

Stories of Life Transition: Subjective Well-Being and Ego Development in Parents of Children with Down Syndrome

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Eighty-seven parents of children with Down Syndrome (DS; 63 women, 24 men) wrote narratives about finding out that their child had DS and completed questionnaire measures of subjective well-being (SWB) and stress-related growth and completed the Sentence Completion Test as a measure of ego development. Forty-two of these individuals participated in a follow-up 2 years later. Foreshadowing and happy endings in the stories were related to heightened SWB at both time periods. Evidence of accommodative change—actively experiencing a paradigmatic shift—was related to stress-related growth and ego development at both time periods. A high sense of closure and accommodation in the stories was associated with the highest levels of stress-related growth. Implications for research on well-being and personal growth are discussed. © 2000 Academic Press

The first 24 hours we were led to believe that our daughter was so bad off that we actually prayed to God to take her from us now versus later.

A wave of feelings passed through me—shock, fear and tremendous sadness and protectiveness toward my son.

I remember feeling a little jealous of the mother in the bed next to me—nursing her new “whole” child.

I remember feeling as if I was being punished.

Major life changes, by definition, require individuals to come to terms with a new set of life circumstances. Some life changes, such as the ones

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described in the quotes above, involve irrevocable alterations in our lives, requiring us to redefine the very meaning of our existence, to seek out new sources of purpose, and to reassess our priorities. These quotes were taken from participants in the current study, all of whom were describing the experience of finding out that they would be parenting a child with Down Syndrome (DS). It is not difficult to conclude that such a life change can be experienced as catastrophic. Yet, Van Riper, Ryff, and Pridham (1992) found that such parents did not differ from parents of children without DS in their level of individual, marital, or family functioning. Apparently, in the face of an experience that might be viewed as catastrophic, people are able to live satisfying lives.

One of the ways that people make sense of potentially devastating experiences is by telling the story of the experience (cf. Pennebaker, 1989). Human beings are storytellers. We use stories to make sense of experience, to bring order to perceptions, and to attach ourselves to various sources of meaning. The purpose of the present study was to examine how aspects of the stories that parents of children with DS tell about their life transition relate to the parents' subjective well-being (SWB), personal growth, and personality development. We used stories of life transition as a means of examining the ways that individuals had come to encapsulate their experience, examining the coherence of the story and the degree to which that story contained evidence of a hard-won battle to make meaning of life circumstances. We were interested in the stories parents would tell about finding out that they would be parenting a child with DS—assuming that that story had been retold many times and that it might represent a distillation of the experience for the person (McAdams, 1996). These transition stories were assumed to be organizing structures in which might be manifested such psychological processes as positive reframing, the reassertion of the predictability and comprehensibility of the world, and accommodation (Block, 1982). Specifically, this study examined whether telling stories that possess features that have been associated with adaptive functioning—e.g., having a happy ending—would relate to heightened SWB. In addition, these transition stories were used to gain a measure of accommodative change (cf. Block, 1982) so that we could examine how consciously struggling with a major life transition may relate to heightened personal growth and personality development. Before describing the specific aspects of this study, we review various lines of research that bear on the predictions we made with regard to story characteristics that might relate to enhanced levels of SWB and then we consider how a story might reveal the process of personality development.

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND STORYTELLING

Research from a variety of areas has converged on a fascinating conclusion: the stories we tell about our experience not only reveal aspects of our

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