Does intra-individual variability in narration matter and for what?

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ABSTRACT

Building on calls to examine intra-individual variability in personality, we examined such variability in narrative. In Study 1, participants (*n* = 553) provided three narratives (*either* self-defining, turning point, transgression, low point, or trauma memories; *n* = 1659 narratives). Narratives were coded for coherence, autobiographical reasoning, resolution, and emotional expression. Variability was highest for resolution, lowest for coherence, and was related to well-being, depending on narrative feature and event type. In Study 2, participants (*n* = 103) engaged in a 'narrative recognition' task to see if they could identify which narratives came from the same individual. Recognizability was substantial, but not related to variability or well-being. Results showcase the importance of addressing intra-individual variability by narrative feature and event type.

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1. Introduction

Historically, personality researchers have primarily focused on the stability of individual differences across time and context (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1994): that is, how individuals differ from each other in stable ways. Thus, despite the fact that personality traits are variable across contexts (e.g., Mischel & Peake, 1982, 1983; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; see also Noftle & Fleeson, 2015 for a review), the conceptual underpinning of much of personality theory is that a stable 'core' underlies contextual fluctuation (e.g., Block, 1981; Costa & McCrae, 1994). Methodologically, aggregation across contexts is viewed as a way to smooth out variation due to error in measurement, normative developmental shifts, or seemingly irrelevant contextual shifts (Funder, 1983), and this approach has revealed impressively high stability in people's relative rankings on personality traits, sometimes over quite long spans (e.g., Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Further, high variability across various aspects of personality has generally been associated with poorer psychological adjustment (e.g., Côté, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2012; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993; Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013), although the level of personality appears to matter with greater variability in goals, for example, associated with more positive outcomes (Dunlop et al., 2013).

Despite the relative emphasis on the stability of personality, there are alternative orientations. The first comes from the dispositional signature literature, in which variation in traits across contexts is viewed as a potential source of stability in personality (e.g., Fournier, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2009; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). That is, one may *reliably* shift behavior depending on contextual demands, which turns attention from variation between people to variation within people. Here we see that relative rank is often preserved, but that if-then dispositional signatures are also meaningful parts of personality; there can be stability in variability.

Fleeson and Jayawickreme (2015) have recently called for greater attention to within-person variability in traits in the context of the Five Factor model, employing methods such as experience sampling. They have shown that there is indeed great within-person individual variability in the manifestation of traits in daily life, often more than the variability *between* persons, yet the range or form that this variability takes within persons is relatively stable (e.g., Fleeson, 2001; Noftle & Fleeson, 2010). Fleeson and Jayawickreme (2015) make the claim that this within-person trait variability is due to the dynamics of social-cognitive processes related to how individuals engage with various contexts (e.g., goals, mood, roles, encoding processes), and such variability may be as important in characterizing individuals as are trait descriptions.

Considering the narrative level of personality, McAdams (1995) argued that this part of personality is highly contextualized and offers a more idiographic perspective on the person than other

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levels of personality (McAdams, 1995; McAdams & Manczak, 2011); this raises the possibility that it may be more variable than other levels. However, like much of the research on traits, research in this area has predominantly focused on aggregation of features across narratives, overlooking the potentially rich sources of information about personality that come from examining within person variability in narrative (cf., Dunlop, 2015; Dunlop et al., 2013; Pasupathi et al., in preparation). Thus, we consider where we might see such variability in narrative, examine whether the extent to which individuals' stories vary across the narration of similar events may be an important indicator of individual well-being, and examine whether this variability is indicative of a 'narrative style,' or signature that is visible to others.

1.1. Intra-individual variability in narrative: Where, and does it matter?

One of the implicit and deeply held assumptions embedded in narrative research is that individuals are consistent in how they narrate events. This assumption is evident in the ways that researchers often aggregate across narratives (e.g., Blagov & Singer, 2004; Mansfield, Pasupathi, & McLean, 2015; McAdams et al., 2004; McLean, Wood, & Breen, 2013), elicit only a single event as a "window" into narrative identity (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006), or hypothesize stability in narrative over time (McAdams et al., 2006; Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998). This assumption, and associated methodological strategies, stem from the roots of many narrative researchers in personality psychology, and the emphasis on a stable core as central to the definition of personality (see Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015).

Aside from the stability assumptions embedded in dominant personality approaches, the narrative identity literature itself also provides deep theoretical reasons to argue for stability in narrative. Narrative represents the level of personality most closely linked to, or in fact representative of, identity (McAdams, 1988; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). As such, McAdams has argued that narrative serves an integrative function, and can be used to create unity for an individual's personality – to fit the pieces together, so to speak (e.g., McAdams & Cox, 2010; McAdams & Olson, 2010). From this perspective, we would expect to see that high variability across narratives might represent a lack of unity or integration, and thus be associated with poor outcomes. Indeed, Dunlop et al. (2013) found that those with more variability in narratives across different domains (e.g., professional and personal) had less positive adjustment (see related findings on traits in Donahue et al., 1993). Further, Dunlop et al. (2013) also found that greater thematic consistency across narratives was related to more positive adjustment (see also McLean, 2008 for a discussion of the developmental implications of thematic consistency).

In contrast to these arguments focused on the importance of narrative integration (conceptualized as low variability) for psychological health, from a contextualist perspective, higher variability in narrative might contribute to flexibility and adaptability (Pasupathi et al., in preparation). Indeed, McAdams (e.g., 1995; McAdams & Manczak, 2011) emphasizes the *evolving* nature of narrative, and we already know that there is variability in the narration of events for different audiences (McLean, 2005; McLean & Jennings, 2012; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010), over time (Josselson, 2009; McAdams et al., 2006; Thorne et al., 1998), and for different types of events (e.g., Banks & Salmon, 2013; Fivush, Sales, & Bohanek, 2008; Waters, Bauer, & Fivush, 2013), suggesting that stories are not set in plaster. In the present paper, we focus on one specific type of narrative variability: variability in how individuals narrate similar types of events at one point in time, in relation to both well-being and to being recognizable to others.

1.2. Does variability differ for type of event and does it matter for psychological adjustment?

Fleeson and Jayawickreme (2015) argue that every context evokes expectancies, goals, and self-regulation strategies that should shift how trait-related behaviors manifest, which is based on the idea that not all events are equal. We agree with this premise, and we addressed this issue of contextual variation in the context of narrative in two ways, within and between persons.

There is some emerging evidence that high intra-individual variability in narratives about different life contexts is linked to poor adjustment, and is perhaps indicative of a lack of identity integration (Dunlop et al., 2013). We note that our examination is somewhat distinct from this extant work. For example, Dunlop et al. (2013) examined variability across narratives about different contexts, operationalized as roles across various domains (e.g., professional, personal) and variability was examined in the themes that occurred within a person's narratives. However, in Dunlop et al.'s (2013) design event type and person were confounded as people provided an event from a professional and from a relational context. Thus, variability in the narratives could be due either to a person narrating different events differently, or to a person being simply more variable in narration regardless of type of event. In fact, recent empirical and theoretical work has argued that different types of events, or contexts, require different types of narrative processing (see Mansfield, 2015; Waters et al., 2013). Thus, in our study, we asked how people did (or did not) vary in the way they narrated several events from the same class of experiences. For example, do people tell their self-defining memories with the same narrative features, or do they tell them in different ways, and does this matter? We also included five different types of events, permitting us to examine whether variability depends on the type of event, and whether within-person variation has different implications for well-being depending on the type of event.

We chose five common narrative prompts: turning point, self-defining, transgression, low point, and trauma memories as our between-person comparison because they have different implications for identity and well-being. By definition self-defining memories are identity related (Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992). Turning points are also often viewed as an identity-defining (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006), signaling a meaningful change within a person's conception of his or her identity. The other three memories – low points, traumas, and transgressions – are not so evidently linked to identity. Indeed, these are the kinds of events that are more likely to be a challenge to identity, potentially even events that individuals want to distance from the self, particularly transgressions (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; cf., Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010; Mansfield et al., 2015). Furthermore, whereas these three types of events are by definition about negative experiences, self-defining and turning point events can be positive or negative. Finally, self-defining and turning point memories vary not only by the emotionality of the event, but also by the way the event may become self-defining (e.g., learning what one *is* as well as learning who one *no longer is*; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007; Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009; Pasupathi et al., 2015).

Thus, we expected that, overall, self-defining and turning point memories would show more variability than the more negative memories, and that narrating identity-linked memories in more variable ways may be more adaptable. In contrast, transgression, low point, and traumatic experiences always pose a problem for the self that must be resolved in some way, and there are cultural master narratives for these types of events that provide narrative templates for story construction (McLean & Syed, in press). Thus, individuals may show less variability when narrating these kinds