

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REASONING AND SEVERITY OF PERSONALITY DYSFUNCTION

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Narrative identity is defined as a personal life story that integrates an understanding of the past and an envisioned future to provide life with a sense of meaning, unity and purpose. The key process through the construction of narrative identity is autobiographical reasoning, which can be understood from the perspective of three indicators: exploratory narrative processing, meaning-making, and self-event connections. The relationship between narrative identity and personality disorders has been examined extensively over the last decade. According to the latest literature, autobiographical reasoning could be a crucial narrative indicator of the severity of personality dysfunction. However, there was no research to verify this hypothesis. The main goal of the presented research was to examine relationships between autobiographical reasoning and the severity of personality dysfunction. The analysis includes data collected from 11 volunteers using a questionnaire (Self and Interpersonal Functioning Scale [SIFS]) and Life Story Interview (Critical Events). Each statement was treated separately ($N = 88$) in order to enable statistical analysis. The preliminary results show that the indicators of autobiographical reasoning are negatively correlated with some of the aspects of the severity of personality dysfunction. The results support the reasonability of the approach followed in this research, and contribute to academic discussion about relationships between narrative identity and personality disorders.

Keywords: narrative identity; autobiographical reasoning; dimensional approach to personality disorders; severity of personality dysfunction; mixed-method

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The Narrative Identity and the Autobiographical Reasoning

The narrative identity theory (e.g., McAdams, 2010) assumes the existence of three levels of personality: traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity. The traits level is understood as decontextualized general tendencies and typical ways of responding (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Characteristic adaptations are seen as socio-culturally embedded manifestations of traits as well as more complex and trait-independent forms, such as patterns of relationships with others (McAdams & Pals, 2006). The third level of personality is narrative identity. This construct is described as an internalized and evolving life story that consolidates the perceived past and future and provides a sense of unity and purpose (e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013). Narrative identity reflects an individual's subjective perspective, allowing her to understand who a person is, who she has been, and who she is likely to become in the future (McAdams, 2001). Consequently, narrative identity has an organizing characteristic concerning the other two levels of personality (McAdams, 1995b) and results in the sense of continuity and stability (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2019).

The literature (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) identifies an essential aspect of narrative identity—autobiographical reasoning. According to Habermas and Bluck (2000), it is understood as a critical process for building a coherent and stable life story/narrative identity. Other authors (McLean et al., 2020) point out that autobiographical reasoning reflects the way of connecting experiences with an individual's sense of self. Considering the structural model of narrative identity (McLean et al., 2020), autobiographical reasoning constitutes one of its three general factors (besides structure and motivational and affective themes). Authors describe autobiographical reasoning through the following three processes: (1) exploratory narrative processing (Pals, 2006), (2) meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006), (3) self-event connections (Pasupathi et al., 2006). Taking into account an empirical origin of the structural model of narrative identity, on the one hand, it expands theoretical understanding of autobiographical reasoning, and on the other hand, these processes are measurable indicators, which implies the possibility of using them in empirical scientific research.

Dimensional Approach to Personality Disorders

The development of the dimensional approach to personality disorders (PDs) was driven by the broad limitations of the categorical conceptualization of PDs (e.g., Widiger & Trull, 2007). Criticism of the classical approach concerns not only the underlying assumption of the existence of separate categories of psychopathology but also the problem of co-occurrence of different PD diagnoses or the lack of consistency within categories (see Herperzet et al., 2017; Hopwood, 2018; Sharp & Wall, 2021; Widiger & Trull, 2007). The emerging dimensional approach to PDs have begun to gain popularity because of its potential to provide solutions to the limitations of the categorical conceptualization of PDs and capture them more adequately. Currently, both the ICD-11 (WHO, 2019) and the DSM-5 (Section III: Alternative Model of Personality Disorders, AMPD; American Psychological Association, 2013) include a description of this type of pathology in a dimensional approach.¹ Both the DSM-5 AMPD and ICD-11 include several diagnostic criteria for PDs, the most important of which are the first two criteria related to “Self and interpersonal functioning” and “the severity of pathological personality traits”. The other criteria provide some supportive guidance to determine whether the difficulties with which the diagnosed person struggles are genuinely of a personality nature.

The general personality functioning (Criterion A in the DSM-5 AMPD or the severity of personality dysfunction in the ICD-11) refers to difficulties/disturbances in self (e.g., consistency and stability of identity, adequacy of self-esteem) and interpersonal functioning (e.g., ability to establish mutual and satisfying contacts and deal with conflicts). Some authors consider the general personality functioning as a “core” of PDs that reflects what PDs have in common with each other (Sharp & Wall, 2021). The pathological personality traits (e.g., disinhibition, negative affectivity; Criterion B in the DSM-5 AMPD or trait domains in the ICD-11) are rooted in healthy personality traits models (e.g., the Five Factor Model; see Gore & Widiger, 2013; Thomas et al., 2013; Waugh et al., 2017). In consequence, pathological personality traits share all features of the term “trait” used in psychology. Thus, the maladaptive personality traits are genetically and environmentally determined, and their manifestation is shaped through interactions with the environment (South &

¹ Due to the high conceptual convergence of the dimensional models contained in the ICD-11 and the DSM-5 AMPD, the author decided to describe the general idea of the dimensional approach present in contemporary diagnostic manuals.

DeYoung, 2013). The severity of pathological personality traits enhances the general personality functioning assessment with the specific characteristics and tendencies that affect his or her functioning (Pincus, 2011). The dimensionality of the approaches present in the DSM-5 AMPD and ICD-11 lies in the assumption that both the “self and interpersonal functioning” and “the pathological personality traits” are determined on a bipolar continuum between the absence and extreme severity of disorders (Bach & First, 2018). Indeed, taking into account both criteria (general functioning and traits) allows for a more comprehensive assessment of personality. However, it is worth highlighting that considering only the general level of personality functioning makes it possible to determine whether an individual manifests PDs or not (APA, 2013; Bach & First, 2018).

Personality Disorders Assessment Issues

Practitioners and theorists face PDs assessment problems, regardless of their chosen conceptualization. These difficulties are mainly related to the fact that the diagnostic process is dominated by self-reporting tools (e.g., Clark et al., 2018). As a result, diagnostic approaches within both conceptualizations (dimensional and categorical) share the problems associated with the use of such methods (see Cierpiałkowska & Soroko, 2017; Ganellen, 2007; Huprich & Bornstein, 2007). In particular, the difficulties refer to the (in)adequacy of self-description created by people who have PDs or an exaggerated focus on the symptoms of the disorder (see Cierpiałkowska & Soroko, 2017; Ganellen, 2007; Huprich & Bornstein, 2007) rather than the way the difficulties are subjectively experienced.

The Narrative Identity and Personality Disorders

The literature indicates that narrative identity and PDs are related. Lind, Adler, and Clark (2020) present a meta-review of the results of studies examining the relationship between narrative identity and PDs. The results indicate that people with PDs demonstrate, for example, a lower level of agency, lower narrative coherence, a greater tendency to construct negatively affected stories, and more negative connections between self and the described event (see Lind et al., 2020). However, these studies were mostly conducted among

women with a borderline PD. Many studies did not include a control group in the procedure (Lind et al., 2020). Despite the indicated limitations of previous research, it seems that the study of narrative identity and, in particular, the process of autobiographical reasoning in the assessment of the severity of personality dysfunction is a promising direction in combining PDs and narrative psychology. Lind (2021) points out that autobiographical reasoning can hypothetically be one of the most important narrative indicators of the severity of personality dysfunction, particularly in terms of identity coherence and stability. In addition, assessing the severity of personality dysfunction by considering methods designed to explore narrative identity (interviewing, e.g., McAdams Life Story Interview) makes it possible to (1) reduce the importance of difficulties in self-description for people with PDs by enriching the diagnosis process with an analysis of narrative; (2) measure the subjective way of experiencing the disorder; and (3) increase the subjectivity of the diagnosed person during the diagnosis process. Therefore, testing the hypothesized relationships between the severity of personality dysfunction and autobiographical reasoning (Lind, 2021) will make it possible to take a further step toward incorporating narrative methods into PDs assessment.

METHOD

Aim

The present research was a pilot study supporting the author's doctoral dissertation. It was a starting point for a larger-scale study and a verification stage for the research project and its assumptions.

This study aimed to examine the relationship between autobiographical reasoning and the severity of personality dysfunction. Thus, the author decided to ask the following research question: what relationship exists between the indicators of autobiographical reasoning and the severity of personality dysfunction? Accordingly, the following hypotheses were put forward:

H1. There is a negative relationship between exploratory narrative processing and the severity of personality dysfunction.

H2. There is a negative relationship between the meaning-making process and the severity of personality dysfunction.

H3. There is a negative relationship between self-event connections and the severity of personality dysfunction.

Participants and Procedure

The participants were 11 volunteers (nine women, two men; age: $M = 26.4$, $SD = 4.15$, $\min = 22$, $\max = 36$) from a non-clinical group. They were recruited via Facebook. In order to enable statistical analyses, each statement was treated separately (see the Procedure section). As a result, the total number of units analyzed was $N = 88$. In order to reduce the consequences of the decision to treat each statement separately, a significance correction for multiple correlation coefficients and False Discovery Rate (FDR) was applied.

The research had a mixed-methods procedure, and data were collected in two stages. Stage 1 was conducted exclusively online, and consisted a form for demographical and personal data and the Self and Interpersonal Functioning Scale ([SIFS]; Gamache et al., 2019; Polish adaptation: Soroko et al., 2024) adapted to measure the severity of personality dysfunction (see Table 1).

Stage 2 was organized on a stationary basis and consisted of conducting the Life History Interview (McAdams, 1995a; Polish adaptation: Budziszewska, 2013) for section II (Critical Events) and completing psychological tests: The Splitting Index (Gould et al., 1996; Polish adaptation: Wesołowski, Bandel, Soroko, in preparation); the Borderline Personality Inventory (Leichsenring, 1999; Polish adaptation: Cierpiałkowska, 2001); the PID-5 Personality Inventory (Krueger et al., 2012; Polish adaptation: Rowiński et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Data Analyses

Due to the preliminary nature of the results presented in the article and the thematic scope of this paper, results obtained through the SIFS and the Life Story Interview were included in the analyses.

Qualitative data collected through the interview were transcribed. Then, deductive content analysis was performed, coding the qualitative data quantitatively according to the component processes of autobiographical reasoning (see Table 2). All analyses were conducted exclusively by the author. Finally, to verify the hypotheses, statistical correlations between the autobiographical reasoning indicators and severity of personality dysfunction were performed using Spearman's rho coefficient.

Table 1
Severity of Personality Dysfunction

Self	Identity	Difficulties are assessed regarding the ability to create and maintain positive and adequate self-esteem, define the boundaries of the self, and regulate emotions.
	Self-direction	Difficulties are assessed in terms of setting realistic and achievable goals, applying appropriate standards in behavior, and the ability to reflect on internal experiences.
Interpersonal	Empathy	Difficulties are assessed in terms of mentalizing, understanding and taking the perspective of others, and being aware of the impact of one's own behavior.
	Intimacy	Difficulties are assessed regarding the ability to form and maintain satisfying relationships, engagement in close and reciprocal relationships, and ability to cooperate and be flexible in relationships.

Note. From DSM-5 AMPD (APA, 2013), ICD-11 (WHO, 2019).

Table 2
Autobiographical Reasoning Indicators

Exploratory narrative processing (Pals, 2006): the extent to which the person wants to narrate the events (complexity/description) and understand their contribution/influence on the self.	Richness of narrative: the extent to which a person wants to tell a story (broad descriptions and elaborating on the impact)	Rated on a scale between 1 = <i>very closed/poor</i> to 5 = <i>very open/rich</i>
	Open exploratory: the extent to which a person wants to cope with or gain from the experience (e.g., new perspective, introspection, etc.)	
Meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006): reflects lesson/insight gained from experience a person shares a story about.	No meaning-making: a lack of meaning-making in narrative	Scoring scale: 0 = no meaning-making 1 = lesson 2 = vague meaning 3 = insight
	Lesson: meaning in a narrative is related exclusively to a change of behavior	
	Vague meaning: meaning in a narrative is more sophisticated than the lesson but does not fulfill a definition of the insight	
	Insight: meaning goes beyond the narrated event and is related to self-change or understanding of the world, self, relationships, others, or gaining a different perspective	

Self-event connections (Pasupathi et al., 2006): reflect relationships between experiences/events and some aspect of self/identity.	Self-event connections maintaining stability: they illustrate a person's attributes which he/she had before the event: – illustrate: a narrative illustrates the individual's characteristic/feature – dismissal: a trait is exemplified in a narrative by rejecting an event that does not fit an existing life story	Coded in the form of a total number of specific connections
	Self-event connections expressing change in relation to experience: they illustrate a change that occurred after an event: – causal: narrative shows the change in the person associated with the experienced event – reveal: narrative of the event sheds new light on a previously had but mostly unconscious trait or feature	

RESULTS

The conducted analyses show negative correlations between some indicators of autobiographical reasoning and various aspects of the severity of personality dysfunction (see Table 3). This means that at this stage we can say our hypotheses were confirmed only partly (to the extent that correlations were shown). The demonstrated correlations between variables range from low to moderate. The strongest relationship ($rS = -.384$) is between richness of narrative and the interpersonal aspect of the severity of personality dysfunction—intimacy. The weakest relationship ($rS = -.184$) was observed between “illustrate” self-event connections and the self aspect of severity of personality dysfunction—identity. However, it should be noted that the application of significance adjustment for multiple correlation coefficients and FDR showed significant relationships only between “illustrate” self-event connections and the severity of personality dysfunction in the aspect of identity ($rS = -.184$) and between richness of narrative and the severity of personality dysfunction in the interpersonal aspect—intimacy ($rS = -.384$).

Table 3*Autobiographical Reasoning and Severity of Personality Dysfunction—Correlation Matrix*

	Severity of personality dysfunction	Severity of personality dysfunction (self)	Severity of personality dysfunction (identity)	Severity of personality dysfunction (self-direction)	Severity of personality dysfunction (interpersonal)	Severity of personality dysfunction (empathy)	Severity of personality dysfunction (intimacy)
Richness of narrative	-.101	.067	.182	-.136	-.223*	.060	-.384**
Open exploratory	-.024	-.230*	-.093	-.333**	.003	.179	-.142
Meaning-making	.003	-.207*	-.137	-.333*	.056	.179	-.073
Illustrate connections	.257	.009	-.184*	.142	.308	.278	.157
Dismissal connections	-.102	.078	.014	.119	-.124	-.199*	.012
Causal connections	.065	.046	.002	.004	-.015	.093	-.121
Reveal connections	.034	.102	.104	.051	-.051	.000	-.034

Note. * $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The results provide preliminary and general confirmation of the negative relationship between autobiographical reasoning and the severity of personality dysfunction. Thus, the results indicate that the hypothetical suggestion of autobiographical reasoning as a narrative indicator of the level of personality dysfunction (Lind, 2021) may be reasonable. However, given the study's limitations (see below), the results should be understood more from the perspective of the validity of the chosen research direction rather than the data to be generalized. Nonetheless, the results presented allow to make some cautious conclusions about the investigated relationships.

The results show that people establishing fewer "illustrate" self-event connections report higher disturbances within identity. Moreover, reporting a higher number of dismissal self-event connections correlates with a higher level of difficulties in empathy. Both of the described types of self-event connections form a group of connections maintaining (self) stability. According to Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker (2007), "illustrate" and "dismissal" connections allow an individual to create and maintain a coherent and stable identity by establishing connections between what she is like and the event depicting the characteristic/trait indicated. Thus, such connections enhance an individual's trait by exemplifying it in narrative or rejecting an event that does not fit the existing life story. According to theory, the formation of such self-event connections supports identity stability and strengthens the sense of self as consistent and relatively stable over time. The results suggest that the establishment of such self-event connections may indicate a healthy personality.

Additionally, the analysis indicates a negative relationship between exploratory narrative processing and identity, and self-directioning and intimacy. Pals (2006) points out that exploratory narrative processing is associated with a greater ability to understand oneself through the narrative elaboration of an event and its integration into one's life story. The author also points to the adaptive characteristic of narrative processing in the face of difficult experiences. Exploratory narrative processing of this type of event allows the individual to understand its meaning better and, consequently, to adopt an open attitude toward the situation (see also Staudinger, 2001). Moreover, exploratory narrative processing contributes to positive change and growth in the face of difficult experiences (cf. Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Pals, 2006). Thus, an

open attitude towards difficult experiences, narrative processing of experiences, understanding their meaning, and incorporating it into one's identity allows an individual to cope with such events.

It should also be noted that meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006) is conceptually close to exploratory narrative processing. The conceptual convergence was also confirmed by an analysis of correlations between the components of autobiographical reasoning (see Supplemental Material). Meaning-making correlates with the same aspects of the severity of personality dysfunction as openness exploratory. Both variables capture the process of integrating an event or experience into a broader life story.

It seems interesting to consider whether the lack of meaning-making and openness exploratory will lead to narrative foreclosure. Narrative foreclosure is understood as the conviction that new (re)interpretations of important personal experiences are not possible. It can result in a sense that the life story (not life in general) has come to an end, and that its ending is already known (Freeman, 2000). This phenomenon is seen as nonadaptive because it hinders the development of identity and inhibit potential changes in the understanding and experience of one's own life (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011). As such, difficulties in meaning-making and exploratory openness may indicate difficulties in reflecting on one's own experience, which could consequently involve a sense that one's own life story is done. Moreover, McLean and Pratt (2006) point out the negative associations of meaning-making with foreclosure identity and identity diffusion (Marcia, 1966), as well as identity diffusion in Erikson's theory (e.g., 1956). Some of the most important aspects of identity diffusion are difficulties in self-definition, disturbances in interpersonal relationships, fulfilling social roles, and self-directioning, especially in important aspects of life. Kernberg (2006) argues that in an object-relations perspective, identity diffusion is the result of unintegrated (split), positive and negative representations of the self, object, and self-object dyads. The enduring state of identity diffusion is one of the essential components underlying severe PDs (e.g., borderline PD; Kernberg, 2006). Thus, hypothetically, people who experience themselves, others, and the environment incoherently have difficulty in narrative elaboration of experiences. Consequently, their ability to gain insight, learn from experiences, and integrate events into their broader life story would also be disturbed. Considering the autobiographical reasoning indicators, people's narratives would score lower regarding openness to exploration, meaning-making, and making less "illustrate" self-event connections.

Taking into account the emergence of PDs in early developmental stages (e.g., the nature of object relations formed in childhood; e.g., Kernberg, 1975) and development of narrative identity in later periods (adolescence; e.g., Harbermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2010), it seems that personality difficulties may underlie the narrative identity abnormalities. However, these two phenomena may combine based on a feedback loop, such that persistent PD impedes the creation and maintenance of a coherent narrative identity, which in turn may reinforce PD through the difficulty of (re)organizing one's experience coherently and adaptively in the form of a "healthy" narrative identity.

The presented study has several limitations that should be pointed out.

1. Few participants. As mentioned earlier, the study included 11 individuals, therefore each story of the eight critical events was treated separately to allow statistical analyses. Thus, the results of the narrative analysis of each of the eight crucial life events (treated separately) collected from one person were combined with his or her questionnaire results.

2. A disproportionate number of female participants in the study.

3. No participants from a clinical group.

4. The exclusively correlational nature of the study.

5. The qualitative analysis was conducted by the author alone.

The limitations make it impossible to generalize the results and identify predictors. The results presented should be considered exclusively as a preliminary test of the assumptions of the main study planned on a larger scale. Nevertheless, the presented results are an important contribution to the ongoing discussion on the relationship between autobiographical reasoning and the severity of personality dysfunction. They confirm the validity of the chosen research direction, thus fitting into the contemporary trend of thinking about the relationship between narrative identity and PDs (e.g., Lind, 2021). Moreover, the results of the study provide a starting point for undertaking and conducting further scientific research.

Further research should be conducted to attempt to identify predictors explaining disturbances in autobiographical reasoning, and subsequently in constructing a coherent narrative identity. A promising path in this regard might be to examine the relevance of the Split defense mechanism or, more generally, of primitive defense mechanisms to difficulties in constructing a coherent narrative identity. It is also valuable to determine the characteristics of autobiographical reasoning based on its indicators (see Table 1) for different levels of severity of personality dysfunction. Another (more distant, though) goal of the presented research direction could be an attempt to test the clinical

utility (e.g., Bornstein & Natoli, 2019) of autobiographical reasoning analysis for the severity of personality dysfunction assessment. Implementing the presented research directions could contribute not only to the academic knowledge of the relationship between narrative identity and PDs, but also support the diagnostic process of PDs, e.g., by reducing the aforementioned problems associated with using self-reported methods in diagnosis.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Autobiographical Reasoning Indicators—Correlation Matrix

	Richness of narrative	Open exploratory	Meaning- making	Illustrate connections	Dismissal connections	Causal connections	Reveal connections
Richness of narrative	–						
Open exploratory	.563***	–					
Meaning- making	.433***	.664***	–				
Illustrate connections	–.079	–.052	.093	–			
Dismissal connections	–.117	–.066	–.143	–.088	–		
Causal connections	.342***	.368***	.473***	–.149	–.011	–	
Reveal connections	.142	–.011	.065	–.038	–.026	–.067	–

*** $p < .001$