The Role of Narrative Structure in Expressive Writing for Mental Well-Being

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Opportunity

- Actively refraining from disclosing accounts of distressing experiences acts as a stressor on the mind and body; the harder people work at hiding their thoughts and feelings, the greater the stress on their bodies (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).
- Writing about a distressing event in a narrative way (i.e., a temporally ordered sequence) has been shown to improve positive affect more than writing about the event in a fragmented or piecemeal style (Smyth, True, & Souto, 2001).

Aim: We further investigated whether writing about why a negative event happened the way it did (i.e., in a causal narrative) can improve people’s well-being over and above the positive effects of writing about the event in temporal order. Follow-up linguistic analyses were also conducted.

Results

A greater percentage of Anxiety words used in essays predicted a greater increase in negative affect over two weeks.
- When people were asked to construct either type of narrative, more words that reference other persons (e.g., Affiliation words) were used than when not.
- When asked to construct a causal narrative, more Social words were used and fewer Risk words were used than when not.

Additional findings:

- Analyses of variance revealed no significant effect of condition on overall change-in-affect.

Impact

- The unique feature about our research is that it asks whether causal narrative thinking can have therapeutic effects on mental well-being.
- This addresses the problem of enabling people to regulate their own emotional health using simple, empirically tested interventions.
- Contrary to our hypothesis, we did not find that writing in a causal narrative format was superior to writing in a fragmented or temporally ordered narrative format in driving positive changes in mood.
- However, people spontaneously engaged in some causal narrative thinking in all three conditions; that is, even when not instructed to do so. This finding may inform revisions to the writing instructions in future work.
- Our analyses yielded noteworthy findings on the subject focus of and word-use in participants’ expressive writing.
- Further exploration of narrative structure, categories of word use, and subject-focus in expressive writing is warranted.

Procedure:

Participants: 76 NU undergraduates

Participants were asked to recall a distressing event that personally affected them.
- Participants were asked to write about the event in one of three conditions: (1) Temporal Narrative (2) Causal Narrative (3) Fragmented.
- Participants’ mood was measured by the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) before writing, immediately after writing, and two weeks later.
- The extent of intrusive thoughts and subjective distress caused by this event was assessed using the Impact of Event Scale (IES) before writing and two weeks later.

See handout for reference list.