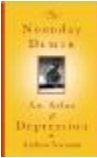


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Narratives and Mental Health
Gerben J. Westerhof
University of Twente

Andrew Solomon



My depression had grown on me as that vine had conquered the oak; it had been a sucking thing that had wrapped itself around me, ugly and more alive than I. (...) Eventually, you are simply absent from yourself. (p. 18-19)

Since that first visit to the first psychopharmacologist I have been playing the medicine game. (...) Trying out different medications makes you feel like a dartboard. (p. 119)

I have a million faults, but I am a better person than I was before I went through this all. (...) To regret my depression now would be to regret the most fundamental part of myself. (p. 436-440)

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Mental Health Care

Medical Model

- § The clinician's task is to identify (diagnose) the disorder (disease) inside the person (patient) and to prescribe an intervention (treatment) that will eliminate (cure) the internal disorder (disease) (Maddux, 2009)
- § DSM-classification, diagnostic instruments and tests, protocols and guidelines, routine outcome measures, randomized controlled trials

⇒ Improved status of psychologist through transparent, controllable, evidence-based care

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Narrative Perspective

Therapy as Social Technology

- § Positioning psychologist as expert and client as patient in a joint venture focusing on remission of psychopathology

Narrative Mental Health Care

- § Integration of complaints and symptoms in life story
- § Personal growth and fulfillment
- § Autobiographical perspective on past, present, and future

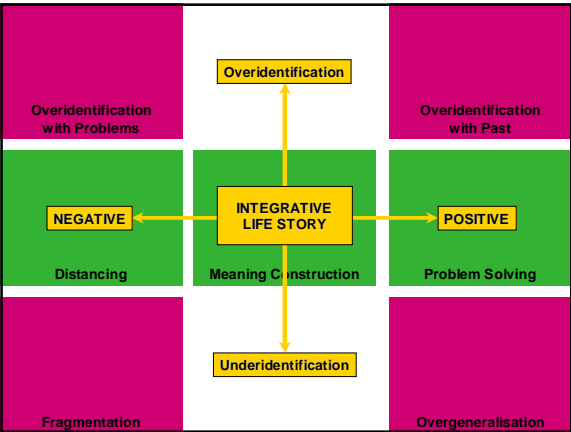
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Theoretical perspectives

- Narrative Psychology: Life Story
- Gerontology: Reminiscence
- Cognitive Psychology: Autobiographical Memory


⇒ Functional/pragmatic approach in relation to mental health

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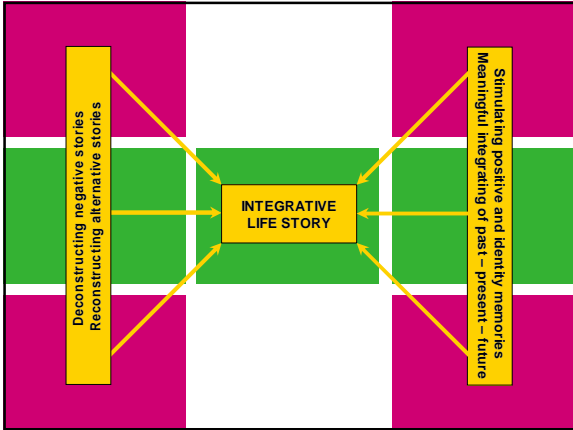


Applications

Narrative Psychology: Narrative Therapy
Gerontology: Life Review
Autobiographical Memory: Training
 ⇒ **Storying Your Life: Your Autobiography as Source of Wisdom**



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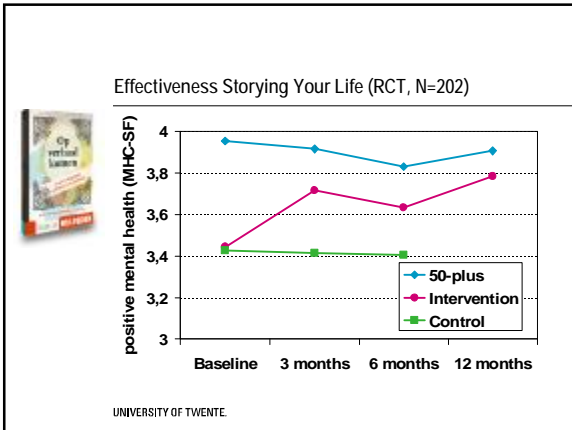
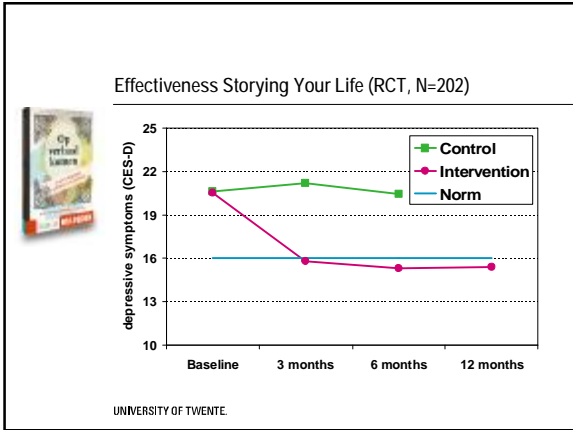
Effectiveness

Narrative Therapy
 § Many case-studies

Life Review
 § Effective in lowering depressive symptoms (Bohlmeijer et al., 2003; Pinquart et al., 2007)
 § Effective in improving well-being (Bohlmeijer et al., 2003)
 § Evidence-based treatment of depression (Scogin et al., 2005)

Autobiographical Memory Training
 § Effective in decreasing depressive symptoms (Serrano et al., 2004; Goncalves et al., 2009; Steunenberg et al., under review)

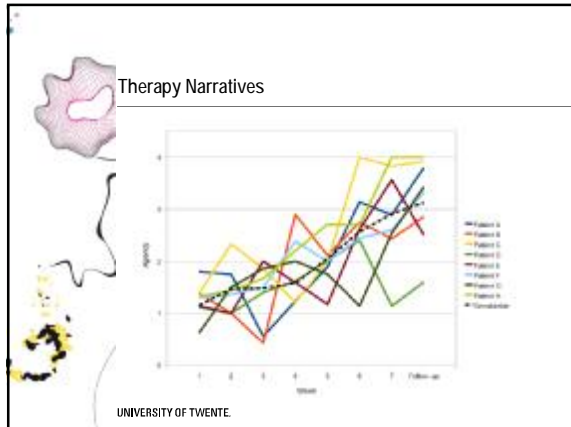
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Therapy Narratives

Qualitative studies giving voice to therapeutic experiences of clients
Afterwards as well as during therapy
 § Increasing agency (Adler & McAdams, 2007; Adler et al., 2008; Lysaker et al., 2005)
 § Meaning of recovery (Adame & Knudson, 2007; Piat et al., 2009)
 ⇒ Research tool as well as therapeutic tool

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- ### Narrative Change in Therapy
- § **Getting into therapeutic dynamics and processes**
 - § **Case studies** (Bohlmeijer et al., under review)
 - § **Innovative moments** (Matos et al., 2009; Santos et al., 2009)
 - § **Dialogical accomplishments** (Westerhof et al., in preparation)
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Narrative Change in Therapy

Jo (64 years, recently widowed and retired)

- § Unhappy, life is empty and without purpose despite activities
- § **Overidentification: 'being forgotten'**
- § It was just before the feast of St. Nicholas when I heard my mother say: "Do I have a present for everyone?" Then she looked at me and noticed with a shock: "Oh no, I forgot the little one." And then she hurried up to buy a present just before the shops closed.
- § Being forgotten has still not gone. (...) This was most apparent when my husband died two years ago. My family forgot to inform how I was doing. Under the pretext of "Oh, she will manage".

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Narrative Change in Therapy

- § **Distancing by contextualising**
- § I believe that children of my generation did not have a lot to say. (...) My parents lacked the awareness and openness.
- § **Identification with 'forgotten' positive memories**
- § My father had an independent mind. (...) He was able to make something out of nothing. I always felt safe with my father. He learned me a lot.
- § **Integrating meaning**
- § I first really realized that I start even big things self-confidently and complete them successfully. For the first time I notice the relation with 'being forgotten'. (...) As a result of 'being forgotten' I felt left to my own devices. I believe that I therefore gained much self-confidence and self-respect.

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Narrative Change in Therapy

- § **Effect of the intervention**
- § Decrease in depressive and anxiety symptoms
- § "A lasting feeling that I matter. (...) I do no longer experience my tasks as meaningless, but take on things with purpose."

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- ### Conclusion
- § **Life Story Lab @ University Twente**
 - § Studies on relation of narratives to mental health in the general population
 - § Studies on effectiveness, experience, and dynamics of narrative therapy
 - § Integrating narratives in mental health care
 - § Use of innovative technology, e.g., e-mental health, text mining
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