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Enny Das, Kobie van Krieken, Anja Kalch, Guan Soon Khoo

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Das, Enny, Kobie van Krieken, Anja Kalch, and Guan Soon Khoo. 2023. "Editorial: Existential narratives: increasing psychological wellbeing through story." *Frontiers in Communication* 7 (January): 1113441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2022.1113441.

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frontiers | Frontiers in Communication

TYPE Editorial
PUBLISHED 09 January 2023
DOI 10.3389/fcomm.2022.1113441

Check for updates

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Rukhsana Ahmed,
University at Albany, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Enny Das
✉ enny.das@ru.nl

SPECIALTY SECTION
This article was submitted to Health Communication, a section of the journal Frontiers in Communication

RECEIVED 01 December 2022
ACCEPTED 28 December 2022
PUBLISHED 09 January 2023

CITATION
Das E, van Krieken K, Kalch A and Khoo GS (2023) Editorial: Existential narratives: Increasing psychological wellbeing through story.
Front. Commun. 7:1113441.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2022.1113441

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Editorial: Existential narratives: Increasing psychological wellbeing through story

Enny Das[1]*, Kobie van Krieken[1], Anja Kalch[2] and Guan Soon Khoo[3]

[1]Centre for Language Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands, [2]Department for Media, Knowledge and Communication, University of Augsburg, Augsburg, Germany, [3]Moody College of Communication, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, United States

KEYWORDS

narratives, psychological wellbeing, existential motives, mental processes, books, movies

Editorial on the Research Topic
Existential narratives: Increasing psychological wellbeing through story

Humans are story-telling animals; they understand reality through story, they learn and make sense of the world through story (Schank and Berman, 2003; Mar and Oatley, 2008; Gottschall, 2012). From Homer's *Odyssey* to the movie *Titanic*, and from Little Red Riding Hood to the Netflix series *Stranger Things*: fictional story worlds confront the audience with complex social and interpersonal situations that often involve tragic love affairs, violence, loss, and death. The fact that humans voluntarily seek out tragic stories is striking, because they go to great lengths to avoid tragedy in real life. What, if anything, do people gain from watching or reading tragic stories? While extensive research on the so-called sad film paradox (Oliver, 2006) has been conducted to understand why we appreciate tragic movies or books, research on psychological, health-related effects is scarce. Could existential stories help viewers or readers face fundamental fears, overcome psychological hurdles in life, and increase their psychological wellbeing? If so, which story aspects and processes play a role in producing these effects? The relatively little attention that has been paid to the relation between narratives and psychological wellbeing is surprising because mental health problems are highly prevalent in modern society and became even more urgent during the COVID-19 crisis in the last couple of years (OECD, 2021). Indeed, the reframing of narrative research to focus on its psychological and health impact is timely and potentially valuable.

The aim of this Research Topic is to fill this gap by examining how narratives, and in particular existential narratives, affect mental processes, and psychological outcomes. Existential narratives are stories in which questions about the meaning of life and death are explored through the individual experiences of characters who find themselves at a turning point in their life. Drawing from existential psychology, a turning point is understood as moments when characters' basic beliefs about their world are disrupted,

such as moments of death or loss (Martin et al., 2004). For example, the films *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) and *American Beauty* (1999) raise these existential questions by appealing to a wide range of emotions, from despair to delight. In line with the idea that particularly the combination of eudaimonic (i.e., meaningful) and hedonic (i.e., pleasurable) experiences fosters wellbeing (Huta, 2016), existential narratives transcend the eudaimonic-hedonic distinction and encompass aspects of meaningfulness as well as on aspects of enjoyment. Similarly, existential narratives are not bound to a particular genre or medium: they can be audiovisual (television or Netflix series, movies), textual (poetry, novels), digital (interactive stories, games), fictional or non-fictional, entertaining or persuasive or informative, et cetera.

The broad variety of existential narratives is represented in this Research Topic, with articles exploring the relation between various types of existential narratives and psychological wellbeing as well as underlying processes from theoretical and empirical perspectives. Based on that, three structuring lines emerge: (1) along the types of existential narratives addressed, (2) in terms of wellbeing related effects, and (3) in terms of underlying narrative and reflective processes.

1) Types of existential narratives

Seven of the articles in this Research Topic focus on experiences related to individual (Bálint et al., study 2; (Daalmans et al.; Fitzgerald et al.; Rieger and Schneider; Sopcak et al.) or collective death (Bilandzic and Blessing), confirming the dominant theme of mortality in existential narratives. For example, Bálint et al. (study 2) used an animated short film about dealing with grief throughout life, Daalmans et al. investigated a popular Netflix series about suicide, and Bilandzic and Blessing included an apocalyptic science-fiction parody of modern man's inability to face terrifying facts. Human suffering is another regular theme in the articles, such as the hardships of Canadian Indigenous people in Residential Schools (Sopcak et al.), giving an eulogy at a funeral of a good friend (Fitzgerald et al.), or suffering from depression (Scholl et al.), pulmonary embolism (Kalch et al.), and burnout (Bálint et al., study 1).

2) Wellbeing related aspects

Two studies do not focus on specific types of existential narratives but instead follow an overarching approach by looking at the use and effects of entertainment following experiences of a natural disaster as a life changing event (Raney et al.) as well as longitudinal effects of eudaimonic and hedonic entertainment (Reinecke and Kreling). Results of the study by Raney et al. indicate that self-transcendent media use is positively related to post-traumatic growth. By contrast, results of the study by Reinecke and Kreling showed no effect of eudaimonic and hedonic entertainment on the wellbeing aspects of hope, meaning in life, or resilience. Together, these findings suggest that media stories may affect certain aspects of wellbeing but not others, and perhaps only in times of existential need, such as periods when people are grappling with challenging life events. A range of additional wellbeing correlates is studied in the various other studies, such as loneliness, emotional distress, connectedness, emotional clarity, death acceptance, and coping with self-threats. For example, Kalch et al. discuss how narratives may function to promote self-reflection and inspire mindful mastery while reducing feelings of loneliness and emotional distress among patients suffering from a cardiovascular disease. Hanauer furthermore shows that narrative writing could enhance wellbeing in terms of heightened levels of insight and emotional clarity. This finding demonstrates that beneficial wellbeing effects can be achieved not only by consuming narratives, but also by actively producing narratives.

3) Underlying narrative and reflective processes

How does the narrative impact on wellbeing come about? Eight of the articles aim to answer this question. Rieger and Schneider demonstrate how narratives can serve as a coping tool *via* heightened narrative experiences of transportation, enjoyment, and appreciation. In a similar context, Fitzgerald et al. compared the impact of a poignant-focused eulogy vs. a humor-focused eulogy on death acceptance through narrative processing. Scholl et al. demonstrate how interactive narratives positively affect readers' transformative learning about depression through identification with the narrative character. Several other studies focus on how self-reflection on emotional experiences could promote wellbeing, specifically through people's manner of reflection. Daalmans et al. reported that existential narratives can provoke moral rumination among young adults, whereas Bilandzic and Blessing introduce the idea of critical thinking as a mind-set effect, which implies that media narratives can stimulate viewers and readers to think critically within and outside of the situation that originally triggered this mindset. Sopcak et al. investigate how reading literature promotes empathy and moral outcomes *via* different forms of reading engagement, cognitive perspective taking, and empathy. In addition to these reading processes, Hanauer investigates self-effects of writing about significant, life-changing moments in a poetic style vs. free writing about daily events.

Together, the findings point to promising avenues for future research about existential narratives and the intricate relation between their form and content, the processes they generate and their impact on wellbeing. First, we observe that in existential narratives, the themes of death and human suffering are put center stage, suggesting that such narratives simulate experiences that are too terrifying or dangerous to try out in real life (Gottschall, 2012). Second, several studies suggest a thin line between complex emotional narrative content on the one hand and moral reasoning and critical reflection on the other hand. For example, mixed affect can stimulate or decrease learning from a narrative, depending on the topic. Finally, we conclude that reading and writing existential narratives can contribute to wellbeing by

giving meaning to life and by providing tools to cope with existential threats.

Author contributions

ED and KK drafted a concept article. ED, KK, AK, and GK provided edits and comments. All authors approved of the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the Netherlands Science Foundation NWO (grant number 406.18.SW.039).

Conflict of interest

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