

Retelling everyday emotional events: Condensation, distancing, and closure

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Abstract

Narratives of emotional experiences are widely assumed to reflect how well the speaker has coped with them. Some cross-sectional studies have suggested that well-being and absence of psychopathology correlate with more elaborate and coherent narratives of negative events. Other studies, on the other hand, suggest that retelling and coping render narratives shorter, more cognitive, and explicitly evaluative. To test this latter hypothesis, 30 young women narrated five events eliciting anger, sadness, anxiety, pride and happiness from the past week, and retold the same events three months later. After three months, narratives contained fewer attempts to solve the complication, and evaluations became more global and impersonal. Negative narratives were framed better and re-evaluated positively. Unexpectedly, narrative clauses did not decrease, nor did evaluations shift from past to present. Ways to better differentiate effects of memory and retelling from mere effects of coping are suggested.

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Retelling everyday emotional events: Condensation, distancing, and closure

Emotions are essentially social and communicative in nature (Fischer & Manstead, 2008). They are most frequently elicited in social situations and signal an action tendency to others (Frijda, 1986), and emotion arousing situations are frequently narrated to third persons (Rimé, Mesquita, Plilippot, & Boca, 1991). This social sharing serves both interpersonal and intrapersonal purposes: It helps to strengthen emotional bonds with others by sharing experiences (Roberts, 2009), it may release emotions (Scheff, 1979; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988) and it helps to understand an event by organizing it in a temporal-causal narrative order (Oatley, 2009; Rimé, 2009). In everyday life, narratives may reflect how well narrators have come to grips with their experiences by listening not only to what they say, but also to how they say it. Narratives that deviate from the implicitly expected form may indicate that the narrator is avoiding or is still struggling with an event. To study the relation between narrative form and coping with emotional experiences in everyday life, we compared narratives told within a week of an event and retold three months later in a non-clinical sample. We expected narratives to reflect increased processing by becoming more condensed, distanced, and closed over time. We first turn to clinical theories of processing emotional experiences, then to cognitive and linguistic theories of retelling.

Psychopathology: Avoidance of and immersion in the emotional past

Classical theories posit that psychopathology undermines the ability or motivation to produce elaborate and coherent narratives of negative personal experiences (Freud, 1905). Trauma narratives by patients with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are less distanced and contain more perceptual than cognitive mental verbs, but do not differ from narratives by non traumatized narrators in terms of coherence (O’Kearney, 2006). Depressed patients report past events more globally, thereby avoiding having to narrate specific events (Williams, 1996). Their life narratives are more immersed in the past (Fromholt, Larsen, & Larsen, 1995; Habermas, Ott, Schubert, Schneider & Pate, 2008). In studies with non-clinical samples, well-being (Baerger & McAdams, 1999) and non-defensiveness (Nelson & Horowitz, 2000) correlated with the production of longer, more elaborate narratives with a higher degree of *narrativity* (Barclay, 1996) in terms of the proportion of *narrative clauses* (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Narrative clauses recount past events in the order in which they occurred, and therefore that order can not be altered without changing the meaning of what is reported. Narrative clauses most typically begin with ‘And then ..., and then ...’.

These diverse findings indirectly support the notion that psychopathology implies the difficulty to cope with emotional events, which is reflected in the difficulty to actually narrate them. However, findings are equivocal as to whether psychopathology is associated with longer or shorter narratives and with more or less distance from past events. Psychopathology may be related to both emotional overinvolvement, with longer and less distanced narratives, and to avoidance, with shorter and more distanced narratives. A further problem of these studies is that they do not measure change over time, which is essential for psychotherapy and coping. Freud and Janet (1929) assumed that the initial psychopathological stance is a defence against, or inability to confront events, and that therefore the task of psychotherapy is to help patients to narrate these events more fully. Thus, a more adequate conceptualization needs not only incorporate a temporal dimension, but should also take into account that both overinvolvement in and avoidance of narrating can be related to psychopathology.

Stiles, Honos-Webb, and Lani (1999) have proposed such a process model of successful coping with an event. They suggest an inverse curvilinear relationship between the cognitive assimilation of a problematic experience to one’s pre-existing schemata of self and the world over time and the degree of elaboration of narratives. Starting from a state of avoidance, the experience is gradually assimilated by narratively elaborating the sequence of events and their emotional implications. Once it is assimilated and therefore no longer so emotional, it need be mentioned only briefly because the event is no longer discrepant from one’s schemata.

We propose three dimensions of these changes in narratives. Narratives first become longer and more elaborate, before becoming shorter and more condensed again. Second, narrators initially immerse in the past experience and then re-establish distance. Third, as avoidance is reduced, the emotional impact of the event is acknowledged, which successively gives way to a sense of closure. This model is supported by psychotherapy process studies (Mergenthaler, 1996; Nye, 1996). In a review of developmental studies, Fivush, Sales, and Bohanek (2008) propose a similar model of an inverted U-curve for the relation between the traumaticity of an

event and the length and elaborateness of its narration.

Re-narrating traumatic and everyday emotional experiences

Several cognitive and linguistic studies with non-clinical samples have focussed on retellings of events of varying severity and across varying time spans. In narrations of Holocaust experiences repeated across decades, for example, the events and their temporal order were highly stable, but were increasingly interpreted, historically contextualized, and evaluated from a present point of view (Schiff, 2005; Schiffrin, 2003; cf. Goblirsch, 2005). Both these naturalistic and experimental studies (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997) suggest that coping with traumatic events may be more successful if the process of re-narrating the event involves not only confrontation with emotions, but also a process of increasing interpretative activity, corresponding with the top section of the inverted U-curve, in which an event is narrated extensively and is increasingly interpreted.

If we apply Stiles' model to more mundane and less emotionally extreme events, narratives of these events would most suitably be situated on the downward slope of the right half of the curve, because such events are never totally avoided, but can usually be immediately told fully. This fits in with the reasoning of other schema-theorists like Schank and Abelson (1995), who, following Bartlett (1932), postulate that in the process of retelling, narratives are condensed to contain the gist of an experience, leaving out details and specific event sequences, in the interest of abstracting and generalizing knowledge. This could also be partially due to the mere forgetting of details of experiences (Christianson & Safer, 1995), although forgetting is often counteracted by hypermnesia (Bluck, Levine, & Lulhere, 1999). Therefore a shortening of narratives in the course of retellings is probably not only the effect of forgetting, but also of active assimilation.

This has been demonstrated by qualitative changes in short-term retellings of mundane events that we summarize as condensation, distancing, and closure. First, condensation describes not just a shortening of narratives, for instance by leaving out events, but an abstraction from specific acts by way of summarizing events and dropping interpretations and evaluations. Thus in repeated telling, events and their temporal order remain stable, while evaluations change more easily (Chafe, 1998; Norrick, 1998). The same holds true for repeatedly measured flashbulb memories in which the emotions experienced in the past are remembered less well than aspects of the event (Hirst et al., 2009; Levine, Proshaska, Burgess, Rice, & Lulhere, 2001). More specifically, everyday narratives become shorter and more condensed, for example compressing several events that had been narrated in detail into atemporal summary descriptions (Chafe, 1998; Levy, 2003; Rullkötter et al., 2009). Conforming to assimilation theory, the shortening of narratives therefore entails a loss of narrativity.

Second, distancing may be manifested by the shifting of evaluations from the past protagonist to the present narrator perspective (Chafe, 1998). Also, a low proportion of emotion and of perceptual and proprioceptive verbs may indicate psychological distance. Correspondingly, the relative frequency of emotion words and of perceptual and proprioceptive verbs was lower in narratives of events that were no longer considered to be emotional compared to narratives that still elicited emotion (Rullkötter et al., 2009).

Third, the sense of how closed a past event is may increase over time. Closure denotes the degree to which the complicating event has been resolved and, consequently, how its emotionality has decreased. The sense of closure may increase not only with the passing of time and a decrease in emotionality (Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005), but also with re-narration and increased coping. This may be apparent in positive reappraisals of negative experiences (McAdams, 2005; Wood & Conway, 2006) as well as in a better formal framing of narratives by opening and closing remarks.

The Present Study

This study was designed to analyse the process of coping with everyday emotional events in a non-clinical sample, comparing narratives within a week of an event with re-narrations three months later (see Table 1). We expected to find the three changes, reflecting the second half of the inverted curvilinear relation between coping and narrative elaboration. To translate our hypotheses into formal characteristics of narrative, we systematically coded the most important formal aspects of narratives.

Narratives have two main characteristics. One is a temporal structure imitating a past sequence of events by presenting them in the same order in *narrative clauses* (cf. Table 2 for other clause types). Narratives typically follow a canonical *narrative structure* of *abstract, complication, attempts to solve the complication, resolution, and coda* (cf. Table 2). All propositions of the narratives were coded for clause type and narrative structure. Even though not all codes were needed to test the hypotheses with these interdependent codes, a complete coding

renders coding more reliable. A second characteristic is that narratives evaluate what happened. We focus on entire propositions that serve mainly evaluative purposes, namely clauses referring to internal states in which the individual has privileged introspective access. We differentiate *explicit statements about specific emotions* from *global evaluations*, and both from *mental verbs* that refer to all other mental activities (cf. Table 2).

Using these elements of the architecture of narratives, we studied three broad hypotheses about how narratives of everyday emotional experiences change over the course of three months. Condensation was operationalized as a reduction of length and a reduction of narrativity. i.e. a reduction of the proportion of narrative clauses and specific actions succeeding each other. Distancing was operationalized as the use of more distanced evaluations, i.e. more global evaluations relative to specific emotions, and more cognitive relative to perceptual mental verbs, as well as in more present than past and more impersonal than personal perspectives. Closure was operationalized as a stronger bracketing of narratives in terms of embedding the emotional experience in introductory abstracts and concluding coda as well as in more positively interpreted endings.

We chose to ask for narratives of five emotion-eliciting events to reduce the effect of specific event characteristics, and to increase generalizability across emotions. We asked for both positive and negative events to see which changes applied to narratives in general and which applied specifically to negative events. We chose three broad negative emotions (anger, sadness, fear) and two positive emotions (happiness, pride).

Like earlier studies, this study does not differentiate clearly between various factors that might influence the expected change, namely forgetting, retelling, or coping. We used ratings to check the assumption that with the passing of time, daily events are better coped with. An additional argument for the role of coping in changes in narrative form is provided if changes apply only to narratives of negative events, because coping is usually limited to negative events.

Method

Participants

About 100 female students between ages 20 and 35 were asked to participate in two 1.5- to 2-hour sessions. A total of 34 agreed to participate, all of whom also participated in a second session three months later, when they received 10€. Data of four were excluded from further analysis because they did not provide all the requested narratives. The mean age of the remaining 30 participants was 25.7 years ($SD = 4.1$). Eleven had a major in Psychology, eight in Law, four in Economics and Education, and three in the Social Sciences. All participants were fluent in German.

Procedure

Participants were approached on campus and interviewed by one of the two interviewers in the lab. The second interview was conducted by the respective other interviewer, who was blind to the narratives told at time 1. Interviewers were roughly equally distributed across measurement times. Only procedures and measures relevant to this paper will be reported (for other parts of this study cf. Habermas, Meier & Mukhtar, 2009, Study 1). At time 1, participants were informed that the study dealt with how people remember emotional events: "I am interested in how people remember events that arouse specific emotions. I will ask you for memories of a sad, angering, frightening, or happy event and an event that made you feel proud". Participants were then asked to think back for about a week, to recall one specific event for each of the five emotions, and to jot down two or three words to remind them of the event. Then participants were asked to narrate each of the five events, in the sequence anger, sadness, pride, anxiety, and happiness. Interviews always ended with the happy event to conclude the session on a positive note. Narratives were not interrupted by the interviewer and were tape-recorded. If the participant only gave a very general description without narrating a specific event, or if she narrated for less than 30 seconds, she was asked to narrate a specific event or to narrate more extensively. Finally, participants answered a brief questionnaire for each memory. Three months later, participants were asked to re-narrate the five events they had narrated at time 1. We presented the brief notes taken by the participants at time 1 to remind them of the events.

Material

Emotion narratives. Narratives were transcribed literally and divided into propositions by a research assistant who had achieved an interrater agreement of 98.5% based on 20 life narratives in an earlier study using the same manual (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). The coding manual for narrative structure and for clause type was developed by the authors and Michaela Meier, while the coding of evaluations was based on manuals

already used in earlier studies (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; Habermas, Ott, Schubert, Schneider, & Pate, 2008). Coding proceeded on the basis of propositions, i.e. for each proposition the presence of a specific code was judged. Interrater agreement was based on codes per proposition for 120 narratives. Once agreement was reached, one coder continued to code the remaining narratives. As a second check, another 20 narratives not known to the main coder were also coded by the second coder, and a second interrater agreement was calculated to control whether the coder remained true to the manual. In a second step, relative frequencies of codes were calculated by dividing their absolute number by the number of propositions for each narrative for clause type and evaluative statements. Narrative structure was simplified to dichotomous variables for the absence or presence of each section, irrespective of their length.

Clause type was coded for each proposition to render coding easier. Here we included narrative clauses and six other clause types that are of no interest here (cf. Table 2). Initial interrater reliability was based on 120 narratives with $K = .85$, and a follow-up Kappa based on 20 narratives was $K = .90$.

Narrative structure was coded by assigning each proposition one of six codes, namely abstract, orientation, complication, resolution, attempt to solve, or coda (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Complications and resolutions were also coded for their positive or negative valence. We deviated from Labov and Waletzky's (1967) scheme in two ways. For one, Labov had conceived evaluations to be one part of the narrative structure, situated right before the resolution. We did not conceive evaluations as autonomous narrative sections, because evaluations may appear in any section of narrative structure and are logically a different category. Secondly, we added the category 'attempt to solve the complication' following Stein and Glenn (1979). In Labov's scheme this is part of the complication. To simplify coding and to follow the theoretical model, all propositions were coded, codes had to follow the canonical order, and each code could only be assigned in an uninterrupted sequence. Thus, for example, after a first complication, all following propositions were coded as complication until a proposition was coded either as an attempt to solve, a resolution, or a coda. Not all codes needed to be used for each narrative. If participants did not narrate, i.e. if they offered no complication, but only a general description with no specific complicating event, all propositions received the code "no narrative". We allowed for positive complications. In Table 1 we have marked the first proposition of each section of narrative structure, all subsequent propositions have the same code until the next section of narrative structure starts. Initial interrater reliability was $K = .85$, with a follow-up $K = .93$. To ascertain whether a narrative ended on a positive or negative note, we used the valence of the resolution, or, if the narrative ended with an unresolved complication, the valence of this complication. We assigned a -1 for a negative ending, a 1 for a positive ending, and 0 for narratives without narrative structure (no complication).

Evaluative statements were coded only in some, not in all propositions. We coded global positive and negative evaluations. Specific evaluations were all emotions insofar as they were explicitly named or very clearly identifiable in an expressive movement or action. We coded anger, anxiety, sadness, pride, and happiness, as well as all other positive and all other negative emotions. Interrater reliability reached $K = .90$ and $K = .88$. Length of narratives was measured in terms of number of words. In addition, mental verbs were coded, including the categories understand, think, believe and doubt, hope, remember, know, intend, external perception and proprioception (cf. Table 2 for examples). Interrater reliability reached $K = .90$ and $K = .87$. For all evaluations, i.e. global evaluations, emotion words, and mental verbs, we also coded the temporal and personal perspectives, interrater reliabilities reaching $K = .90$ and $K = .90$, and $K = .93$ and $K = .92$ respectively.

To construct indicators of psychological distance, we used the relative weights of global evaluations versus specific emotions, cognitive versus perceptual mental verbs, the use of present versus past evaluative perspectives, and of impersonal versus personal evaluative perspectives. We used a difference indicator instead of a percentage to avoid the problem that arises with proportional indicators (e.g., proportion of specific emotions of all evaluations) used elsewhere (Habermas, Meier & Mukhtar, 2009) when neither of the two variables is present which results in a missing value. Given the small number of participants we wished to avoid missing values and therefore used difference scores. We subtracted specific emotions from global evaluations and divided this difference by the sum of global evaluations plus specific emotions, and multiplied it by 100, resulting in an indicator that varied between 100 and -100. The extremes indicate an exclusive presence of one or the other kind of evaluation, a zero indicates the same frequency (or absence) of both kinds of evaluations. We proceeded in analogous fashion when constructing indicators of cognitive (think, understand) versus

perceptual (perceive, corporal sensations) mental verbs. In addition, the relative weight of present versus past perspective (leaving out future and global temporal perspectives), and of impersonal perspectives, such as *one*, or generalized perspective, such as *you*, versus perspectives of specific individuals were constructed in analogous fashion. Positive values in these four indicators denote psychological distance in terms of global versus specific evaluation, cognitive versus perceptual mental verbs, present versus past, and impersonal versus personal perspectives used in evaluative statements and reported speech.

Event ratings. Participants rated each narrated event on several dimensions on 5-point scales. We z-standardized and averaged three items to construct an indicator of coping: “The event still puts me into emotional turmoil” (negative), “The event still comes to my mind” (negative), and “I am relaxed when I think back to the event”, indicating involuntary remembering and emotional agitation (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$). We also included ratings of emotional intensity, event importance, and frequency of having talked about the event.

Results

Content of narratives

The narrated events were mostly from the private sphere (57%), some from work or study situations (24%), and only 19% from other everyday contexts. Among the events were achievement situations (21%), experiences of disrespect or being treated incorrectly (16%), reunions, being with or getting closer to others (10%), illness and accidents (7% each), separations, disappointments, and getting an object (4% each), being alone at night, and mishaps (3% each). In 11% of events emotions regarded the concerns of someone other than the narrator.

Change after three months

Hypotheses were tested with analyses of variance (ANOVA) for repeated measurement with two within-factors, valence of narrated emotion and time (2 x 2). The interaction of valence with change over time was tested to explore whether the expected effects were significantly stronger for negative than for positive narratives, which we interpret as evidence for the specific effects of coping. Differences between valence are reported for descriptive purposes. We used a 5% level of significance.

Event ratings. A basic assumption of this study was that with the passing of time, everyday events are coped with better. This was confirmed by a significant increase in ratings of having coped successfully with the event (see Table 4). The few negative events for which coping did not improve were enduring situations such as being stalked or chronic worries. The interaction between the valence of emotions and change over time reached marginal significance ($p = .067$), indicating a trend for more improvement in coping with negative rather than positive events. To explore the distinctness of our indicator of coping, we related it to emotion intensity, event importance, and frequency of talking about the event. Across times they correlated with coping by $r = .45$, $r = .35$, and $r = .41$ respectively, and in terms of changes over time (differences between times 1 and 2) with $r = .30$, $r = .09$, and $r = .18$. Only emotion intensity was significantly related to coping both across times and over time, indicating an certain overlap of constructs with 9% of shared variance in change over time..

Tests of hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 predicted a condensation of narratives after three months, reflected in a shortening of narratives and in a reduction of narrativity in terms of clause type and narrative structure. The mean reduction in length after three months in terms of number of words was not significant (see Table 4), with narratives of negative events being longer than those of positive events. Narrativity, in terms of proportion of narrative clauses, was not reduced, rather there was even a trend in the opposite direction ($p = .054$). Narrative clauses were more prevalent in narratives of negative than of positive events. We also explored whether the absolute frequency of narrative clauses had increased, which it had not ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 4.06$, to $M = 2.89$, $SD = 3.25$, respectively).

The core of a narrative is the complication and attempts to solve sections, in which the actual events and actions are reported. In terms of the elements of narrative structure, narrativity could not be ascertained via the presence of a complication section, because instructions ensured that almost all narrations regarded a specific event and therefore contained a complication. Instead, we took the attempts to solve the complication as a structural indicator of narrativity, because they reflect the often extended actions undertaken to solve a problem. They are absent in narratives in which the complication is also the final result. As expected, the presence of a section of attempts to solve the complication decreased in frequency, $F(1,29) = 10.20$, $p = .003$ $\eta_p^2 = .26$. They were also more frequent in narratives of negative than of positive events, $F(1, 29) = 11.20$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$ (see Table 5).

Hypothesis 2 predicted a distancing from the event in terms of a more distanced use of evaluations. The hypothesis did not regard the overall relative frequencies of emotion words, global evaluations, mental verbs, and reported speech, which indeed did not change over time. Rather, distancing was expected to result in an increase of the relative weight of global evaluations versus specific emotions, of cognitive versus perceptual mental verbs, as well as in the increase of the use of present versus past evaluative perspectives and of impersonal versus personal evaluative perspectives when using global evaluations, emotion words, and mental verbs.

Whereas the difference between cognitive and perceptual mental verbs did not increase, the difference between global evaluations and emotion words increased significantly. The difference between the use of a present versus a past evaluative perspective did not increase, but the past perspective was relatively more frequent in positive narratives. Finally, as expected, the difference between the use of impersonal versus personal evaluative perspectives increased significantly, and personal perspectives were also used relatively more frequently in negative than in positive narratives. Thus, two of the four indicators of psychological distance increased with time, as expected.

Hypothesis 3 predicted narratives to become more closed in terms of being framed by abstracts and coda and of ending on a more positive note. Although the framing of narratives by abstracts or coda did not increase overall, $F(1,29) = 3.08, p = .090, \eta_p^2 = .10$, there was a significant interaction between valence of emotion and change over time, $F(1,29) = 4.59, p = .041, \eta_p^2 = .14$, indicating that only the narratives of negative events were framed more often after three months (Table 5). Valence did not have any significant effects, $F(1,29) = .002, p = .881, \eta_p^2 = .00$. The same pattern emerged for a positive reinterpretation of the ending, with a significant interaction of change over time and valence, $F(1,29) = 9.51, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .25$. Only the valence of negative events improved over time. Valence of ending obviously also differed by valence of event, $F(1,29) = 461.55, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .94$, but overall change over time did not, $F(1,29) = 3.17, p = .085, \eta_p^2 = .10$.

Discussion

Narratives of everyday emotional experiences changed over three months in several ways. The memories were judged to be less emotionally pressing and better coped with than when first told. After three months, narratives tended to contain fewer sequences of attempts to solve the problem, and were thus more condensed. Also, they were narrated from a more distant perspective, as reflected in a decreased use of specific emotions relative to global evaluations, and a decreased use of personal relative to impersonal evaluative perspectives. Finally, narratives at time 2 showed a higher degree of closure both in terms of being framed by abstracts or coda, and in terms of ending more frequently on a positive note, having undergone a positive reinterpretation of their outcome. These findings match our predictions. Narratives of everyday events change over time by becoming more condensed, partially more distanced, and more enclosed. Based on only two measurement points, the findings cannot confirm Stile's model of the relation between coping and narrative elaboration, but they may be modelled by the right half of the inverted U-curve showing a decreased narrative elaboration over time.

There are several reservations to this conclusion, however. We did not find the expected diminution of narrativity in terms of the proportion of narrative sentences. Possibly, the relative stability of the absolute number of narrative clauses indicates that a core of events remains stable over time, and only the evaluative and descriptive sections vary in length. This would fit with the findings that in retelling, the content of narrative sections remains stable, while the content of other parts changes more easily with time.

The finding of an almost stable absolute number of narrative clauses is in line with the other unexpected finding, i.e. that evaluation did not shift from past events to the present situation in terms of temporal perspective and in terms of abstractness of mental verbs. Thus the finding from studies of retellings of traumatic narratives over many years that external evaluations are added is not confirmed for narratives of events with much less emotional impact.

A major difficulty of the literature on the relation between coping with an experience and change of the form in which it is narrated over time is that it remains unclear to which degree the changes are due to forgetting, to repeated telling, or to better coping with the event. In this study, we did control for coping after three months. However, a strength of the present study is that it allowed a second way to empirically distinguish between effects of a mere passing of time or retelling and coping with an event, because we included both

positive and negative events. A narrow definition of coping is restricted to the adaptation to negative events. Following this definition, effects of coping should occur exclusively for negative events, whereas mere forgetting and retelling should equally affect both positive and negative events. Thus the condensation and distancing found in negative and positive narratives are open to being interpreted as possible effects of forgetting or retelling, whereas the increase in closure in terms of framing with abstracts or coda and a positive reinterpretation of the event's outcome are specific for negative events, and can therefore be interpreted to result exclusively from coping.

Another limitation of this study is the use of everyday events. Although daily hassles and uplifts do have a strong tradition in coping research (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981), it could be that more variance in the success of coping can be found for severe events, rendering it easier to detect relations between coping and narrative form. Furthermore, the first phase of the negative effect of adverse events on the ability to narrate as hypothesized by Stiles, Honos-Webb and Lani (1999), most probably regards only events that are very severe or subjectively very disturbing. Therefore future studies should include exceptional negative events. This would make it possible to compare narratives of successful coping to narratives of unsuccessful coping, keeping the age of the memory constant, and comparing re-narrations of to-be-coped-with severe events with re-narrations of everyday events not requiring major efforts of emotional coping.

Like other cognitive studies of retelling, this study only used two measurement points. This appears justifiable on theoretical grounds for non severe events. In the studies of severe events just proposed, however, more than two measurement points are needed to do justice to the expected inverted quadratic function.

Another limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the sample in terms of gender, age, and educational level. Although educational level does not seem to impact the ability for oral narration, some studies do suggest that women and older adults narrate better and more emotionally than men and younger adults do. Therefore results cannot necessarily be generalized to men and other age groups.

This study points to the necessity and feasibility of combining findings from research in linguistics, cognitive psychology, and clinical psychology to study the relation between coping with emotional events and the form in which they are narrated. If it proves possible to objectively identify formal elements of narratives that indicate emotional trouble or successful coping, this would not only provide an unobtrusive measure of coping with high ecological validity, but could also help to teach how to assess coping in clinical settings.

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Table 1

Example of a retold sad story with coding of narrative structure

After one week

1)	Well, my father is – stopped drinking about two years ago	ORIENTATION
2)	he had totally stopped drinking	
3)	finally accepted	
4)	he had an alcohol problem	
5)	and I was extremely proud of him,	
6)	and thought	
7)	„Great“	
8)	well, when he told me	
9)	„Hey, I quit“	
10)	he had made it all by himself,	
11)	he wanted to get back his driver’s licence and things like that,	
12)	he made it all by himself, without therapy or anything,	
13)	I was so proud of him	
14)	I thought	
15)	„Great, he made it all by himself!“	
16)	and now, a week ago, he was in a kind of meeting,	COMPLICATION
17)	and I came, he came home,	
18)	and then, I notice it immediately, you know,	
19)	if you as – you’ve got, you smell it,	
20)	well, leave this aside,	
21)	and you know,	
22)	what your father usually looks like,	
23)	and --- and that was	
24)	when I thought:	
25)	„Man, yeah“	
26)	that really did me,	
27)	when I said	
28)	I was so proud of him, yeah	
29)	and then we got into a fight over it,	
30)	‘cause I told him right into his face	
31)	it’s not	
32)	that I am somehow - taboos	
33)	thank God, at home it’s not	
34)	that daddy’s the chief	
35)	can’t say nothing,	
36)	but I always tell him things right to his face	
37)	what I think about him	
38)	or what’s good,	
39)	what’s negative, anything,	
40)	and he usually - that’s fine for him,	
41)	only not when he’s drunk	
42)	then anything is an attack to him	
43)	but it’s not,	
44)	I actually only wanted to show him	ATTEMPT TO SOLVE
45)	how sad I am	
46)	I also started crying	
47)	„Why did you start again?“	
48)	We were so proud of you	
49)	You made it all by yourself, a new life phase“	
50)	And yeah – but he wasn’t responsive, not really,	NEGATIVE RESOLUTION
51)	Well, I was actually sad, very sad, --- angry, but more sad,	
52)	Because I was so very disappointed, yeah.	

Three months later

- | | | |
|-----|---|--------------|
| 1) | Well, my father was , - or had been drinking for a long time, | ORIENTATION |
| 2) | Was an alcoholic, | |
| 3) | And he stopped all by himself, | |
| 4) | And then for the first time after two years I saw him drunk again, | COMPLICATION |
| 5) | And that was a real shock, | |
| 6) | Because I was so proud of him, | |
| 7) | That he had made it all by himself, | |
| 8) | And to see him like this again was like looking back into the past, | |
| 9) | Because, you know, that's not a nice experience | |
| 10) | To see your father drunk as a kid or as an adolescent, right, | |
| 11) | And well, that made me terribly sad, | |
| 12) | That he relapsed. | |
| 13) | That was it. | CODA |

Table 2

*Formal Elements of Narratives*1. Clause types (either one of these or of five additional clause types was coded for each proposition)

Narrative clause	Narrative clauses imitate the original temporal sequence of events (Labov & Waletzky, 1967); reports events datable to a specific day: <i>"And now, a week ago, he was in a kind of meeting, / and I came, he came home, / and then I notice it immediately"</i>
Indirect speech	<i>"When I said/ [that]I was so proud of him, yeah"</i>
Direct speech	<i>"Well, when he told me/ 'Hey, I quit'"</i>
Internal monologue	<i>"I thought/ 'Great, he made it all by himself!"</i>

2. Narrative structure (coded for each proposition)

Abstract	Announces main topic or point of narrative
Orientation	Provides background such as antecedents, place, time and persons
Complication	Central event that breaks with normality, elicits an emotion, defines a goal
Attempts to solve	Attempts to return the situation to normal
Resolution	Successful or not successful result of attempts to solve complication
Coda	Signals end, leads back to the present

3. Evaluative statements

Global evaluations	Positive: <i>"Great!"</i> ; <i>"Thank God"</i> . Negative: <i>"That really did me"</i> ; <i>"Because, you know, that's not a nice experience"</i> .
Specific emotions	Explicit naming of one of the five emotions studied here, or of actions clearly expressive of a specific emotion: <i>"And I was extremely proud of him"</i> ; <i>"And then we got into a fight over it, / 'cause I told him right into his face"</i> ; <i>"how sad I am"</i> .
Mental verbs	Verbs expressing mental activity with a privileged first person access: <i>"[He]finally accepted, [/that he had an alcohol problem]"</i> (understand); <i>"And thought [/Great!]"</i> (think); <i>"He wanted to get back his driver's licence and things like that,"</i> (intend); <i>"And then, I notice it immediately, you now, / if you as – you've got, you smell it"</i> (perceive); <i>"And you know, [/what your father usually looks like,]"</i> (know); other categories are believe and doubt, hope for, remember, and feel (corporal sensations). 'Think' and 'understand' are grouped as cognitive mental verbs, 'perceive' and 'feel' as perceptual mental verbs.

4. Personal and temporal perspectives in evaluative statements and reported speech

Impersonal perspective	An impersonal subject like <i>it</i> , <i>one</i> , or a generic <i>you</i> is provided for an evaluation or mental verb : <i>"If you as – you've got, you smell it"</i> ; <i>"And that was a real shock "</i> ; <i>"Because that's not a nice experience, / to see your father drunk as a kid or as an adolescent, right"</i> .
Personal perspective	A specific person is named as the subject of an evaluation or mental verb: <i>"And I was extremely proud of him"</i> ; <i>"When he told me, /"Hey, I quit"</i> .
Present perspective	The evaluation or mental verb is used from a present perspective of the narrator: <i>"That is really disappointing."</i>
Past perspective	The evaluation or mental verb is used from a past perspective of a protagonist: <i>"Because I was so very disappointed"</i> .

Table 3

Overview of Hypotheses about Change over Time, Indicators, and Results

1) Condensation	Number of words	n.s. (trend)
	Proportion of narrative clauses	n.s.
	Presence of attempts to solve a complication	significant
2) Distancing	Relative weight of cognitive vs. perceptual mental verbs	n.s.
	Relative weight global evaluations vs. specific emotions	significant
	Relative weight of present vs. past perspective	n.s.
	Relative weight of impersonal vs. personal perspectives	significant
3) Closure	Presence of either abstract or coda	significant
	Positive outcome	significant

Note. N.s. – not significant.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations of Length and Complexity and of Relative Frequencies of Kinds of Clauses and Evaluations (Time 1 in 1st Row, Time 2 in 2nd Row)

	<u>Emotion Elicited by Narrated Event</u>				<u>ANOVA^a</u>					
	<u>Negative</u>		<u>Positive</u>		<u>Time (T)</u>		<u>Valence (V)</u>		<u>T * V</u>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1,29)	partial η^2	<i>F</i> (1,29)	partial η^2	<i>F</i> (1,29)	partial η^2
Coping	-.43	.57	-.18	.43	118.09***	.80	1.68	.06	3.62	.11
	.33	.44	.33	.49						
Number of words	285.7	138.0	180.7	77.1	3.39	.11	37.49***	.56	1.07	.04
	251.0	121.4	166.5	80.3						
<u>Types of clauses (% of propositions)</u>										
Narrative clauses	10.42	5.30	8.89	7.04	4.04	.12	5.01*	.15	.83	.03
	13.06	7.20	9.55	7.78						
<u>Psychological distance (Difference scores)</u>										
Difference global	41.27	34.85	5.96	46.30	5.05*	.15	19.33***	.40	.00	.00
eval. - emotion	27.66	37.28	-8.09	51.73						
Difference cognitive	7.28	45.22	8.43	53.61	.18	.01	.66	.02	1.73	.00
- percept. ment.v.	11.88	47.54	-3.08	46.58						
Difference impersonal	-66.16	18.33	-52.52	33.76	1.29	.04	7.21*	.20	.04	.00
- personal persp.	-50.99	31.18	-43.66	39.92						
Difference present	-47.14	30.90	-60.00	31.53	5.31*	.16	4.86*	.14	.54	.02
- past persp.	-41.39	31.76	-55.91	31.77						

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Difference scores were calculated by subtracting the second from the first indicator and dividing the difference by the sum of both, multiplied by 100, so that scores can vary between 100 (psychologically distant) and -100 (psychologically close).

Table 5
Mean Percentage of Narratives for each Emotion Valence that Contain Each of the Six Elements of Narrative Structure (Time 1 in 1st Row, Time 2 in 2nd Row)

	Valence of Emotion	
	Negative	Positive
Abstract (A)	32.2	45.0
	46.7	43.3
Orientation	86.7	83.3
	83.3	81.7
Complication	92.2	98.3
(CP)	92.2	95.0
Attempt solve	42.2	15.0
	24.4	8.3
Resolution (R)	47.8	31.7
	42.2	30.0
Coda (C)	24.4	26.7
	35.6	31.7
A or C	23.1	58.3
	67.8	56.7
positive final	12.2	96.7
segment (CP or R)	25.6	91.7

Note. If a narrative contained no complication, no other structural element was coded.