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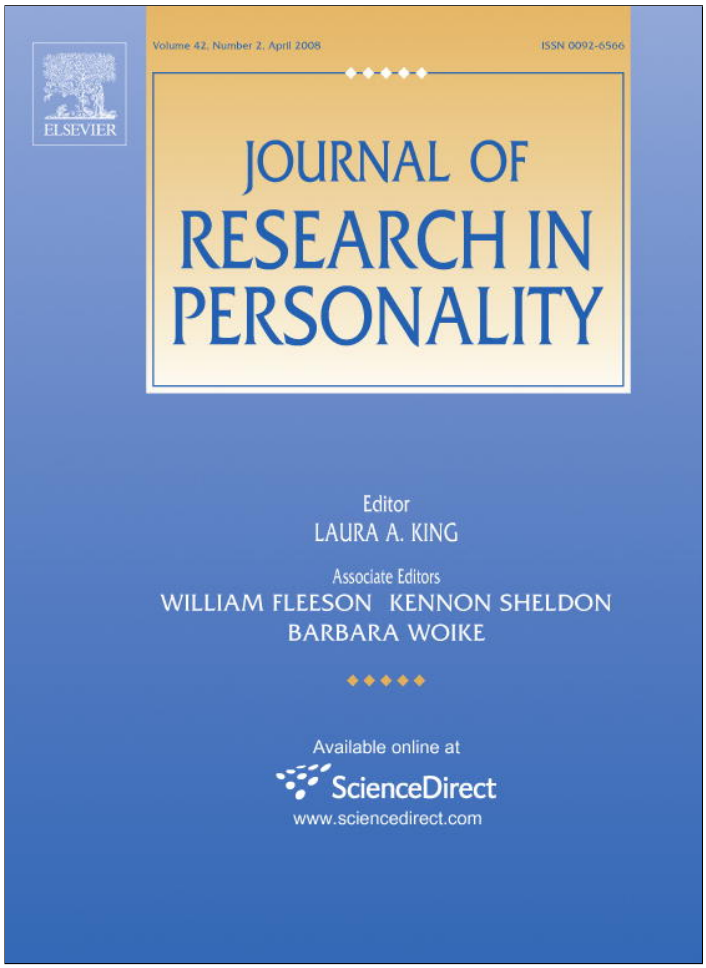

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Telling losses: Personality correlates and functions of bereavement narratives

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Abstract

How and why do bereaved individuals talk about their loss? What are the personality correlates and social consequences of different kinds of bereavement narratives? Two studies were conducted to answer these questions. In Study 1, participants from online bereavement support groups and memorial websites wrote bereavement narratives. Participants high in Conscientiousness told brief, factual narratives; participants high in Neuroticism told self-focused contamination narratives; and participants high in Extraversion told narratives for social reasons. In Study 2, undergraduate participants responded to twelve narratives from Study 1. Participants felt more sympathetic concern but more social awkwardness and less acceptance towards contamination narrators compared to redemption narrators. The role of personality in the telling and reception of bereavement stories, and social support after loss, is discussed.
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1. Introduction

In Raymond Carver's (1993) short story "A Small, Good Thing" a mother ordered her son a birthday cake from a baker. The baker seemed aloof and cold, which made the mother uncomfortable. On the morning before the son's birthday party, the son was hit by a car and hospitalized. He died within days, and the mother forgot about the birthday

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cake. However, she received a series of telephone reminders from the increasingly irritated baker. Angered by the phone calls, she entered the bakery late one night with her husband and told the baker about the death of her son. This disclosure explained and justified her behavior (neglecting to pick up the cake); it defused the baker's irritation and elicited an immediate display of compassion and hospitality (he seated the mother and father and fed them warm rolls); and it encouraged the baker to open up to the couple in a more intimate way, talking with them about his own sorrows and joys.

This story demonstrates the powerful healing effect that telling about losses can have for both the narrator and the listener. It also suggests the role that the personality of each participant can play in the narrative exchange (suppose the baker had been overwhelmed or less compassionate in his response to the disclosure). Similarly, it raises the question of why and when individuals ultimately choose to share a story of loss.

Increasingly, researchers are studying the effects of sharing narratives in social interactions (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Pasupathi, 2003, 2005; Thorne & McLean, 2003). Alea and Bluck (2003) have proposed a model of autobiographical memory telling that identifies key factors that might influence the nature and outcome of a narrative disclosure. These factors include the personality characteristics of both narrator and listener, as well as the content of the memory disclosed. Depending on the personality characteristics of the narrator, the memory content may be more or less emotional and revealing. Depending on the memory content and the personality characteristics of the narrative recipient, the recipient's response may be more or less supportive.

The goal of the present studies is to apply these insights about personality and memory-telling to the study of bereavement narrative disclosure. Although not all bereavement disclosures are memory narratives, Alea and Bluck's model can be extended to encompass the major features of any story disclosure. Their model focused on the *social* functions of autobiographical memory sharing (i.e., social support, intimacy-building, advice-giving); however the components of the model are likely to figure in *self* functions (i.e., emotional expression, validation, insight) as well.

For bereaved individuals, telling and retelling stories about their loved one and their loss may serve both self and social functions (Capps & Bonanno, 2000; Harvey, Carlson, Huff, & Green, 2001). In the bereavement literature, all of the self and social functions mentioned above have been recognized as features of the grieving process, and this process, in turn, has been recognized as likely to be affected by the griever's and listener's personality characteristics (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Harvey et al., 2001). Yet researchers in the bereavement field have noted that empirical studies linking personality to the functions and effects of telling stories of loss have yet to be conducted (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Harvey et al., 2001).

For example, Capps and Bonanno (2000) demonstrated that bereaved individuals with poorer psychological adjustment to their losses were more likely to tell bereavement narratives that displayed greater negative content and diminished agency (as measured by the use of more second person pronouns and passive sentence constructions). These bereavement narratives were more likely to create distance and discomfort in listeners. Despite these valuable findings, these authors did not report the role that personality characteristics in either speakers or listeners might have played in the content and reception of these narratives.

With this in mind, the current studies examined the following questions: (1) Are narrators' personality characteristics linked to the kind of bereavement stories that they tell? (2) Is there a relationship between narrators' personality characteristics and the functions served by telling bereavement stories? (3) Does the content of the disclosure influence

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recipients' responses to the narrators? (4) Is there a relationship between recipients' personality characteristics and their responses to narrators?[1]

1.1. Personality characteristics of narrators and narrative functions

McAdams (2006b) has proposed a three-tiered approach to the study of personality that includes traits, characteristic adaptations (e.g., goals, life tasks, cognitive strategies), and personal narratives. In the current study, we chose to examine personality primarily through the trait domain. Drawing on the "Big Five" factors of personality (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 2003), we asked how these personality domains might be linked to the functions of telling bereavement narratives and to the types of narratives disclosed. Further, we asked how narrative recipients' personality traits might affect their reactions to the narrative disclosures.

Previous researchers have shown links between the "Big Five" personality traits and the linguistic and affective content of autobiographical narratives (McAdams et al., 2004; Pennebaker & King, 1999). People high in Neuroticism tend to tell stories that are negative in emotional tone (McAdams et al., 2004) and use more negative emotion words and fewer positive emotion words (Pennebaker & King, 1999). High Extraversion has often been associated with positive emotional tone (McLean, 2006), but not always (McAdams et al., 2004). People high in Extraversion tend to use more positive emotion words, people high in Agreeableness use more positive emotion words and fewer negative emotion words, and people high in Conscientiousness use fewer negative emotion words (Pennebaker & King, 1999).

Individuals high in Extraversion and those high in Conscientiousness are less likely to use language suggestive of cognitive processing or meaning-making in autobiographical memory narratives (Pasupathi, 2005). Specifically, individuals high in Conscientiousness and those high in Extraversion used fewer cognitive process words, particularly tentative words (e.g., *maybe, guess*), negations (e.g., *no, never*), and exclusive words (e.g., *but*, *without*). People high in Conscientiousness also used fewer causation words (e.g., *because*, *effect*).

The use of first-person singular pronouns, considered an indicator of self-focus (Pasupathi, 2005), appears to be connected to personality traits. People high in Openness told stories that contained fewer first-person singular pronouns, whereas people high in Neuroticism used more first-person singular pronouns. Additionally, Neuroticism was associated with language use indicating immediacy, particularly the use of more present tense verbs (Pennebaker & King, 1999). This use of present tense suggests a ruminative focus on and re-living of the feelings associated with the experience rather than an ability to gain a degree of emotional distance from the recalled event.

In addition to looking at emotion words or grammatical usage, the current studies examined the overall affective trajectories of the bereavement stories. Previous studies have

[1] Although the Alea and Bluck (2003) model focuses on memories delivered orally in the context of conversation, participants in the current studies provided written memories in response to a prompt rather than spoken memories delivered in the context of a conversation. Singer and Moffitt (1991–1992) found that spoken memories were longer and more specific than their written counterparts, but that written and spoken memories were similar in emotional quality and vividness. According to Alea and Bluck (2003) listener characteristics and responsiveness influence the characteristics of the autobiographical memory told in conversation. Therefore, the memories written by participants would likely vary in a conversational context according to the specific characteristics and responsiveness of the conversation partner(s).

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shown that narrators high in Neuroticism tend to tell more negatively toned stories and contamination sequences, in which events go from good to bad, while redemptive stories that go from bad to good are linked to more positive emotion and well-being, attributes associated with Extraversion (Adler, Kissel, & McAdams, 2006; McAdams et al., 2004; McLean, 2006).

There have been few studies of the relationship between the Big Five traits and the functions of narrative telling. Although there is evidence that people high in Extraversion tend to share memory narratives in order to teach or inform others, studies thus far have shown no relationship between personality traits and the use of narratives to promote intimacy or seek validation (see review in Alea & Bluck, 2003).

1.2. Audience responses

The social sharing of negative events is most beneficial if the listener is responsive and supportive (Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000), and the nature of the response to a narrative depends on both the narrative content and the audience. Although McAdams (2006a) has highlighted American preferences for redemption stories, no empirical studies have examined the effect of redemption and contamination stories on social support in disclosure interactions. Additionally, the characteristics of the recipients may also play a role in how beneficial the telling of a particular story is for the narrator. Personality traits like Agreeableness and Extraversion may make for more responsive and supportive listening, while listeners who are similar in levels of Neuroticism to narrators may be more sympathetic to their tendency to tell negatively-toned stories.

1.3. The present studies

The first study addressed personality traits as they related to narrative characteristics and functions; the second study examined recipients' personality traits and responses to bereavement narratives.

1.3.1. Study 1 Hypotheses

First, it was expected that individuals with loss stories that were more negative in affective content (as defined by more negative words and fewer positive words) would be higher in Neuroticism and lower in Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. It was also predicted that individuals who chose to tell contamination stories would be higher in Neuroticism and lower in Extraversion, compared to individuals who chose to tell redemption stories.

Second, it was expected that individuals higher in Neuroticism would use more self-focused language with more emphasis on their current feeling state than on the past event. This would be reflected in more first-person singular pronouns, more present-tense and fewer past-tense verbs, fewer insight and causal words, and less discussion of the specifics of the loss. On the other hand, individuals high in Conscientiousness and Extraversion would be more likely to focus on the circumstances of the loss and provide language that was more past-oriented, less meaning-oriented, and less reflective of self-focus.

Third, it was expected that individuals higher in Neuroticism would use their stories more for self-related functions, whereas individuals higher in Extraversion would use their stories more for social functions.

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In order to demonstrate that associations between personality and bereavement disclosure were independent of current mood state or situational concerns about disclosing information, measures of depression and social constraints on disclosure in the past week were included as control variables.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

A total of 133 people recruited from on-line support groups and memorial sites participated in Study 1, whose stated purpose was to investigate how people talk about their loss. Most participants (92.5%, $N = 123$) were women. The mean age was 39.40 years ($SD = 12.74$ years, range = 18—71 years). The median level of education was some college. Most respondents were White (89.5%, $N = 119$). About half (57.9%, $N = 77$) were married or in committed relationships; 17.3% ($N = 23$) were widowed; 9.8% ($N = 13$) were divorced or separated; and 14.3% ($N = 19$) were single.

Losses had taken place an average of 3.34 years ago ($SD = 5.2$). On average, participants had very close relationships with the deceased ($M = 1.1$, $SD = 0.43$, on a scale where 1 = *very close* and 5 = *very distant*). Fifty-two percent of the participants ($N = 69$) had been involved in a support group, and 27.1% ($N = 36$) had been involved in an online support group. Forty-three percent of participants ($N = 69$) reported that they had lost a child; 18.0% ($N = 29$) had lost a spouse or partner; 16.8% ($N = 27$) had lost a parent; 10.6% ($N = 17$) had lost a sibling; and 11.8% ($N = 19$) had lost a friend or relative not in the four categories previously mentioned. Causes of loved ones' death were illness (27%, $N = 36$); accidents (24.1%, $N = 32$); miscarriage or neonatal loss (19.5%, $N = 26$); war or terrorism (8.3%, $N = 11$); suicide (7.5%, $N = 10$); and miscellaneous other causes (13.5%, $N = 18$) including homicide, drug or alcohol-related deaths, and deaths whose cause was unclear from the narrative.[2]

2.1.2. Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked questions regarding their age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, level of education, whether they had ever participated in a support group, and whether they had ever participated in an online support group.

Loss characteristics. Participants were asked how long ago their loss took place, what their relationship was to the deceased, how close they were to the deceased, and how comfortable they felt talking about their loss.

Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John & Srivastava, 1999). This 44-item scale measures Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness. Participants rated each statement on a 1 to 5 Likert scale for the extent to which it described the participant's personality. Cronbach's α's for the subscales in the current sample ranged from .89 to .74 (Extraversion = .89; Conscientiousness = .87; Agreeableness = .78; Neuroticism = .74; Openness = .74).

[2] Participants were not asked directly how their loved one had died; however, almost all of them included this information in their narratives.

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Narrative Functions Scale (adapted from McLean, 2005). Participants rated their likelihood of telling the story for each of the five following reasons on a Likert scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*): To validate your feelings or opinions about the narrative; To get a better understanding of the narrative; To explain yourself to someone else; To get close(r) to someone; To gain comfort or support from another person.[3]

A principal factors analysis with oblique rotation was conducted on the five items of the Narrative Functions Scale. Only factors with eigenvalues of 1 or greater were retained. Each factor was evaluated for factor loadings; only items that loaded .40 or greater on one and only one factor were retained. Together, two factors explained 60.78% of the variance. The first factor (38.36%) consisted of *to validate your feelings or opinions about the narrative* (.86) and *to get a better understanding of the narrative* (.63). These items were averaged to create the variable *self functions*, Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$. The second factor (22.41%) consisted of *to get close(r) to someone* (.89), and *to gain comfort or support* (.43). These items were averaged to create the variable *social functions*, Cronbach's $\alpha = .52$.

Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Inventory (CES-D), Short Form (Cole, Rabin, Smith, & Kaufman, 2004). This scale measures depression severity. For each of 10 statements regarding depressive symptoms, participants indicated how often they had experienced the feeling in the past week. Answers were on a 0–3 scale (0 = rarely/none to 3 = most of the time). Cronbach's α for the present sample was .89.

Social Constraints Scale (SCS) (Lepore, Silver, Wortman, & Wayment, 1996). This 5-item scale measures the degree to which individuals believe that their social relationships have been strained and their expressions of trauma-related feelings inhibited during the past week. Answers were on a 1–5 scale (1 = *almost never* and 5 = *almost always*). Cronbach's α for the scale in the present sample was .81.

2.1.3. Procedure

Recruitment of participants. Participants were recruited from support groups for individuals dealing with the loss of a loved one and from websites dedicated to virtual memorials for the deceased. Bereavement support groups and memorial sites were located via an on-line search (using Google ©) for "grief support groups," "bereavement support groups," and "memorial." Support group leaders were e-mailed via addresses posted on their websites, informed about the purpose and length of the study, and told that participants' identities would be kept confidential. Some group leaders e-mailed the link to their support group members. Among the groups contacted were chapters of a national network for bereaved parents, a group for miscarriage or neonatal losses, and several groups for losses of diverse types. The memorial website allowed the public to post messages or links. A short description of the study and a link to the survey were posted on this site.

The on-line survey.[4] The study was set up on-line through a web survey company, (i.e., Surveymonkey.com, copyright 1999–2006). Both setting up and participating in the web survey required only basic computer skills. Participants accessed the survey via a link in their e-mail. After reading the informed consent form and indicating their consent,

[3] McLean's (2005) scale included "for entertainment" rather than "to gain comfort or support." This was changed in the current study in order to make the scale more appropriate for a sample of bereavement narratives.

[4] Data collected through on-line surveys are comparable to data collected through traditional methods in terms of the diversity of the sample, the level of mental illness of participants, and the likelihood that participants in the study take the study seriously and provide accurate information (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004).

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participants completed demographic questions, questions about their loss, the CES-D, the BFI, and the SCS. They read and responded to the following prompt, "In the space below, please write down the story of your loss as you might tell it to someone who wants to get to know you better." Participants had an unlimited amount of space to write their narrative. They were not required to answer every question. Estimated completion time for the whole study was 45 min.

2.1.4. Data coding

Linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC) (Pennebaker & Francis, 1999). The LIWC program counts the percentage of words in a text that fit into particular categories. The LIWC program was used to calculate the length of each narrative and the percentage of words within each narrative that belonged to each of the following categories: verb tense (past, present, future), pronoun (first-, second- and third-person, singular and plural), positive and negative affect words, cognitive processing words (insight words and causal words), and death words (e.g. deceased, coffin).

Affective sequences (McAdams, 1998, 1999). Narratives were coded for affective sequence using a protocol based on McAdams' coding schemes for redemption (McAdams, 1999) and contamination (McAdams, 1998) sequences. The coding scheme used in the current study included two additional categories drawn from the data: autobiographical facts, which were free of explicit emotional statements, and bad-to-bad narratives, which both began and ended with negative events and expressions of negative emotion. Sample narratives from each of the four mutually exclusive categories are shown in Appendix A. One rater scored all the narratives and a second rater independently scored twenty percent ($N = 26$) of the narratives. Inter-rater agreement was 92.3%, $\kappa = .90$.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Characteristics of narratives

The stories (analyzed in LIWC) were, on average, 227.5 words long ($SD = 278.3$, range 6–1410). On average, the stories contained more negative emotion words ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 3.0$) than positive emotion words ($M = 1.6$, $SD = 1.7$), $t(134) = -3.55$, $p = .001$. Thirty-four percent of participants ($N = 45$) told autobiographical facts; 31.6% ($N = 42$) told contamination sequences; 21.8% ($N = 29$) told bad to bad sequences; and 12.8% ($N = 17$) told redemption sequences.

2.2.2. Personality characteristics and narrative characteristics

Contrary to our first hypothesis, there were no relationships observed between the number of positive and negative words in the narratives and Neuroticism or Extraversion (all r's were between .−1 and .1, p's $> .05$). However, in confirmation of the second part of the first hypothesis, there were significant differences in the use of affective sequences in the loss stories. A MANOVA was conducted with type of loss narrative as the between-participants factor and personality scores on each dimension of the BFI as dependent variables. The MANOVA was set up this way because narrative type is a categorical variable and the personality scores on the Big Five dimensions are continuous variables. The MANOVA was significant, Wilks Lambda = .67, $F(15, 254) = 2.61$, $p < .002$.

As Table 1 shows, univariate ANOVAs revealed significant differences for types of affective sequences and personality characteristics: Extraversion, $F(3, 100) = 6.66$,

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Table 1
Affective sequence type and means of the big five personality traits

	Contamination	Redemption	Bad-to-bad	Autobiographical facts
Extraversion	23.53[a]	28.84[ab]	31.13[b]	25.37[a]
Agreeableness	36.62[a]	36.62[a]	36.00[a]	38.25[a]
Conscientiousness	30.37[a]	33.61[ab]	33.34[ab]	36.04[b]
Neuroticism	27.78[a]	24.02[ab]	26.78[ab]	23.03[b]
Openness	33.25[a]	37.76[a]	38.21[a]	35.53[a]

Means in the same row that do not share the same superscript differ at $p < .05$ in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison.

$p < .001$; Conscientiousness, $F(3, 100) = 3.88$, $p < .02$; and Neuroticism, $F(3, 100) = 2.86$, $p < .05$. Follow-up Tukey tests indicated that, as the first hypothesis predicted, individuals who told contamination sequences had the lowest mean Extraversion score, significantly lower than individuals who told bad-to-bad sequences, and marginally lower than those who told redemption sequences. Narrators who told contamination sequences showed the highest mean Neuroticism score, significantly higher than individuals who shared autobiographical facts. Individuals who told autobiographical facts had the highest mean for Conscientiousness, significantly higher than that of individuals who told contamination sequences.[5]

In partial support of the second hypothesis, several significant relationships emerged between speaker personality traits and narrative characteristics. Narrators who were higher in Neuroticism used more first person pronouns, $r = .28$, $p < .01$, and made fewer references to death, $r = -.19$, $p < .05$. In other words, their stories were more likely to focus on the self and less likely to review the circumstances of the loss.

Narrators higher in Conscientiousness took a transactional approach to story telling: they told shorter narratives, $r = -.20$, $p < .05$; used fewer first-person pronouns, $r = .24$, $p < .05$, present tense verbs, $r = -.23$, $p < .05$, and insight words (e.g., *think, know, consider*), $r = -.19$, $p < .05$. They also made more references to death, $r = .22$, $p < .05$. People higher in Openness used more death-related words in their narratives, $r = .25$, $p < .01$, perhaps indicating a greater willingness to confront the loss in a concrete way. People higher in Agreeableness used fewer insight words in their narratives, $r = -.20$, $p < .05$, suggesting an interpersonal rather than an intrapersonal orientation.

[5] In order to confirm that personality characteristics were specifically linked to affective sequence, independent of other narrative characteristics, a series of MANCOVAs were conducted with affective sequence as the between-participants factor and the five personality dimensions as dependent variables. In successive MANCOVAs, length of narrative, positive words, negative words, insight-oriented words, past tense words, present tense words, relationship to deceased, type of death (e.g., illness, accident) and years since loss were each entered as covariates. All of the analyses except years since loss left the significant relationships between the personality characteristics and affective sequences intact. When years since loss was entered as a covariate, the relationship between Neuroticism and story type became only marginally significant, $F(1, 94) = 2.09$, $p < .11$. This mediating effect is due to the fact that individuals who had more recent losses were also more likely to have higher Neuroticism scores; however an ANOVA for affective sequence with years since loss as the dependent variable was not significant, indicating that individuals who told contamination stories have not suffered more recent losses than other narrators. To examine the potential short-term influences of depression and social constraints, two more MANCOVAs were conducted with each of these variables entered as covariates. In both cases, the significant relationships between the personality dimensions and affective sequences were retained.

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2.2.3. Personality characteristics and narrative functions

To test the third hypothesis, two stepwise regressions were conducted to predict the use of social functions and self functions, respectively, as the reasons for bereavement narrative disclosure (see Tables 2 and 3). In the stepwise regression predicting social functions, age, years since loss, and relationship to deceased were entered in the first block. The overall equation was non-significant. Adding Depression and Social Constraints at the second

Table 2
Predictors of social functions of narrative telling

Block	Dependent variable	R^2	Adj. R^2	Change in R^2	β	Significance of change
1	Age	.03	.01	.03	.06	$F(3,102) = 1.16$, $p = .33$
	Years since loss				−.10	
	Relationship				.17	
2	Age	.04	−.01	.01	.06	$F(2,100) = .27$, $p = .77$
	Years since loss				−.09	
	Relationship				.16	
	Depression				.08	
	Social constraints				−.09	
3	Age	.17	.11	.13*	.11	$F(2,98) = 7.95$, $p < .001$
	Years since loss				−.13	
	Relationship				.16	
	Depression				.21	
	Social constraints				−.08	
	Openness				−.06	
	Extraversion				.37**	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Predictors of self functions of narrative telling

Block	Dependent variable	R^2	Adj. R^2	Change in R^2	β	Significance of change
1	Age	.10	.07	.10	−.23*	$F(3,96) = 3.62$, $p < .02$
	Years since loss				−.14	
	Relationship				.00	
2	Age	.14	.09	.04	−.22*	$F(2,94) = 1.75$, $p = .15$
	Years since loss				−.08	
	Relationship				.00	
	Depression				.25*	
	Social constraints				−.15	
3	Age	.19	.13	.05[a]	−.20[a]	$F(2,90) = 2.88$, $p < .06$
	Years since loss				−.06	
	Relationship				.00	
	Depression				.11	
	Social constraints				−.17	
	Conscientiousness				.00	
	Neuroticism				.28*	

[a] $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.

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step did not improve the model. However, the addition of Openness and Extraversion at the third step yielded an overall significant model and a significant increase in R^2 (.13). Extraversion was the sole strong predictor of social functions ($\beta = .37$).

In the stepwise regression predicting self functions, age, years since loss, and participant's relationship to the deceased were entered in the first block and the overall equation was significant with Age as a predictor of self functions ($\beta = -.23$). This finding indicates that younger participants were more inclined to tell bereavement narratives for self-oriented reasons. Depression and Social Constraints were next added in the second block. Though the change in F was not significant, Age and Depression both yielded significant Beta weights with higher levels of depression indicating a greater tendency toward self functions. Adding Conscientiousness and Neuroticism in the third block increased the R^2 (.05, $p = .058$), and Neuroticism emerged as the sole significant predictor ($\beta = .28$) in the equation with Age weakening as a predictor once Neuroticism was introduced.

Overall, the bereavement narratives expressed a great deal of pain, although many expressed a sense of hope and increased strength as well. Redemption sequences were the least common type of affective sequence, only half as common as autobiographical facts or contamination sequences. What might explain the paucity of redemption sequences in this sample of bereavement narratives? Significant numbers of individuals report some form of personal growth or benefit in the wake of losses of different kinds (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), which suggests that redemption sequences would be relatively frequent even in bereavement stories. It is possible that the paucity of redemption stories is in part due to the anonymous on-line context in people wrote their stories. Within the anonymous context of an on-line survey people might feel freer than they would in face to face conversations to vent negative feelings (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Suler, 2004).

Alea and Bluck's (2003) model proposes that audience responses to narratives are influential to the outcomes of memory-telling interactions. Characteristics of the narrative are likely to influence how audiences respond to that narrative (for example, a sad story may evoke sympathy or discomfort), and therefore influence the listener's subsequent behavior towards the narrator (e.g., supporting the narrator or withdrawing from the relationship). Thus, the story's effect on the listener will be experienced by the teller and subsequently affect the interaction, the ongoing relationship, and future memory sharing.

In order to understand how listeners might respond to different types of bereavement narratives, Study 2 was designed to examine respondents' reactions to six redemption and six contamination narratives from among those collected in Study 1. Study 2 participants read rather than heard stories. Written stories as opposed to spoken ones provide an opportunity to assess how the pure content of a story, independent of conversational and non-verbal cues, may influence responses of recipients.

3. Study 2

Study 2 was designed to explore recipients' responses to redemption and contamination sequences in bereavement narratives, as well as whether recipients' personality traits were associated with their responses to either or both redemption and contamination narratives. Because there is an existing literature on redemption and contamination sequences which allowed us to make and test predictions about the reception of these types of narratives, but no such literature on our other two categories of narrative, which we derived from the data, we only compared responses to redemption and contamination sequences in this study.

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3.1. Study 2 hypotheses

There were three hypotheses. First, it was expected that redemption narratives would garner more sympathetic concern and less socially awkward reactions than contamination sequences and that participants would feel closer to, more familiar with, and more similar to redemption narrators.

Second, it was expected that participants higher in Neuroticism would feel more social rapport or acceptance of contamination narrators, given their own tendency (demonstrated in Study 1) to tell contamination narratives. It was also expected that individuals higher in Agreeableness (which is associated with a prosocial orientation) and Extraversion (which is associated with a positive outlook) would feel more sympathy and social acceptance toward both redemption and contamination narrators.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Participants

One hundred seven students recruited from a small northeastern college's participant pool took part in an on-line study in exchange for course credit. The study was approved by the college's Institutional Review Board and each participant provided his or her informed consent. The mean age of participants was 19.6 years old ($SD = 1.09$ years, range 18–23 years). Most participants were White and non-Hispanic (84.0%). Women were 81.3% of the sample.[6] Most of the participants (81.3%, $N = 87$) had experienced the loss of a close friend or family member. Losses took place an average of 3.6 years ago.

3.2.2. Measures

Demographics and basic information. Participants answered questions regarding their age, class year, gender, race/ethnicity, whether they had experienced the loss of a close friend or family member, how long ago the loss was, and their relationship to the deceased person.

Responses to narrator. After reading each of the 12 stories, participants were asked to rate on a 1–5 scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*) how similar, familiar, and close they felt to the narrator, how pessimistic the narrator was, and how much the narrator "saw a silver lining in her/his loss." The first three responses were averaged and combined into one variable, which was labeled *social rapport*. The Cronbach's α for social rapport was .85. In addition, the response to the silver lining question and the inverse of the response to the pessimism question were averaged and combined into a new variable, *perceived optimism*.

Reactions to stories. A list of 12 potential responses were generated *a priori*: empathy, sympathy, concern for the narrator's well-being, politeness, acceptance, surprise, bewilderment, awkwardness, embarrassment, discomfort, abruptness, and disbelief. These responses were developed based on literature describing typical reactions to hearing about bereaved individuals' losses (e.g. Calhoun, Selby, & Abernathy, 1984; Capps & Bonanno, 2000; Range & Calhoun, 1990). After reading each story, participants indicated on a 1–5 Likert scale (1 = *very much* to 5 = *not at all*) how much each reaction characterized their response to the story. Responses to the twelve narratives were averaged and factor

[6] Data were analyzed twice, once with male participants and once without. Results did not differ, so the results from the analyses of the whole sample—both men and women—are reported.

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Table 4
Factor analysis of reactions to stories

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Empathy	.12	.26	**.78**
Sympathy	−.12	.01	**.80**
Concern	.30	.34	**.46**
Politeness	.15	**.89**	.09
Acceptance	.04	**.86**	.19
Surprise	**.73**	.42	.15
Bewilderment	**.81**	.31	.16
Awkwardness	**.78**	.21	−.32
Embarrassment	**.81**	.16	−.27
Discomfort	**.80**	.06	−.06
Abruptness	**.87**	−.03	.24
Disbelief	**.84**	−.12	.26
Variance explained	38.95	18.14	14.56

The highest factor loadings for each dimension are indicated in bold type.

analyzed. A principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation[7] was conducted on the 12 items of the listener responses scale. Only factors with eigenvalues of 1 or greater were retained. Each factor was evaluated for factor loadings. In the factor analysis for responses to the stories, every item loaded .62 or greater on one and only one factor, yielding three distinct factors (see Table 4). Together, the three factors accounted for 74.8% of the variance. The factors were labeled *sympathetic concern, polite acceptance*, and *social awkwardness*. The Cronbach's αs were as follows: sympathetic concern, .78; polite acceptance, .90; and social awkwardness, .96

3.2.3. Procedure

The study was set up on-line through a web survey company, (i.e., Surveymonkey.com, copyright 1999–2006). Participants recruited via an oral announcement in an introduction to psychology class provided their e-mail addresses to the experimenter, who e-mailed them the link to the survey webpage. After providing consent, participants answered questions about demographics and past losses. Next, participants read 12 narratives: six redemption and six contamination sequences chosen at random from the pool of Study 1 stories (see Appendix A for examples). Redemption sequences alternated with contamination sequences so that every other story was a redemption sequence. Redemption and contamination sequences were similar in word count ($M = 272$, $SD = 118.5$ and $M = 294$, $SD = 207.4$), respectively, $t(5) = -.252$, $p < .82$. After each narrative, participants answered a series of questions about their responses to the narrator. They then completed the Big Five Inventory and read a debriefing form.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Narrative type

To compare recipients' responses to contamination versus redemption sequences, participants' responses to six contamination sequences and six redemption sequences were

[7] This type of factor analysis was chosen based on the exploratory nature of the analyses.

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Table 5
Reactions to contamination and redemption sequences[a]

Source	Redemption means	Contamination means
Perceived optimism	4.18	2.13
Social rapport	2.78	2.45
Sympathetic concern	3.47	3.90
Polite acceptance	2.94	2.62
Social awkwardness	1.68	2.23

Means are on a 1–5 scale where 5 represents the highest score and 1 represents the lowest score.
[a] The means in the same row are significantly different from each other at the $p < .001$ level of significance.

averaged, respectively, into composite variables for each of the following factors: sympathetic concern, polite acceptance, social awkwardness, perceived optimism and social rapport. These averaged responses were entered into a repeated measures MANOVA with type of affective sequence as the independent variable and the five responses as the dependent variables. The MANOVA was significant, Wilks Lambda = .12, $F(7,91) = 94.67$, $p < .001$.

Follow-up univariate repeated measures ANOVAs revealed significant differences for all variables (see Table 5). In support of the first hypothesis, participants rated redemption sequences as more optimistic than contamination sequences. Participants responded with more polite acceptance and with less social awkwardness to redemption than contamination sequences and indicated greater social rapport with redemption than contamination narrators. Contrary to the first hypothesis, participants responded with less sympathetic concern to redemption than to contamination sequences.

These results suggest that contamination sequences awaken listeners to the severity of the narrator's plight and elicit sympathy and concern, but also lead to discomfort and bewilderment. Redemption sequences may signal that the person is coping adequately and does not require such a burdensomely high level of support.

3.3.2. Recipient characteristics

Results partially supported the second hypothesis that recipient personality characteristics would be linked to their responses to the stories. Separate regressions for redemption and contamination stories were conducted for each of the dependent variables (perceived optimism, social rapport, sympathetic concern, polite acceptance, and social awkwardness), using the 5 personality dimensions as predictors. Two regressions were significant. As hypothesized, Extraversion predicted sympathetic concern for narrators of contamination stories ($\beta = .21$, $p < .04$). Agreeableness also predicted perceived optimism in redemption stories ($\beta = .35$, $p < .005$). Contrary to predictions, Neuroticism did not significantly predict more social rapport with or acceptance of individuals telling contamination stories.

4. General discussion

Guided by Alea and Bluck's (2003) model, the present studies were designed to examine bereavement narratives from a personality and functional perspective. The major findings of the current studies were (1) there are significant relationships between personality characteristics and the content and functions of bereavement narratives; (2) there are significant relationships between the content of the disclosure and recipients' responses; (3)

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there are significant but modest relationships between recipients' personality characteristics and their responses to bereavement disclosures.

Individuals high in Neuroticism told contamination narratives focused on themselves and their sadness. Their reasons for telling these narratives tended to be more for emotional validation and introspection than in the service of building relationships or gaining social support. This self-oriented pattern of sharing narratives resembles what Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson (1999) identified as a ruminative coping style, which is associated with heightened distress. Contamination stories may indeed be a marker of this style.

Individuals high in Conscientiousness tended to tell brief autobiographical factual narratives and to use higher numbers of death-related words. They also were not inclined to tell their narratives for self-focused reasons. These results support findings that people high in Conscientiousness tend not to use self-blame or escape-avoidance coping strategies to deal with stress, but are more likely to use active problem-solving strategies or stoic distancing (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Newth & DeLongis, 2004, p. 288).

People who were high in Extraversion were less likely to tell contamination stories than bad-to-bad stories or factual accounts, and they, like people high in Openness, tended to tell their stories for social reasons. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) reported that people high in Extraversion and Openness tend to experience higher levels of post-traumatic growth. It is possible that their tendency to tell their bereavement stories for social reasons facilitates such growth.

One important methodological advance of this study was its emphasis on affective sequence rather than simple counts of positive and negative emotion words. Using the LIWC program, it would appear that individuals of different personality styles did not differ in the emotional content of their disclosures. However, once we examined the sequence of emotional expression in their loss stories, important and meaningful differences emerged.

Results from Study 2 suggest that people would rather hear redemption than contamination sequences. Although audiences feel more sympathetic toward contamination narrators than redemption narrators, they feel more comfortable with and accepting of redemption narrators. Study 2 did not examine how people respond to accounts in the autobiographical facts or bad-to-bad categories. Future studies might examine how people respond to such narratives. Study 2 also found some modest evidence that Extraverted and Agreeable listeners will be more receptive to narrators of contamination and redemption stories. Interestingly, recipients higher in Neuroticism were not more inclined to show greater social rapport or acceptance toward narrators of contamination stories.

Extending an existing model of memory-telling to the disclosure of bereavement narratives, this study demonstrated that personality factors in narrators and recipients, as well as the affective sequence of the narrative content, may be linked to the outcome and effectiveness of a disclosure. The role of personality in this narrative-telling emerged even when controlling for the type of loss suffered, the years since the loss, and the current level of depression experienced by the narrator.

4.1. Limitations

In that the purpose of these studies was to investigate phenomena related to social exchange, their primary limitation was that they do not allow direct examination of

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dialogical exchange, wherein listeners contribute to shaping a story by providing responses during the telling.

Study 2 relied on people's self-reported reactions to bereavement stories. Self-enhancing biases may lead people to under-report feelings of discomfort that they might express in more subtle ways in face-to-face conversations. Although participants in Study 2 admitted to some discomfort, especially with the contamination stories, the levels of discomfort detected by means other than self-report might be even higher.

The fact that Study 1 was conducted on a sample recruited from support groups and on-line memorial sites may limit the generalizability of its findings. Individuals who have joined support groups, who participate in on-line memorial sites, and/or who consent to participate in psychology research, may be different in personality and other attributes from those who do not participate in such activities. For example, the current sample was significantly higher in the Big Five personality traits of Agreeableness and Openness than was a much larger, more representative sample of adults (Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). These individuals' high Openness may mean that they are more willing to talk openly about emotions, and their high Agreeableness may mean that they were more likely than others to comply with the request to participate in a survey about a personal and painful topic.

5. Conclusion

Investigation of individual differences in the functions of and responses to bereavement narratives allows us to understand the social processes by which bereaved individuals and their listeners arrive at an adaptive understanding of the meanings of the loss. At least in mainstream U.S. culture, people tend to believe that emotional disclosure is helpful, and after disclosing an emotionally intense experience, people report that the disclosure experience was beneficial (Zech & Rime, 2005). Yet research suggests that if the experience of telling one's story to a listener is discouraging, this may impede adaptation (Harvey, Orbuch, Chwalisz, & Garwood, 1991, cited in Harvey et al., 2001). Individuals who express the most distress about their loss may need the most emotional support, yet they tend to tell the kinds of stories that are likely to alienate their listeners.

It is important for these individuals to have a supportive social environment in which they can express their pain as well as work toward building a more positive, redemptive story of the sort that will allow them to function effectively within their social context. It would be unwise to push bereaved individuals to adopt redemption stories prematurely or artificially, but therapists and support group leaders can play a crucial role by validating clients' emotional reactions (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999), addressing and challenging the fear that lies at the heart of contamination stories: that life will get worse rather than better, and helping bereaved individuals prepare for the possibility that listeners may respond awkwardly to contamination stories.

Study 1 highlighted the diversity of bereavement narratives and the ways that personality characteristics might influence the telling of these narratives. Study 2 demonstrated that responses to bereavement narratives differ depending on what kind of story is being told and who is listening. These findings suggest that the act of disclosing one's bereavement narrative may vary widely in its uses and its adaptive value, depending on the individual and the interpersonal context. Counselors and clinicians would be wise to consider these complicating factors as they assist clients in the telling of bereavement stories.

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Appendix A

Sample narratives of each affective sequence type

Redemption	My husband was killed in action in Iraq. I was 28 at the time with a young daughter. She is almost 3 years old now and so far doing well emotionally. Her well-being is my most important goal. I lost my white picket fence and the life we had made for ourselves. There was a fork in the road of life—let this tragic event consume me or learn many life lessons and embrace the positive. I choose the latter. I think about him every day and try to predict his opinion when making decisions. We love him and miss him, but we speak of him with a smile!
Contamination	I am 28 years old. Five months ago my life was perfect. I have been married for 1 year and my parents were married for 32 years. I have 3 sisters and 4 nieces. Five months ago after a normal night of laughing, joking and talking, my dad suffered an aneurism and was rushed to hospital. He died a week later. My husband and I were planning on starting a family next year but now I can't bear to bring another person into this world that I will love as much as my dad because I will be constantly scared of losing them. I am now just a scared lonely person who longs to talk and laugh with her dad. I'm scared I'll never be happy again.
Bad-to-bad	I lost my 20 year old brother to suicide six months ago. At 4 am while his family was asleep, he walked out of the house, jumped off of a railroad overpass and hung himself. The police told us that he had jumped off a bridge, but that he was still alive. I will never forget getting into the officer's car and hearing him say, I'm sorry, but your brother is deceased. The pain of having to bury my little brother was almost unbearable. We never thought he would commit suicide. It all stemmed from the suicide death of our cousin which my brother took extremely hard.
Autobiographical facts	My dad liked to climb mountains. He went out one Saturday to climb one and never returned home. That night around 10pm, my brother phoned to say that mum was in a state as dad had not come home. My brother and his friend who are both in the Mountain rescue team went to look for him. I stayed with mum. They phoned that night to say that they had found his car and started to search the mountain for him. To cut a long story short, a team of rescuers found him a few days later. He had died suddenly and did not suffer. The search had been on the local news, it was like being in a film, it was so sudden and surreal.

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