



# Is narrating growth in stories of personal transgressions associated with increased well-being, self-compassion, and forgiveness of others?



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## ABSTRACT

We tested whether narrating growth from transgressions was associated with increased well-being, self-compassion, and forgiveness. Study 1 was cross-sectional ( $N = 118$ ). Studies 2 and 3 were short-term longitudinal ( $N$ 's = 77 and 88). Study 1 revealed positive associations between narrating growth and well-being. Study 2 replicated Study 1 and growth-oriented narration was associated with increased self-compassion and forgiveness at session 2 beyond expected levels given session 1 scores. Study 3 replicated some Study 2 findings and growth-oriented narration was once again associated with increased self-compassion at session 2 beyond expected levels given session 1 scores. We discuss how growth-oriented narration in specific types of events may be associated with changes in specific forms of adaptive functioning and gender differences.

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## 1. Introduction

Harming others may present particular types of challenges to the self. For example, although most of us believe that it is wrong to hurt others, in the course of our complex social lives most of us will harm someone else (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Transgressions that contradict one's beliefs about what is right may undermine one's sense of being a decent, morally upstanding person. Beyond challenging the self our transgressions also create opportunities to develop insight into the complexity of self, others, and social situations (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; see also Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Because they may challenge the self in particular ways and they may present distinct developmental opportunities transgressions may be a distinct category of experience.

One of the ways that people may feel better about themselves after transgressing and tap into the developmental opportunities linked to transgressing is by forming insights about personal-growth from their transgressions. Researchers who take a narrative perspective on personality and positive functioning have shown that people who narrate growth from challenging

events tend to score high on a variety of forms of positive functioning such as ego-development, psychological well-being, and wisdom (e.g. Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010; Pals, 2006a; Pals & McAdams, 2004). However, very little work has examined whether narrating growth from a specific type of event may be associated with gains in some domains of positive functioning as opposed to others (for preliminary work in this direction see Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2010).

In the studies presented here we sought to broaden our understanding of what well-being and positive functioning can mean in the context of a distinct type of event, a transgression. We focused on transgressions because of the tension they can create between a person's actions and his or her values and moral beliefs. We also focused on transgressions because of their potential relationships to particular aspects of adaptive functioning. We tested the extent to which individual differences in narrating growth from past transgressions was associated with three different forms of positive functioning, feeling good about the self, being compassionate toward the self, and being forgiving of others.

## 2. Constructing an understanding of self and experience in narratives of personal transgressions: Narrating as a meaning-making process

One way that people may be able to resolve the tensions created by transgressing and feel better about themselves after transgressing is by narrating how they have grown and changed for the

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better from the experience. Narrating is a process by which people recall and organize the elements of a past experience in story form (Bruner, 1990). When narrating, people recall the details of that experience and create a chronologically structured, causal account that can render negative experiences more coherent and understandable. Such accounts also necessarily articulate more subjective aspects of experiences. These subjective aspects may include interpretations about what the narrator felt, planned, and hoped. They may include interpretations regarding what the experience signifies about the narrator as a person, or interpretations about the characteristics of others who were involved (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pasupathi, 2001).

When people interpret what happened in an event as arising from stable aspects of the self, or as causing a change in the self, they create causal connections between the self and that event (Habermas & Paha, 2001; McLean & Pasupathi, 2011; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). Causal connections convey people's beliefs about their own stable and changing characteristics in relation to some experience. These beliefs may be couched in positive or negative terms and their valence matters. For example, making more negative causal connections in stories of low point events is associated with low psychological well-being, high depression, anxiety, and stress (Banks & Salmon, 2013).

Causal connections that denote positive change in narratives of negative events are important for creating a sense of healthy growth and positive self-transformation (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). A story that features such growth causal connections may be especially beneficial when narrating transgressions. Indeed, past research indicates that forming those types of connections is associated with adaptive outcomes concurrently (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; Pals, 2006a) and prospectively (Bauer & McAdams, 2010, see also Adler, 2012). Indeed, our subjective interpretations have the power to make use of negative history in the service of a more optimistic future. That is, when one does something bad, the act can become an inspiration for personal growth (Lilgendahl et al., 2013; Pals, 2006a, 2006b). Narrative interpretation is a powerful mechanism for self-development because it may facilitate personal growth and personal understanding.

### 3. Self and social constructs that are potentially linked to narrating growth from transgressions: Psychological well-being, self-compassion, and forgiveness of others

People are less likely to disclose their transgressions than other types of negative experiences (Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009). This suggests that people may view their transgressions as potentially threatening to self or social relationships. In the current studies, we were broadly interested in understanding the extent to which interpreting growth in transgression narratives was associated with positivity in self-understanding and social relatedness after transgressing. Working from the notion that transgressions may be a distinct category of experience with unique developmental affordances (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010), we examined relationships between narrating growth and three constructs that we theorized were relevant for transgressions: psychological well-being; self-compassion; and forgiveness of others.

Psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) is a multicomponent construct, which goes beyond merely assessing one's life as satisfying, or tending to experience positive affect over negative affect. Psychological well-being includes a set of beliefs that one can develop one's true potential, that one has positive relationships, that one can regulate behaviors from internal standards, that one is effectively pursuing goals that are meaningful to the

autonomous self, that one is able to maximize personal fit with the environment, and that one accurately understands and accepts his or her own actions, and motivations (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Narrating growth from transgressions may help people believe that he or she can maintain current and future relationships despite their complications, and that he or she is able to effectively pursue meaningful interpersonal goals in the future. Thus, narrating growth may be central to reconstructing memories of transgressions in ways that support a sense that the self is "becoming better all the time" (Ross & Wilson, 2003). By contrast, narrating a story of how one has changed in *negative ways may detract* from positive self-understanding and be reflected in lower scores on psychological well-being. Thus, we expected that people who narrated positive, growth connections, in transgression stories would score higher on psychological well-being. We expected that people who narrated negative, growth-limiting causal connections, would score lower on psychological well-being.

Moving beyond prior literature that has primarily focused on general well-being (e.g. Mansfield et al., 2010), we also examined relations between personal growth in transgressions and self-compassion (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion is conceptually distinct from psychological well-being. Whereas psychological well-being is based on a set of beliefs about the self, self-compassion is based on healthy ways of treating the self when one does the wrong thing or breaks one's code of ethics. By "encouraging change where needed and rectifying harmful or unproductive behavior patterns" (Neff, 2003, p. 225), self-compassionate individuals desire and strive for well-being even when they have done the wrong thing.

Self-compassion is composed of three elements: (1) treating the self with kindness, (2) seeing one's imperfections as part of the human condition, and (3) being mindful of both positivity and negativity when considering the self (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Narrating growth from personal transgressions may support those elements of self-compassion. Making positive interpretations about how the self has changed without letting one's self off the hook for the harmful action may push people to balance positive and negative information about the self. Furthermore, fostering a sense of positive change through stories about transgressions may be linked to treating the self with understanding and kindness as opposed to being punitive and harshly judging the self. Thus, we expected that people who narrated growth-promoting causal connections would score higher on self-compassion than those who narrated growth-limiting causal connections.

Again moving beyond intrapersonal psychological well-being to other broad markers of positive functioning, we theorized that narrating growth from personal transgressions would be associated with people being more forgiving of those who had harmed him or her in the past. In the current studies we used an empathy-based conceptualization of forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). This approach assesses the extent to which people are forgiving of a harmful act perpetrated against them by a person that they are interpersonally close to. In this approach forgiveness is not seen as a personality characteristic. We reasoned that after narrating growth from one's own past transgressions an individual may be more likely to empathize with and be forgiving of one who had caused him or her harm in the past. This is because narrating growth entails taking some level of responsibility for one's own harmful actions but doing so while making interpretations about becoming better from that experience. Such meaning-making may be associated with greater empathy for others because it may foster the idea that all people, even those who have harmed us, are imperfect and potentially capable of positive change.

To our knowledge no research has examined how narrating growth from one's own *perpetration experiences* (i.e.

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