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Narratives of Positive and Negative Early Love Life Experiences: A Consideration of Redemption, Contamination, and Affective Tone

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Abstract

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Narratives of positive and negative early love life experiences:

A consideration of redemption, contamination, and affective tone

Narrative identity unites a person's past present and future as they think about their life as if it were a book. Narrative identity encompasses a person's life and personality in a different lens than personality traits because it allows them to dive deeper into their lives. Through this method, researchers can learn more about personality. The researcher getting to know the person can help the understanding of who people are and if there are life outcomes that can be predicted by the way they tell their narrative. As a person tells their life as if it were a book, a researcher has prompts they must go through to facilitate the production of the person's story and stimulate different types of salient events, for example, key scenes including high points, low points and turning points (Dunlop et al., 2018). This study will be focusing on descriptions of two salient experiences, negative and positive early memories. Often, these stories carry themes of redemption, contamination, and/or tone.

Types of Key Scenes

McAdams et al. (2001) suggests that redemption is when a story goes from a bad event to a good ending, while contamination is when a story goes from seemingly well to ending badly. In redemptive stories the bad event is redeemed, and the person has made sense of the event. In contaminated stories the positivity of the event is ruined and made insignificant by the ending. It is how the person conveys these stories that help identify who they are, through narrative.

In this study of McAdams et al. (2001), 74 adults, half high on generativity, were asked to participate in an interview. The first part of the interview was about asking the participant to think about their life as if it were a book and divide it into chapters. Then they were prompted to

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describe eight key scenes of their life from high points, turning points, earliest memory, important childhood scenes. For each scene they were asked to describe exactly what occurred, who was involved, what time it occurred, what they were thinking and feeling and what the scene may say about their life.

Coders determined whether redemption or contamination was present in each story. There had to be clear negativity in the bad part of the story that made them feel pain, fear, sadness, or other negative feelings, while the good part did not have to outweigh the bad. It did have to be clear that the person received a positive gain from the negative initial experience. If the participant reported additional benefits from their redemptive story, the coder granted an extra point. These additional benefits either had to be enhanced agency, enhanced communion, or the satisfaction of an ultimate concern. Enhanced agency was noted when the participant reported feeling, for example, stronger or more efficient. Communion was defined as a participant reporting enhanced interpersonal intimacy in relationships. Ultimate concerns referred to a participant reporting their spiritual beliefs changing from negative to positive aspects of their life. The authors found that redemption was highest among turning points followed by high and low points. They also concluded that life narratives can be predictive of life outcomes. Finding that there are correlations between redemption and well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. On the other hand, significant correlations were found between contamination and predicting depression as well as low self-esteem.

Another very important way to quantify key scenes is via affective tone. Tone is the emotional sound and feeling of the person's voice as they tell the story. As the person speaks about their key scenes or other salient moments, whether redemptive or contaminated, their tone tells a lot about their personality. The overall tone of a participant while telling their life

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narrative is positively related to their well-being (Dunlop et al., 2018). As demonstrated, life narratives can be predictive in many ways. In Dunlop et al.'s study, researchers focused on tone, contamination, and redemption within the romantic domain. With a sample of 97 participants there was evidence that positive tone in participants' stories relates to secure attachment tendencies. The study also found that, over time, there is an increasingly positive perspective on one's love life and that overall negative tone was related to anxious and avoidant tendencies. As this research shows, a person's meaning and tone about their love life is very important to predicting, in this case, the way they will behave and feel about their love lives.

Aggregation to Individual Key Scenes

In the work of McAdams et al. (2001), Dunlop et al. (2018), and others, scores of redemption, contamination, and tone are considered across a number of stories. In contrast, Cox and McAdams (2014) focused on the predictive ability of themes of meaning making and emotional regulation drawn from specific memories. Meaning making occurs when a person expresses their perspective on what their life narrative means to them and what the story says about their life. Emotional regulation is how a person expresses and handles their feelings across time and situations, it can be adaptive or maladaptive. Cox and McAdams study hypothesized that emotional regulation can be predicted by either negative or positive meaning making of life narratives. From a sample of 164 adults ages 55-58 years old were asked to complete the Big Five Inventory online then complete a life narrative questionnaire in person. Two years later they were asked to complete other self-report forms among an emotional regulation strategy questionnaire. Results supported their hypothesis. Positive meaning making predicts positive emotional regulation, and negative meaning making predicts negative emotional regulation two years later.

Cox, Hanek and Cassiro (2019) focused their interest on whether a single redemptive low point, in life narratives, predicted well-being. Their study was split into three research questions: (1) Were redemptive low points related to well-being over time? (2) Are low points related to well-being when controlling for Neuroticism, Extraversion, and word count? (3) Are high points and low points unique in being predictive of well-being? To test their hypotheses, there were a total of 144 participants for the first round of the study, 112 for the survey three months later, and 88 for a follow up, three years later. They found that low point redemption was predictive of well-being for three months into the future but not three years, when controlling for Extraversion, Neuroticism, and adding high points to low points did not predict better well-being than low points alone. The past two studies done by Cox demonstrate that certain aspects of life narratives are predictive of well-being and emotional regulation, however they do not focus on specific domains such as someone's love life.

Key Scenes, within Domains

Buhler and Dunlop (2019) have focused their research on romantic relationships and their importance on life narratives. Their proposal calls for more research in the romantic domain to demonstrate other behaviors/ life outcomes it can predict. A person has various important domains, but one of the most important ones is their love life (or, the romantic domain). During adolescence, a child begins to transition their friendships from same- sex to opposite sex in preparation for romantic relationships. They begin to form closer relationships with people in which they are uniquely interested in as they progress through life (Feiring, 1999). As children develop, they go through many different experiences, one being their first love. This experience may be negative or positive. Regardless, the experience contributes to their idea of love and can affect the rest of their love life. I want to examine narrative representations of these initial

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experiences, by determining whether features participants' first or most memorable early love life experience predict someone's future love life outcomes. In particular, I'd like to explore whether conveying an early memory in a redemptive or contaminated manner results in different love life outcomes. This study will focus on the way redemptive, contaminated, and the tone of the participants' narratives of early love life experiences are related to avoidant and anxious attachment styles.

Method

The current study draws from the Dunlop et al, (2018) dataset. The study focused on themes of contamination, redemption, and affective tone within participants' love life stories. The study recruited a goal of 100 participants from the city of Riverside, California but only 97 completed the study in its entirety. Participants were compensated for their time with \$50. The average age was 41.97 years, 60 were female, and 14% identified as African American, 27% Latino/a, and 49% white/Caucasian. The data collected from these participants will be used in this present study. However, only a few measures and variables will be considered.

Procedure and measures

A consent form was given to participants in order to complete a love life story interview. A love life story interview is similar to a life story interview but differs in its specificity in the love domain. Participants were first asked to outline their love lives into chapters. They were then asked to provide summaries of specific points also known as key scenes from their love lives such as high points, low points, turning points, positive early memory, and negative early memory, and an additional vivid memory.

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These key scenes asked the participant to express who was involved, what time it occurred, what they were thinking and feeling and what the event says about their life. Negative and positive early love life memories will be the focus of the present study. Negative and positive early love life memories were key scenes that participants were prompted to answer. The negative early love life memory question asked the participants to describe a very negative, unhappy memory in detail from an adolescent years or “puppy love” experience. While the positive early love life memory focused on asking the participant to describe a very happy and very positive memory of their adolescent years or puppy love experiences.

Each story was independently coded for both contamination and redemption. For example, the stories can be a contaminated negative early memory and a contaminated positive early memory or redemptive positive early memories and redemptive negative early memories. Meaning that some positive early love life memories could go from a good beginning to a bad ending (contaminated) and some positive early love life memories could go from a bad beginning to a good outcome (redemptive). As for negative early love life memories some can go from good to bad endings (contaminated) and the others can go from a bad beginning to a good ending (redemptive). Negative early love life memories do not have to be contaminated because they are negative in nature and, similarly, positive early love life memories do not need to be redemptive. It is up to the participant and how they tell their “story” whether their memory is redemptive or contaminated regardless of its positive or negative nature because they are making sense of their life. In the case of both key scenes, people were asked to describe in detail what happened, when and where it occurred, who was involved, what they were thinking and feeling and what the memory says about them and their life. The next variable that was considered was affective tone. These variables were used to quantify the tone participants had during their

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interview, specifically when answering both the negative and positive early love life memory prompts.

Anxious and Avoidant tendencies were also a focus of this study. Participants took a 36-item version of the Experiences in Close Relationships- Revised to assess their attachment tendencies. Half of the items were measures of anxious tendencies (e.g., “I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me,” “ I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them,” “ It makes me mad that I don’t get the affection and support I need from my partner”). While the other half of the items were measures of avoidant tendencies (e.g., “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close,” “I don’t feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners,” “ I am nervous when partners get too close to me”) (Fraley et al., 2000). A few items were reversed in the anxious attachment measures to ensure participants gave accurate responses (e.g., “I rarely worry about my partner leaving me,” “I do not often worry about being abandoned”). Items were also reversed for the avoidant attachment measures (e.g., “I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner,” “It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need,” “I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner”). Reversed items are statements that are almost opposite of the items meant to measure the variables. For example, “It’s not difficult for me to get close to my partner” is a reversed item, while “I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners” is a valid measure of avoidant tendencies. The items were measured on a Likert- type scale from 1 being “Strongly Disagree” to 7 being “Strongly Agree.” In Dunlop et al (2018) there was suggestion that there is a relationship between positive tone and secure attachment. Therefore, anxious and avoidant attachment styles were further examined. The last variable focused on was life satisfaction in the

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love domain. This quantification of satisfaction is helpful to see if it is related to any of the variables described above.

Data quantification

The key scenes were transcribed and reviewed by a research assistant. The primary rater coded the early love life stories for redemption and contamination using a 0/1, absent/present format. They also coded the overall tone of each key scene, positive and negative early love life memories, on a scale of 1 being very emotionally negative to 5 being very emotionally positive. Reliability was ensured with a secondary coder, who rated and read a quarter of randomly selected key scenes.

The data gathered was reorganized into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to focus on the most relevant variable to this study. Bivariate Correlations were then considered and are presented in Table 1. Correlation testing was done on all variables to determine the presence of significant relations. Again, redemptive negative and positive early memories, contaminated negative and positive early memories, affective tone in negative and positive early memories, anxious and avoidant tendencies, and life satisfaction in the love domain. In this study, the main focus was negative early love life memories being predictive of life outcomes such as anxious or avoidant tendencies.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and inter-relations among variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Redemptive Negative Early Memory ^a	.21	.408	—							
2. Redemptive Positive Early Memory ^a	.12	.332	.194	—						
3. Contaminated Negative Early Memory ^a	.37	.508	.228*	-.094	—					
4. Contaminated Positive Early Memory ^a	.05	.223	-.005	-.089	.104	—				
5. Affective Tone Negative Early Memory	2.23	.968	.704**	.270**	-.284**	-.105	—			
6. Affective tone Positive Early Memory	4.11	.819	.054	.101	.047	-.493**	.059	—		
7. Anxious Tendencies	3.08	1.34	.055	.047	-.063	.022	.008	-.160	—	
8. Avoidant Tendencies	2.85	1.16	-.002	-.028	.022	.015	-.079	-.168	.409**	
9. Love Life Satisfaction	4.26	1.08	.119	-.011	-.102	-.159	.106	.213*	-.253*	-.352**

Note. *N* = 208 ***p* < .001, **p* < .05.

^aVariable coded such that the presence of the applicable feature received a score of “1” whereas the absence was represented by a “0”.

Results

Analysis in Table 1 suggests that there is a significant correlation between contaminated negative early memories. Affective tone in negative early memories also correlated significantly with redemptive negative early memories and redemptive positive early memories. There was also significant correlation between affective tone in positive early love life memories and contaminated positive early love life memories. Suggesting that there is a relationship between the tone expressed by the participants and their very happy or very unhappy “puppy love” experiences.

Love life satisfaction correlated with anxious tendencies and avoidant tendencies. The relationships between love life satisfaction and positive affective tone, anxious, and avoidant tendencies suggest that positive affective tone, anxious and avoidant tendencies can be predictive of life satisfaction in the love life domain.

A significant relation was not observed between negative early memories and the overall satisfaction of someone’s love life. There was also no significant correlation between contaminated positive early memory and life satisfaction. Redemptive early memories, either negative or positive, did not have a statistically significant correlation with love life satisfaction.

General Discussion

In this study, we furthered the application of the life narrative approach to gain more understanding of the love domain. This was done by drawing from Dunlop et al. (2018) and focusing on specific key scenes, in particular the negative and positive early love life experiences in relation to love life satisfaction and attachment tendencies. There was not enough evidence to support the hypothesis that early contaminated negative memories are more salient and

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predictive of life outcomes than early positive love life memories. I did, however, identify associations between love life satisfaction and positive affective tone, anxious, and avoidant tendencies suggesting that positive affective tone, anxious and avoidant tendencies can be predictive of life satisfaction in the love life domain.

Contaminated negative memories were not more predictive of love live satisfaction. Contaminated stories were also unrelated to anxious and avoidant tendencies. One explanation for this lack of relation is the low base rate of contamination in this sample: only about 36% of negative early memories had contamination present, while about 5% of positive early memories were contaminated. Finally, Anxious and avoidant tendencies was found to be related to a person's love life satisfaction, suggesting that these tendencies can negatively affect a person's outlook of their own love domain. In future, researchers should consider examining these relations via longitudinal study designs.

Limitations

The current project drew information and the dataset from Dunlop et al. (2018). The sample number (n=97) was fair in size. The findings of this paper could be more reliable if the sample size was larger. In hindsight and with more time additional efforts for recruitment for the current study could have been beneficial to increasing the sample size for more data. There would also be additional questions and surveys taken by the participants to better measure the focus of this study, for example, more demographics (e.g., history of domestic abuse, gender, and sexual orientation).

Other concerns arose when thinking about different cultures. Do the findings of this current study remain the case across cultures? The study was done with a population of African,

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White, and Latino Americans. Although, the sample population is diverse and has three different cultures, it does not account for all the cultures in the United States let alone among different countries. Future studies can focus on recruiting a larger sample size that is also a more diverse population to include various cultures (e.g., Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Colombian). An additional question could be added to the demographics survey (e.g., What culture do you identify more closely to?). An additional question the Love Life Story Interview could measure how love is expressed or defined in different cultures (e.g., Please describe certain expectations your cultural group holds for romantic partners or love in general). The additional question can provide more insight to the person's perception about how their culture has influenced their love domain, making it easier for researchers to discover findings that may be supported among different cultures.

In the current study the love domain was the focus along with its relations to attachment styles, redemption, contamination, and tone. Future studies can broaden the love domain research by looking at relationships with the more general life story. Can the love domain have impacts on the general narrative of a person's life? Can it affect other life domains? An expansion to the Love Life Story Interview can provide insight into love affecting general areas of a person's life. Such as, "Please describe a time in which you and your current romantic partner had an argument that wasn't resolved right away, did this disagreement affect you and any task throughout your day? For example, throughout work, school, or any other social situations" and "Please describe a time in which you and a past romantic partner had an argument that wasn't resolved right away, did this disagreement affect you and any task throughout your day? For example, throughout work, school, or any other social situations." These two questions can give insight to a person's general life withing their love life domain because it compares two similar

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situations that may result in better, similar, or worse coping mechanisms. A question such as “I’d like you to now think about your past and present life and love life. What do you think future life and love life will be like in ten years?” Can also be beneficial to this expansion of research in the love domain in relation to a more general life story because it allows the participant to combine both their general life and a specific domain.

The narrative identity focuses on the totality of a person’s life narrative as if it were a book and without analyzing different domains of a person’s life. As more evidence arises to support that the love domain of the narrative identity is important in predicting a person’s life outcomes (e.g., love life satisfaction, attachment tendencies) future research should begin looking into different domains (e.g., family, career). Additional questions can be added to the general life narrative interview or new interviews could be created like the Love Life Story Interview was created for the love domain. A prompt to consider for the family domain is, “please identify one scene from your family relationship that stands out as especially vivid or meaningful. This scene can be positive or negative in nature. Please describe the scene in detail, what happened, when and where it occurred, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling. Also, what does this memory say about your family life?” A prompt to consider for the career domain is, “please identify the earliest scene in which you identified what you wanted your career to be. This memory can be positive or negative in nature. Please describe in detail, what happened, when and where it occurred, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling. Also, what does this early memory say about you and your career life.” Both domain interviews should have demographic surveys (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity), a life satisfaction scale, and the scenes should be coded for redemption, contamination, and tone. Perhaps these

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different domains further the knowledge of life narratives and the impact different life domains have on a person's personality and life outcomes.

In conclusion, the current project has found a lack of relation between contaminated early memories and attachment tendencies but did find that anxious and avoidant tendencies can negatively affect a person's outlook on life. To further our knowledge, addressing these limitations in future research will further the understanding of who a person is through their past, present, and future story as they function through the love domain and many others.

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