



# Telling losses: Personality correlates and functions of bereavement narratives

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## Abstract

How and why do bereaved individuals talk about their loss? What are the personality correlates and social consequences of different kinds of bereavement narratives? Two studies were conducted to answer these questions. In Study 1, participants from online bereavement support groups and memorial websites wrote bereavement narratives. Participants high in Conscientiousness told brief, factual narratives; participants high in Neuroticism told self-focused contamination narratives; and participants high in Extraversion told narratives for social reasons. In Study 2, undergraduate participants responded to twelve narratives from Study 1. Participants felt more sympathetic concern but more social awkwardness and less acceptance towards contamination narrators compared to redemption narrators. The role of personality in the telling and reception of bereavement stories, and social support after loss, is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In Raymond Carver's (1993) short story "A Small, Good Thing" a mother ordered her son a birthday cake from a baker. The baker seemed aloof and cold, which made the mother uncomfortable. On the morning before the son's birthday party, the son was hit by a car and hospitalized. He died within days, and the mother forgot about the birthday

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cake. However, she received a series of telephone reminders from the increasingly irritated baker. Angered by the phone calls, she entered the bakery late one night with her husband and told the baker about the death of her son. This disclosure explained and justified her behavior (neglecting to pick up the cake); it defused the baker's irritation and elicited an immediate display of compassion and hospitality (he seated the mother and father and fed them warm rolls); and it encouraged the baker to open up to the couple in a more intimate way, talking with them about his own sorrows and joys.

This story demonstrates the powerful healing effect that telling about losses can have for both the narrator and the listener. It also suggests the role that the personality of each participant can play in the narrative exchange (suppose the baker had been overwhelmed or less compassionate in his response to the disclosure). Similarly, it raises the question of why and when individuals ultimately choose to share a story of loss.

Increasingly, researchers are studying the effects of sharing narratives in social interactions (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Pasupathi, 2003, 2005; Thorne & McLean, 2003). Alea and Bluck (2003) have proposed a model of autobiographical memory telling that identifies key factors that might influence the nature and outcome of a narrative disclosure. These factors include the personality characteristics of both narrator and listener, as well as the content of the memory disclosed. Depending on the personality characteristics of the narrator, the memory content may be more or less emotional and revealing. Depending on the memory content and the personality characteristics of the narrative recipient, the recipient's response may be more or less supportive.

The goal of the present studies is to apply these insights about personality and memory-telling to the study of bereavement narrative disclosure. Although not all bereavement disclosures are memory narratives, Alea and Bluck's model can be extended to encompass the major features of any story disclosure. Their model focused on the *social* functions of autobiographical memory sharing (i.e., social support, intimacy-building, advice-giving); however the components of the model are likely to figure in *self* functions (i.e., emotional expression, validation, insight) as well.

For bereaved individuals, telling and retelling stories about their loved one and their loss may serve both self and social functions (Capps & Bonanno, 2000; Harvey, Carlson, Huff, & Green, 2001). In the bereavement literature, all of the self and social functions mentioned above have been recognized as features of the grieving process, and this process, in turn, has been recognized as likely to be affected by the griever's and listener's personality characteristics (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Harvey et al., 2001). Yet researchers in the bereavement field have noted that empirical studies linking personality to the functions and effects of telling stories of loss have yet to be conducted (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Harvey et al., 2001).

For example, Capps and Bonanno (2000) demonstrated that bereaved individuals with poorer psychological adjustment to their losses were more likely to tell bereavement narratives that displayed greater negative content and diminished agency (as measured by the use of more second person pronouns and passive sentence constructions). These bereavement narratives were more likely to create distance and discomfort in listeners. Despite these valuable findings, these authors did not report the role that personality characteristics in either speakers or listeners might have played in the content and reception of these narratives.

With this in mind, the current studies examined the following questions: (1) Are narrators' personality characteristics linked to the kind of bereavement stories that they tell? (2) Is there a relationship between narrators' personality characteristics and the functions served by telling bereavement stories? (3) Does the content of the disclosure influence

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