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10 Narratives as Projective Techniques Among Psychology Students – A Content Analysis

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This study is based on the writing of a short, potentially projective narrative, and sharing it in small peer groups. There is a close relationship between narratives and projection; readers' enjoyment may in fact depend on their ability and readiness to project their own agendas onto the protagonists (see, for example, Sullivan's 1994 analysis of Onetti's 1990 novella). Yet the more obvious connection between narratives and projection lies in the act of producing the former while achieving the latter: The act of narrating is, almost by definition, a potential projective test. Projection itself is based on the hypothesis 'that individuals will project their own perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and needs in assigning meaning to relatively ambiguous stimuli' (Esquivel et al., 2007, p.358; see also Esquivel and Flanagan, 2007, and Wiggins, 2003). Projection is not without its dangers: When they use it as a psychological defence mechanism, projecting individuals fail to acknowledge their own motives and emotions, and thus are hindered from effectively coping with them. At the same time they fail to correctly perceive others, since they attribute to them their own, projected characteristics. In an analysis, which again connects narratives and projection, Parker (1995, p.159) argues that 'to avoid misrecognition of others I need to attend *both* to their otherness *and* to elements of human continuity between us'. (This issue is further discussed and analyzed in Serpell, 2008.)

Sharing one's experiences with other group members is a well known, often praised element of group psycho-therapy (for some examples in varied settings see psychodrama groups in Davies, 1993; self-help groups in Ephraim, 1993; interpersonal groups in Ratigan and Aveline, 1993. See also the frequent use of sharing in inter-cultural empathy training by Kramer-Moore and Moore, 2006, and its investigation in a controlled study by Falloon et al., 1977). Though being in a group does, by itself, help reduce isolation, it is the sharing with others of some of one's thoughts and feelings (and, in this case, personal narratives) that conveys to the individual the all-important message: "Others have had experiences similar to yours". In her analysis of self-help groups, Ephraim (1993, pp.234-235) refers to this aspect of the group process as 'the bedrock of self-help groups'.

The study at hand aims at a) stimulating social interaction and individual reflection, as two basic skills connected to the field of psychology, and b) teaching students more about such individual differences that are projected when using narratives as a projective technique. It is hypothesized that

1. Individual differences illuminating gender differences, individual's personal agendas and attitudes will be reflected in the choice of the protagonists, the narratives' completion and the written reflections of the participants.
2. The act of writing as a projective technique and the sharing of it in small groups will create positive affect and help participants gain insight.

Method

Participants

Eighty undergraduates (61 women and 19 men) enrolled in a second year course in psychology ("Individual Differences in Intelligence and Personality") at a British university took part in this study. Their mean age was 20.5.

Procedure

Students in four seminar groups of about 20 each were presented with a copy of the following (in Kramer-Moore and Moore, 2006, p.211):

Darkness – An African Folktale

The world was in complete darkness. All the living creatures gathered in the forest: Word has reached them that there was light somewhere, and it could be obtained for all of them to enjoy. The lion, who is brave and strong, volunteered first and went to fetch the light. He returned after three days and three nights, exhausted, wounded, bleeding. He told his friends that the road was dangerous and scary and that he couldn't reach the light. The elephant, who has a thick skin, went next. He returned after three days and three nights half-blinded, defeated. He couldn't find the light, either. Then a voice was heard: "I shall bring the light!"

-- Finish the story.

Whose voice was heard?

Describe the journey.

How does the story end?

[10 minutes for writing]

-- How does the story you wrote relate to your own life?

On completion of the task, students sat in subgroups of 5, and were encouraged to share their stories with each other. After about 15 minutes a volunteer from each subgroup reported to the group the gist of their encounter. At the end of the meeting students provided written feedback about this activity.

Content Analysis

The 80 anonymous narratives (completed stories), as well as the answers to the questions were thematically content analysed, using categories that were arrived at empirically.

Results

Choice of Protagonist

1. Women tended to choose small, “insignificant” animals far more than men: mouse (27% vs. 10%), spider, small bird, squirrel, bug, fly, ants, firefly, grasshopper, chameleon, mussel, and moth. Overall, 58% of the women chose small and “weak” creatures, while only 37% of the men made such choices. In the small group discussions, women were both surprised and delighted to discover that other women also chose a mouse as a protagonist, and said this “discovery” empowered them.
2. Sixteen percent of the men and 5% of the women chose a large animal (giraffe, eagle, and dolphin). Women tended to choose average sized animals (cat, monkey, fox, mongoose, owl).
3. Sixteen percent of the men chose “man” as the creature (ie. a person rather than an animal or a supernatural being), as opposed to only 8% of the women. None of the participants chose “woman” as the protagonist. If they chose a female creature, it was an animal.
4. Twelve percent of the women chose a religious symbol (god or an angel), compared to 5% of the men.
5. Practically all of the students thought the voice belonged to a male creature; the four who found it feminine, were all women.

Ending of the Story

1. The majority of the students wrote a happy ending to the story: Light was found and the creature survived.
2. No significant gender difference was found between the frequency of an “optimistic/pessimistic” attitude of the participants. Two of the men ended their stories in a pessimistic way (failure to bring the light; death of the protagonist). Three women ended their stories by describing the failures of their protagonists, and two by its death. (Because the activity was not conducted in a clinical setting, we have no follow up for the participants who chose hopeless or morbid endings.)
3. More male (26%) than female (16%) students mentioned the importance of teamwork in the endings they provided.

Projections and Insights to One’s Life

A larger proportion of women (89%) than of men (53%) found the ending they had written projected their own life, and wrote a personal reflection. Most common was the “underdog” theme:

I was never expected to do well in school (mouse)
I’ve managed to exceed teachers’ expectations (mouse)
I was a shy character. Joined the hockey club, became captain (mouse)
I tend to be quite quiet (mouse)
I have managed to exceed teachers’ expectations of me in high school (mouse)
I sometimes feel my voice isn’t heard (monkey)
Due to my shy nature I can be overlooked as a person (snake)
I blend into the night, I wear black (budger)
I always had to fight to be given a chance (small mouse)
I may not feel confident or capable but I have some skills to offer (chameleon)
I’m quiet like a mouse but I get there in the end (unspecified)
I’m small and stubborn (bird)
Hard work and determination, learn your limitations (snake who fails)
I couldn’t end the story because I’m still going down the road to try and find happiness (mouse)
I always had to fight to be given the chance to do well (mouse)
I’m shy and can be overlooked (serpent)
I want to be carefree and fearless, all things I’m not (small bird)
I’m realistic about life, it’s not always a happy ending (small mouse dies of heart attack)
The light could be my personal happiness; the darkness was life with my ex husband (unspecified)

Other themes included

Relationship between individuals and their social network:

You don't have to be the best to help others (cat)
Family and friends' support is very important to me (family of ants)
I like to share my personal achievements and to help others (eagle)
Sometimes you see things other people can't (meerkat)
Friends are important (teamwork)

Creativity in problem solving:

I'll find new ways around existing problems (monkey)
I think outside the box (squirrel)
Use strength to overcome problems (monkey)
I'm small but can achieve what other taller people can't (spider)
I plan everything, I take my time (cunning fox)
I deal with obstacles head on (blind bat)
Use your head (small mouse)
All problems can be solved using common sense (man with chainsaw)

Disappointment in life and mankind:

You end up at square one several times (moth)
Most events occur when you least expect (unspecified)
It's important not to be intimidated by rumours (snake)
People always misjudge others as they base their judgment on physical characteristics (mouse)
The world we live in is in darkness and needs saving (mouse)
Life is a battle sometimes (mouse)
Looks aren't everything (tiny squirrel)
All the people who never seek nor get the recognition they deserve (mouse)
Good things come in small packages (small mouse)
Life is often dark, but there is hope (mussel that fails)
Impressions can be deceiving (fly)
I have a tendency to be pessimistic (mouse who dies)

Teamwork is a comfort and hope to many (more so to men):

Teamwork seems to help me get through struggles (bird)
Working together makes nothing impossible (all the animals)
I tend to do things in groups (all the animals)
Often I need to work in groups to achieve a goal (all the animals)
I seek help from others (Tarzan)
I often need to work in groups to achieve a goal (all the animals)

You don't have to be the best to help others (cat)
Need others to be happy to reach my full potential (man)
Teamwork helps me get thru struggles (bird)

Personal philosophy of life is portrayed in the reflections:

Taller people have better advantages (giraffe)
There are some similarities with the way I want to think the world works (tiny, fragile mouse)
The importance of education in my life (cunning man)
Life is often dark, but there is hope (mussel)
You don't have to be big and strong to be brave and successful (mouse)
Light represents the happiness I want from my life (bug with thick shell)
Life is a battle sometimes (mouse)
Feeling that men are more practical than women (man with a chainsaw)
All that goes around comes around (moth)
It's not the most influential people who manage to do the most (grasshopper)

The religious theme (more frequent among women):

I believe in spirituality (bird)
Even though God knew how much he would suffer, he sent his son into the world...
(god)
Angel shines over you so you are never alone in times of darkness (angel)
Light is a symbol for God's glory (god)
God found me (giraffe)
God will do the best for me (Jesus)
Hard work is always paid off, god is light and gives us hope (god)
Jesus is the light of this world (god)
You are never alone in times of darkness (angel)

Feedback

Written feedback was solicited and content analysed. Seventy six percent of the students provided positive feedbacks, and found writing the narrative insightful to their life. They claimed it brought into awareness new and meaningful insights; sharing with others brought on a feeling of intimacy and warmth, and diminished feelings of isolation. Four percent of the students (all male) disliked the whole activity (one of them felt the activity was too revealing). The rest were either neutral (2%) or expressed mixed feelings (14%), mostly due to the fact that they could not see how the activity (which they liked) was relevant to their academic goals. Four percent did not provide feedback.

Here are some verbatim comments:

- I didn't think we were really projecting until we all read them out, then it was clear we all had!
- I thought the seminar was insightful and the exercise was a good demonstration of how different people look at things differently
- Very insightful, interesting, relevant. Do it more often!
- It was interesting to see how different people had different endings...important to remember our similarities because it helps avoid prejudice in society
- I particularly enjoyed hearing other people's insights, because people think so differently to me and each other, and say things that would never even occur to me
- Fun and insightful

Discussion

The hypotheses suggested above dealt with the content of the completed narratives and the nature of the experience participants will undergo. Both hypotheses were confirmed.

Individual Differences

The higher occurrence of religious themes in female students' narratives is hardly surprising: Social psychological studies of religiosity (eg. Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997; see also Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975, as well as Loewenthal et al., 2001 for Christians) consistently report a similar trend.

Additional gender differences identified in the study at hand tend to conform to the old-fashioned stereotype of males being more task oriented: More of them suggest teamwork (presumably for its efficiency in problem solving), more of them attribute masculinity to the volunteering creature, they have a lower incidence of identifying the creature with the proverbially insignificant mouse and other small creatures, and they express higher dislike for the entire activity (which appears to them to be more social/emotional than task related). However, current empirical research findings do not support this stereotype. On the contrary, research carried out among different ages, cultures and populations shows that women score higher than men on measures of task-orientation (see, for example, Bouffard et al., 1995; Jagacinski and Strickland, 2000; Wu, 2003). The result at hand, falling in line more with the stereotype than with the findings of current research, is probably related to the particular composition of undergraduate psychology classes, which certainly do not constitute a representative sample of the student population (owing to both the

specific motivation of psychology majors and the unbalanced gender distribution).

Projecting and Sharing

In the choice of the protagonist, the main theme of the story, the choice of ending and the connection of all these to the students' lives, we can see that the use of projective narrative is both meaningful and insightful to most students (more so to women), and that the use of narratives provides them with the opportunity to view their own agendas, and choose to share some of them with a peer group. The overwhelmingly positive reaction to the entire activity – reading, writing and sharing – leads me to repeat this and similar activities in the future.

Conclusions

1. One can use projective techniques in educational settings to promote insight in the individual, especially among students of the behavioural sciences.
2. Talking about personal experience and listening to others is enjoyable as it creates closeness and understanding among group members.
3. Women seem to enjoy and benefit more from this activity than men.
4. Gaining insight and sharing with others empowers the participants, especially women.

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