

Redemption Sequences

Coding Narrative Accounts of Autobiographical Scenes for Redemption Sequences

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A redemption sequence is a particular narrative form that appears in some accounts of significant scenes in a person's life story. In a redemption sequence, a demonstrably "bad" or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably "good" or emotionally positive outcome. The story plot moves from a negative to a positive valence, bad leads to good. Therefore, the initial negative state is "redeemed" or salvaged by the good that follows it.

Redemption is a common theme in both classic and contemporary narratives. In life story research, redemption sequences can be detected in a wide range of accounts that people provide, from their reconstructions of the past events, to their characterizations of what may happen in their lives in the future. The current coding scheme is based on research into the form and content of particular life-story scenes. A scene is a circumscribed event or episode in a life story, situated in time and place, and containing particular characters and action. In our research on life stories, we have focused mainly on the following kinds of scenes: life story "high points" (sometimes called "peak experiences"), life story "low points" (sometimes called "nadir experiences"), life story "turning points," "earliest memories," "significant childhood scenes," "significant adolescent scenes," "significant adult scenes," "decision scenes" (an episode in which the protagonist made a major life decision), "morality scenes" (an episode in which the protagonist confronted a moral dilemma), and a catch-all category that we call "significant other scenes" (in response to the question: "Describe one other important scene in your life story"). For each scene, the subject describes what happened, who was there, what he or she was thinking and feeling, and what the meaning of the scene might be in the context of his or her overall life story (e.g., "what does the scene say about who you are or who you were?"). These descriptions can be collected through life-story interviewing or through open-ended questionnaires in which respondents write down or type out their accounts. Each narrated scene is coded as a whole. Thus, the coding unit for redemption sequences is the narrated account of one scene (e.g., a high point, a turning point, an earliest memory).

The coding scheme for redemption sequences is derived from theoretical writings on redemption scenes and commitment scripts (e.g., Carlson, 1988; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Tomkins, 1987) and the literature on posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The first literature frames an overall understanding of the movement from bad scenes to good scenes in stories, encoded in the category of "redemption imagery" described below. The second literature speaks to the positive aftermath or growth that may occur in an individual's life once a negative (even traumatic event) leads to a positive outcome, encoded in three subcategories for redemption sequences ("enhanced agency" "enhanced communion," and "ultimate concern") described below. In the overall, then, the redemption sequence coding scheme consists of four theoretically derived thematic categories:

1. Redemption imagery

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2. Enhanced agency
3. Enhanced communion
4. Ultimate concerns.

The Prime Test: Redemption Imagery

In scoring a particular narrative account of an autobiographical scene for redemption, the coder must first determine the presence or absence of redemption imagery. If the scene contains redemption imagery, then it receives a score of +1, and the coder continues to look for the presence or absence of each of the three subcategories (enhanced agency, enhanced communion, ultimate concerns) in that particular scene. If the scene does not contain redemption imagery, then it receives a score of 0 and no further subcategory scoring is done for that scene. Thus, if the scene scores 0 for redemption imagery, all redemption scoring of that scene ends, and the coder moves to the next scene.

The essential characteristic of redemption imagery is the movement in the story from a demonstrably negative to a demonstrably positive scene. We may call the negative or bad element of the sequence "A" and the positive or good element of the sequence "B". Thus:

A ---> B

The coder must first determine if there is a negative A state, scene, or situation in the account. Negative scenes are often described in terms of the protagonist's emotional state -- he or she may have felt fear, terror, sadness, grief, anguish, guilt, shame, humiliation, anger, distress, or any of a large number of explicitly negative affective states. Also relevant would be physical pain, injury, and sickness. In other cases, the author may not explicitly describe a negative feeling, but the event itself is an especially negative one -- e.g., death of a friend, divorce, major failure, poverty, addiction, broken relationship, being fired from one's job. The coder should consider a negative A state to be established if the respondent describes a scene in which he or she experienced significant negative affect or pain or if the respondent describes a scene that itself is so negative that it would most assuredly produce negative affect or pain for most any person experiencing it. The coder should be relatively conservative here. Minor setbacks (e.g., misplacing one's purse, waiting in line, getting a less-than-stellar grade on an exam) and mild negative states (e.g., feeling nervous at the beginning of a competitive event, feeling uncertain about one's skills, lacking direction in life) should not count for A. The event needs to be demonstrably negative. Especially negative scenes are often described in life story low points and turning points, but they can occasionally appear in most any kind of account, including even high points.

Once a negative A state has been determined, then the question of what, if anything, follows that state must be asked. For redemption imagery to be scored, the negative A state must lead to an especially positive scene or state. Positive states are often indexed by positive emotions, such as feelings of joy, happiness, excitement, satisfaction, love, and the like. But they can also be indicated by certain especially positive cognitive results, such as increased understanding of self-insight, and by descriptions of events that themselves would likely elicit positive feelings in most people (e.g., close relationships, victory, reconciliation, healing, growth, learning). The positive state of B that follows the negative A state does not need to be as positive as the A state was negative. For example, the death of one's father is a very negative

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scene. The fact that the father's death ultimately led to an enhanced feeling of self-confidence on the part of the respondent is definitely a positive outcome (B), even though its strength or robustness is less, in absolute terms, than the death itself. Or to put it simply, a very dark cloud can still leave a faint silver lining, and such a sequence would score for redemption. Therefore, redemption sequences occur when some kind of positive outcome follows a negative event, even if that positive outcome pails in comparison to the intensity of the negative event. Still, the B state must be demonstrably positive. The author must explicitly describe a state that involves positive emotional or cognitive resolution, or one that is itself so positive as to produce such a result in most people. The coder should not make undue inferences about what the respondent means. The respondent needs to describe clearly a move from a negative A to a positive B.

The movement from A to B can take one of two forms. A may cause B (in the respondent's view) or A may merely immediately precede B in time.

In the first case, A leads to B by virtue of causation. A is the event or factor whose prior occurrence to B is the reason that B occurs. For instance, the death of one's spouse (A: bad) may cause a person to gain insight into his own life (B: good). Or a divorce (A) may eventuate in improvement of one's relationships with one's children (B). Or an especially painful delivery (A) produces a healthy baby (B). (Note the delivery did not have to be "painful" to eventuate in the baby, but the delivery itself still would be viewed as "causing" the baby to be born.) These events are constructed as causal narratives; B would not have occurred if A had not "caused" it.

In the second case, A need not cause B but merely precede B immediately in time. For example, a losing season (A: bad) is followed immediately by a championship season (B: good). Or a depressive episode (A) is followed immediately by winning the lottery (B). In these instances, the author is not trying to suggest that A caused B. Instead, A and B are juxtaposed in such a way that a very positive event follows on the heels of a very negative one. The link is temporal, but not necessarily causal. It is important to note that by "temporal," we are referring to chronological time in the plot of the narrative itself. B must follow A in the temporal scheme of the story. As an example of the contrary, consider a respondent who describes a bad experience in his life that occurred at age 30 and then proceeds to go back to incident in childhood that is contrastingly positive. Even though the positive event followed the negative one in the telling of the story, the positive event occurred in time long before the negative event occurred. Thus, such an account would not code for redemption imagery.

The content of A ---> B that makes up a redemptive sequence ranges widely. Common examples, though, fall into the categories of sacrifice, recovery, growth, learning, and improvement. Below are examples of each of these five common types ("S" designates subject):

1. Sacrifice. A character in the story willfully accepts or endures an extremely negative A in order to provide a benefit of B. Typically B is a benefit for another, though the self may also benefit. Thus, A is viewed as something of a sacrifice for the good inherent in B.

Examples:

pain of delivery ---> birth of beautiful baby

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difficult years working in a low-paying job ---> money saved enhanced child's education
S leaves husband because he wants her to have abortion, poverty ensues ---> joy of loving son

2. Recovery. The person successfully obtains a positive state again after losing it, as in healing, survival, regaining, recuperating, etc. Typically, A is a physical (injury, illness) or psychological (depression, trauma) condition and B is the healing outcome. Examples:

illness ---> cure
depression ---> regained positive outlook on life
near-fatal injuries ---> surprising recovery
alcoholism ---> successful treatment
severe anorexia ---> therapist "saved my life"

3. Growth. A negative experience leads to psychological or interpersonal growth, fulfillment, actualization, strengthening, individuation, etc. Most often, B is a personal/psychological benefit that results for the person from the occurrence of A. Examples:

death of father ---> brings family closer together
injury ---> S learns to be self-sufficient
S is lonely as a child ---> because of this S feels he/she more resilient as an adult
unhappy employment situation ---> S quits and finds independence, fulfillment
depression ---> initiated personality change
panic attack ---> self-understanding
failed love affair ---> S becomes more assertive
mother's death ---> S feels closer to her now
episode of anger and crying about father's death ---> S no longer stutters, decreased anxiety
ran away from home, felt bad ---> S gained personal strength
divorce ---> developed better relationships with children
got fired from job ---> comes to see self as a "whole person"
sexual philandering, drunkenness, fear had AIDS ---> S started taking responsibility for life
death of grandson ---> S re-prioritizes life
family stress and pressure ---> S puts life in perspective, come to value friendships more
S is threatened by angry mob ---> becomes more self-confident, resilient
husband has affair ---> S feels enhanced "strength of ego"
fight with mother-in-law ---> S experiences personal growth
illness, radiation therapy ---> S experiences better self-understanding
drugs, dereliction ---> S moves to new place, changes name, "got life together"
uncle dies ---> S experiences greater empathy for others
near-death experience ---> S sheds self-centered qualities
illness forces S to end career ---> S takes up painting and finds the "love and passion" of life
miscarriage ---> S now appreciates "the little things in life"
S feels he is arrogant and hypocrite ---> S becomes humbler, happier

4. Learning. A person gains new knowledge, wisdom, skills, etc. from a negative event. Whereas growth generally refers to psychological or interpersonal benefits, learning refers to benefits that are more instrumental and less concerned with issues of personal and interpersonal adjustment. Of course, the two types overlap somewhat. Examples:

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father is dying ---> father gives sage words of advice
S is worn out at work, exhausting work load ---> S realizes life needs more balance
family poverty means S cannot go to the prom ---> learns lessons about honesty, money
severe criticism from co-workers ---> S becomes better employee
frustrations on job ---> S learns patience
tough neighborhood, fights ---> "but I learned a lot"
near-death experience ---> learned to fear death no longer
turmoil in school ---> S learns new perspectives
mother-in-law hates S ---> S learns how to be a good mother-in-law as a result
S is unhappy, quit school ---> S learns value of hard work to achieve goals

5. Improvement (and other). This is something of a catch-all category for the many examples that do not fit into the four types about but in which a bad situation containing negative affect becomes a better situation containing positive affect. Examples:

bad job ---> new, better job
S experiences a period of chaos in life ---> S experiences happiest time in life
infertility ---> a child is born (similar to recovery type)
very bad marriage ---> very good marriage
S experiences job insecurity, doubts ---> S wins award for excellence
girlfriend is depressed about her family ---> S proposes marriage, which lifts her mood
miserable about unemployment ---> stranger gives S a tip, which leads to a good job
divorce, anger ---> S becomes successful in order to prove her own worth to ex-spouse
death of brother, bad grades at school ---> "things then picked up," better grades, S is happy
hated school --> began liking it
fight and injury ---> S becomes friends with his opponent
S is a terrible student ---> summer reading program enhances confidence
very bad year at college ---> S ends up getting grades of "A"
S is terrified of public speaking ---> S improves speaking ability, experiences success
husband is cold, distant ---> S gets help, counseling, marriage improves
lonely, depressed ---> S experiences conversion to Christianity, feels ecstatic
S drifts into drugs ---> S joins track team and gains direction and purpose in life, stops drugs
unwanted pregnancy ---> S gets life focused, she becomes thankful for pregnancy
S is stuck in low-level job ---> S gets promoted and becomes very successful

The Subcategories: Agency Enhancement, Communion Enhancement, Ultimate Concern

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) write that three common positive results of posttraumatic growth are (1) improvements in self, (2) improvements in interpersonal relationships, and (3) enhanced spiritual or religious experiences. Employing Bakan's (1966) distinction between agency and communion as well as the language of Paul Tillich and other theologians, we have reformulated these three into the subcategories of

Enhanced Agency
Enhanced Communion
Ultimate Concerns.

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For enhanced agency, score +1 if the transformation from negative to positive in the story produces or leads to an additional enhancement of the protagonist's personal power or agency, if it builds self-confidence, efficacy, or personal resolve, or if it provides the protagonist with insight into personal identity. The author must explicitly state that enhanced agency was a result of the redemptive sequence.

For enhanced communion, score +1 if the transformation from negative to positive in the story produces or leads to an additional enhancement of the protagonist's personal relationships of love, friendship, family ties, and so on. The author must explicitly state that the enhanced communion was a result of the redemption sequence.

These two subcategories -- enhanced agency and enhanced communion -- function as "bonus points" for redemption sequences. They are points that are added on to an account that already scores for redemption imagery. However, the coder should use the bonus points sparingly. The rule of thumb is that each of these two sub categories can be scored +1 only if it is expressed as a direct result of the move from negative to positive states. In other words, once an A --> B sequence has been detected (score +1 for redemption imagery), then the coder looks for additional benefits that go beyond the original redemptive move. For example, an account may score for redemptive imagery by virtue of a young man's move from drug addiction (A) to recovery (B). The "good" outcome is the recovery from drug addiction. If in addition to this good outcome, the young man also experiences enhanced friendship or love, then the account gets an extra point for the subcategory of enhanced communion. These two subcategories are value added. They enable the coder to give occasional extra points for accounts that provide multiple benefits or aspects to the good outcome (B) that follows the negative state (A). By contrast, an account in which a young woman's experience of loneliness (A) is followed by an experiences of deep-felt love (B) would not score for the extra point of communion enhancement because the actual move that makes for the redemptive imagery itself (which is, of course, scored) is itself a move from loneliness (no communion) to love (communion). There is nothing to "add" -- the redemptive imagery category capture it all. Thus, the subcategories of enhanced agency and enhanced communion are only added to the score when the minimal content that produced the redemptive imagery to begin with leaves behind other, associated content suggestive of additional agentic or communal benefits in B.

For ultimate concern, score +1 if the transformation from negative to positive involves confrontation with or significant involvement in fundamental existential issues or ultimate concerns. The event brings the protagonist face-to-face with death, God, and or religious/spiritual dimensions of life. A point is added for this subcategory because of our belief that redemptive accounts that include such content have a more powerful and personally meaningful quality to them than do other kinds of redemptive accounts.

Total Scores

The coder simply adds up the scores from the prime test and three subcategories for each scene account. Thus scores for a single scene range hypothetically from 0 to 4. The most common score, by far, is 0. Total subject score is the sum of all scene scores.

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