

# Meaning and coherence of self and health: An approach based on narratives of life events

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## Abstract

Using contributions from the fields of interactionist sociology and narrative studies and the results of an empirical study, in this article we examine the subject's mediation between life events and state of health. Examining narratives focusing on significant life events from 26 men and women aged between 51 and 73 from the administrative region of Ile de France, we suggest that dimensions of meaning and coherence of self need not be taken as internal dispositions, but rather as the product of sociocognitive work on self-narration. The characterisation of the types of causal relationships that the narrators establish between significant events and other events, situations or periods in their lives, opens up avenues for the development of a methodological tool to replace traditional ways of measuring sense of coherence and meaning/purpose in life using psychometric methods. This alternative perspective based on a conception of the self as narrative might provide a remedy for certain conceptual and methodological difficulties that are found within the field of coping research.

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## Introduction

Research on stress and coping and their relation to health came into prominence from the end of the 1960s but would now appear to be becoming less popular. Whilst it remains a conceptually unified field of research, two major orientations nevertheless stand out. On the one hand we have “life-event research”, which focuses on stressful situations and life events and aims at identifying and ranking those events according to their severity and potential impact. On the other hand we have

“coping research”, which focuses on the individual and the processes of adapting to stress, and which aims to identify personal characteristics (personality, lifestyle, coping strategies) which are likely to positively or negatively affect how stress impacts health.

Our contribution focuses on the activities of individuals and therefore belongs to the second orientation (coping research). It has both empirical and conceptual dimensions, and offers a new perspective on this type of approach, by highlighting the role of the sociocognitive work that subjects do to give meaning and coherence to the events and situations they encounter, and more generally, to their life stories. The specificity of this approach is to restore to the subject that part of

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agency which is often ignored in the field of coping research.

In the first part of the paper we take a brief look at literature in the field of research on stress and coping, in order to better delineate the contours of our approach; then we compare the contributions of two distinct theoretical currents, namely symbolic interactionism and narrative studies. Our aim is to examine these approaches under the light of two concepts they have in common—meaning and coherence. In the second part of the paper, we present our empirical study and discuss new leads for directly operationalising the dimensions of coherence and meaningfulness which are built by the subjects themselves and reflected in their life event narratives.

The idea that individuals react differently to adverse conditions of existence, and that these reactions can affect their health and their well-being, is firmly rooted in social representations and gives direction to numerous social practices. Understanding the forms of the subject's mediation and its effects on health, both in terms of physical functioning and psychosocial well-being, is extremely important for public health. Health psychology is the discipline most relevant to this type of approach, employing methods which—linked to those of epidemiology—enable one to objectivise this type of phenomenon and to look at how it is distributed throughout a population. This question is also raised in interactionist sociology, albeit using different conceptions and approaches. Yet it is striking to note that researchers from these two traditions sometimes use the same concepts when they are looking at how a subject contributes towards his/her own state of health. These concepts are defined, depending on the conceptions of the subject underlying them, as either individual characteristics, or as the product of socio-cognitive activity. Two of these concepts are often mentioned: meaningfulness, which is sometimes considered to be an inclination to perceive one's life as being objective-oriented, and at other times as the outcome of "biographical work" through which people attempt to give meaning to their existence; coherence, which sometimes refers to a "sense of coherence" which determines a person's vision of the world, and at other times refers to "constructed coherence", i.e. coherence that is built through people's narratives of their lives. These two dimensions are often linked to well-being and health, and the reconciliation

of these two disciplinary viewpoints might be fruitful.

### *Meaningfulness and coherence: given or built?*

The concept of defence proposed by Freud at the end of the nineteenth century already provides certain keys to understanding the mechanisms of adaptation and stress. But from the 1950s, with the prominence of the positivist school of thought, focus on the unconscious gave way to an objectivist orientation for stress research (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). Driven by Holmes and Rahe (1967), various life event checklists were developed and numerous studies carried out to assess the relationship between life events and the onset of illness (Kessler, 1997). The checklist approach assigns varying weights to events, depending on the level of stress deemed to be attached to them. Unstable results and certain criticisms<sup>1</sup> have led to the development of the contextual approach which postulates that the meaning of a given event depends on the context within which it arises. Brown and Harris (1989) constructed a method for very accurately characterising life-events on the basis of the information available in their respondents' narratives. From this perspective, the importance of a particular event depends on the social position and value system of the person in question. This sociological orientation of life event research nevertheless remains objectivist, as it focuses on the characterisation of life events rather than on the subjective outlook of the interviewees. Although it uses qualitative information provided by the interviewees, the meaning of the events is defined by a panel of investigators rather than by the people themselves, the aim being to regroup events comparable in terms of meaning and severity and thus analyse their impact on mental health.

By contrast, in focusing on "how individual efforts to manage distressing problems and emotions affect the physical and psychological outcomes of stress" (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000, p. 620) stress and coping research grants central position to the individual. From this perspective, the impact of an event depends on how the subject perceives and interprets it (Adler & Matthews, 1994; Bruchon-Schweitzer & Quintard, 2001). Yet the way in which

<sup>1</sup>The link between stressful events and the onset of illness would appear to have been overestimated (Bruchon-Schweitzer & Quintard, 2001; Cohen & Edwards, 1989).

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