2014

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Using the Life Story to Promote Identity Formation and Career Decision-Making in an Undergraduate Population

Courtney Jane Obis Belmonte & Dr. Jennifer E. Wartella, PhD, LCP

Introduction

- Career decision-making is a difficult challenge in an undergraduate student's life. It involves identifying one's preferences and goals for one's future.
- It is an important precursor to career-preparation and transition from student to employee.
- Barriers exist within this process that make it problematic. Specifically, many students lack the essential elements necessary to make career decisions.
- Identity formation is one such element that can have an important impact on career decision-making. This process involves reviewing and understanding one's past in order to make decisions about the future.
- Most undergraduate students have not yet resolved or committed to an identity.
- A narrative approach may be one way to facilitate undergraduate life review to promote identity resolution and thus increase career-decision making.
- To explore this hypothesis, McAdams (1988) Life Story exercise was assigned to students in an undergraduate Personality course.

Research Question(s)

- Can an undergraduate class paper project (the LS paper) increase identify formation and career decision-making in an emerging adult population?
- Are students with higher in identity formation scores more likely to endorse greater career decision-making ability (and vice versa)?

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Acknowledgements

- Thank you to the VCU Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approving the study.

Method

Design and Participants

- A within-subjects design was used within this study.
- Undergraduate students (mostly juniors and seniors) enrolled in Psychology 309 (Personality) course were invited to participate in this study. Participants received no compensation but could decline participation at any time during the study.
- Inclusion criteria required continuous enrollment in Psychology 309 and participants had to be at least 18 years of age
- 20 Students completed all tasks of the study (3 male, 17 female)

Materials

- Multiple questionnaires were used to measure identity formation and career decision-making (Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ-IIIx), Career Decision Questionnaire, Career Exploration Survey-Revised (CES-R))
- Two questionnaires (Aspects of Identity and Career Decision) were the focus of the current analyses (Part 1).
- The Aspects of Identity Questionnaire is a 35 item Likert scale answered on a five point scale (Cheek, J. M., Tropp, L. R., Chen, L. C., & Underwood, M. K., 1994 (1st edition)).
- The Career Decision Questionnaire is a 18 item Likert scale answered on a four point scale, with one short answer question that will be analyzed in later research (Osipow, S.H., Carney, C.G., Winer, J., Yanico, B., & Koschier, M., 1976 (3rd edition)).

Procedures

- Students were invited to take part in a research study that examined the impact of a class assignment on identity formation and career decision-making.
- IRB approval was obtained and students were invited, but not required, to take part in the study. The research assistant conducted informed consent and distributed and collected all questionnaires.
- All questionnaires were given at the beginning of the third week of class prior to the assignment of the Life Story Exercise.
- After completion of the Life Story Exercise (submitted near the conclusion of the course), questionnaires were given again to students participating in the study (approximately the 12th week of classes).
- The principal investigator (PI), or professor, stepped out of the room to remain completely anonymous about student participation. All participants were given coded ID's to keep the professor blind to their participation (to prevent any grading biases in the course itself). The research assistant (RA) remained in the room to collect the measures and answer questions.
- The RA created and organized the data base and entered all the data points for the questionnaires.

Statistical Analyses

- The three dependent variables of interest were: personal identity formation, career decision, and career indecision.
- A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was done to assess the relationship of the class assignment on identity formation and career decision-making.
- SPSS version 20.0 was used to perform this analysis.

Example of Life Story Exercise (McAdams, 1998):

Life Story Paper Instructions adapted for Psychology 309 (Personality) course
June 20, 2012 - Version 1

The Life Story

Don P. McAdams, PhD
The Valley Center for the Study of Lives
Northwestern University
Revised: February, 2008
Adapted for classroom use

Introduction

This is a paper about the story of your life. As social scientists, we are interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is whatever I do not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you focus on a few key scenes, characters and ideas. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Instead, your task is simply to tell me about some of the important things that have happened in your life and how you manage your life in the future. These instructions will guide you through the interview.

Please be aware the purpose of this paper is not to figure out what is wrong with you or do some kind of deep clinical analysis! This should be your exercise as a "therapy session" of some kind. This is an exercise to help you learn more about one way Personality Psychologists attempt to understand the different ways in which people in our society and in other lives their lives and the different ways they understand who they are. Instructions for each section are provided below. **Please be aware that social scenes are absolutely inappropriate for this paper and your story will be returned to you ungraded if you should include these topics in your paper. Specifically, topics involving sex or alcohol use, violence, sexual behavior, social identities, or abuse of self or others (children, other adults, vulnerable populations) is strictly prohibited.** Everything you write about is voluntary and confidential.

Please begin by thinking about your life as if it were a book or movie. Imagine that the book has a table of contents containing the titles of the most chapters in the story. In the introduction, what you want to provide is an overall plot summary of your story, going chapter by chapter. Your completed paper should be between 5-10 pages, so please keep your descriptions of the various chapters relatively brief.

A. Key Scenes in the Life Story

I would like you to focus on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. A key event would be an event or specific incident that took place at a particular time and place. Consider a key scene to be a moment in your life story that stands out for a particular reason - it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important or memorable. For each of the key events we will consider, ask that you describe in detail what happened, when it happened, who you involved and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. In addition, I ask that you discuss why you think this particular scene is important or significant in your life. What does the scene say about you as a person? Please be specific.

1

Life Story Paper Instructions adapted for Psychology 309 (Personality) course
June 20, 2012 - Version 1

currently working on or plan to work on in the future. Include what the project is, how you got involved in the project or will get involved in the project, how the project might develop, and why you think this project is important for you and/or other people.

C. Challenges

The next section considers the various challenges, struggles, and problems you have encountered in your life. I will begin with a general challenge, and then I will focus in on three particular areas or issues where many people experience challenges, problems or crises.

1. **Life Challenges:** Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe when you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge in your own life story?

2. **Failure/Regret:** Somewhere experiences failure and regret in life, even for the happiest and luckiest lives. Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe the greatest failure or regret you have experienced. The failure or regret can occur in any area of your life - work, family, friendships or any other area. Please describe the failure or regret and the way in which the failure or regret came to be. How have you coped with this failure or regret? What effect has this failure or regret had on you or your life story?

D. Personal Identity

Now, turn to you think about your fundamental beliefs and values and about questions of meaning and morality in your life. Please give some thought and describe any significant beliefs and/or values that are important to you. These beliefs and values may (or may not) include religious/spiritual values, political/social values, changing ideas, single most important values to you, or any other value you feel is important and reflects who you are and your overall philosophy of life. It is up to you what beliefs and values you would like to include in describing your story.

E. Life Theme

Looking back over your entire life with all the chapters, scenes and challenges, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs through the story? What is the major theme or your life story? Please explain.

F. Reflection

Thank you for your work and effort to present your unique and important story. Many of the stories you have described are about the experiences that stand out from day to day. For example, we talked about a high-point, a low-point, a turning point, your future goals, etc. Given that most people don't share their life stories on a regular basis, I'm wondering if you might reflect for one last moment about what this project and what it's been like to write this paper. What were your thoughts and feelings about the

3

Results

- Statistically significant differences were found in career decision making (students endorsed greater career decision-making upon LS completion), $t(19)=2.37$, $p<.05$ but not identity formation, although a trend toward increased identity formation emerged.

Discussion/Conclusion

- Data reveals that students career-decision making increased following their undergraduate participation in the LS exercise.
- Students endorsed a trend of increased identify formation following participation in the LS exercise as well. This relationship did not meet statistical significance, however, likely due to low power in this study.
- As such, it appears the LS exercise may indeed represent a feasible and useful exercise for bolstering student identify formation, which has been identified by past studies as a potential barrier to career decision-making and ultimately, career preparedness.
- Qualitative research to further understand these relationships and determine what specific aspects (LS themes, etc.) of student LS papers may have the strongest impact on these variables that may also provide important information for solidifying identify formation and increasing career decision-making. The analysis of student LS paper's will comprise Part 2 of this project and is planned for completion this summer 2013.
- Additional research is needed with a larger recruitment plan and students from other university courses to confirm these results and be able to generalize them to the larger undergraduate population. The findings to date are quite promising for assisting undergraduates attempting to transition from student to career and may represent a first step toward resolving their reluctance to begin career preparation upon better understanding of their experiences and interests. More research is needed to continue exploring these relationships and creating a feasible intervention to help undergraduates struggling with this impending change.

Limitations

- Attrition was certainly an issue within this study (50% attrition occurred between pre and post LS study exercise submission. This may be due to the fact that students felt uncomfortable offering their LS papers to the professor to be analyzed for the presence of research variables, or a fear that their grade might be negatively impacted by their stories.
- Numerous students did not answer all items of the questionnaires, thus their data could not be used.
- Power of the population was low and limited to a specific undergraduate class; additional studies that are more inclusive of all undergraduate majors (especially those not to be taught by the PI) would likely yield less attrition and will be considered for future studies.