MAKING MEANING OUT OF MADNESS:

PROCESSING THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

The relations among meaning-making, well-being, and distress have been examined in narratives of personal self-discrepant experiences, but research is divided as to whether or not meaning-making is beneficial and little research has examined how individuals make meaning out of collective experiences. To better understand the implications of meaning-making for the self, the present study examined narrative differences between personal and collective discrepant experiences and the relations among meaning-making, distress, and well-being. One hundred and fifty-nine participants identifying as centrist to extremely liberal were asked to respond to two narrative prompts: a self-discrepant experience prompt and a prompt asking about reactions to the 2016 presidential election. Participants completed measures assessing distress, well-being, depressive and anxious symptoms, political activism, event centrality, and psychological growth. Narratives were coded for meaning-making, self-event connections, and redemption/contamination sequences. Hypotheses concerning the relations among meaning-making, well-being, and growth were supported in the political narrative condition. As hypothesized, meaning-making partially mediated the relation between distress and well-being and distress and psychological growth. However, the first mediation was moderated by event centrality, such that meaning-making in events highly central to the self reduced the effect of distress on well-being. Results are discussed in terms of implications for activism and agency. As this study suggests that meaning-making and positive self-event connections are beneficial for the self, future research should investigate how to inspire meaning-making around negative and discrepant events.

Making Meaning out of Madness: Processing the 2016 Presidential Election

"When learning about the 2016 presidential election, I was disheartened. Since then, I've learned to have less faith in the current administration, and have come	*"I was extremely upset. I literally was crying all night and was in a state of disbelief. It is interesting that he was able to be elected especially because we had*

to understand just how dark the world CAN be. Yet, I've also come to realize the degree to which people can unite for a common cause, and I've realized the importance of being able to communicate and negotiate with people you disagree with."	*such a great person before him."*

These narratives were written by two students at a small liberal arts college who were asked to recall their experiences learning about the 2016 presidential election results. At first glance, these narratives appear similar, as both individuals acknowledge their distress upon learning about the election results. However, what is present in the first narrative that is absent from the second is a meaningful interpretation of what this event signifies for the narrator's worldview and sense of self. Although this distinction may seem trivial, recent research suggests that the ways in which individuals narrate their life experiences and imbue them with meaning may have important implications for individuals' outlooks on the world (Mclean & Pratt, 2006), the preservation of well-being (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012), and psychological growth (Merrill, Waters, & Fivush, 2015).

Meaning-making and Meaning Violations

Narrative researchers would argue that one of the most important ways in which individuals shape one's sense of self is through the creation of a life story; a selection of autobiographical narratives comprised of important events, life periods, and recurrent themes (Bluck & Habermas, 2000). As individuals incorporate events and experiences into their life stories and reflect on the personal significance of their life events, the sense of self is subject to changes over time. According to Conway's and Pleydell-Pearce's *Self-Memory System*, autobiographical memory is accessed and employed to alter or preserve aspects of the self (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The self-memory system provides a stable self-system (Conway & Rubin, 1993), such that autobiographical

memories are organized in a manner that coheres with one's current understanding of oneself, referred to as the *working self* (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000).

Working-self goals influence and may help to control self-discrepancies; experiences that do not match understandings of one's self or worldview. Thus, autobiographical memories may be reconstructed and employed in ways that reflect current beliefs, attitudes, and values, thereby reducing self-discrepant information. *Meaning-making*, the process by which we make sense of our experiences, can be employed as a tool to negotiate between autobiographical memory and the working self. In the face of a meaning-violation or a self-discrepancy, meaning-making helps individuals to reconfigure understandings of the ways the world works (e.g., expected relationships, expected outcomes, cultural value systems). Importantly, these meaning-making strategies help to reduce the negative consequences that arise in response to self-discrepant, meaning-violating experiences, such as feeling socially excluded, dealing with personal tragedy, or facing violations of a socially just world (Tesser, 2000). In the face of such self-discrepant information, Proulx and Inzlicht (2012) propose five behaviors that people engage in to reduce the aversive physiological arousal that stems from meaning violations. These include assimilation (working to integrate an event so that it agrees with prior assumptions), accommodation (altering a meaning framework to resolve the inconsistency), affirmation (heightening attention to an unrelated meaning framework), abstraction (finding patterns in the environment to compensate for meaning violations), and assembly (creating a new meaning framework to make experiences feel familiar). These strategies enable individuals to assemble a framework that aids in making sense of one's life.

Given that self-discrepant experiences can prove threatening to an individual's worldview and sense of self, research has examined differences in how individuals

narrate self-discrepant experiences, as opposed to self-consistent ones. In a recent study, Mutluturk and Tekcan (2016) examined phenomenological and narrative differences in self-discrepant and self-consistent memories. Although phenomenological aspects of the narratives, such as retrieval and specificity, were not significantly different, self-discrepant narratives showed significantly greater amounts of meaning-making. Furthermore, individuals showed less autonomy in the self-discrepant narratives, suggesting that in the face of challenges to the sense of self, they felt less control over the situation. It appears that when experiences threaten one's sense of self, individuals will use meaning-making as a way to guide future behavior and to learn lessons about themselves. These findings are in accordance with Conway and Plydell-Pearce (2000), in that individuals may reconstruct or engage in different strategies to incorporate discrepant information into the goals of the working self. Similarly, Rice and Pasupathi (2010) found that in comparison with older adults, young adults describe self-discrepant memories as significantly more negative than self-consistent memories, but imbue self-discrepant events with more meaning. This suggests that individuals respond differently to self-discrepant events over the lifetime. Furthermore, at identity-forming points in our lives such as young adulthood, individuals tend to engage more emotionally and more negatively with self-discrepant experiences. Given the finding that meaning-violations impact individuals more negatively and more significantly at different points in the lifespan, it is important to understand the impact that meaning-violations may have on well-being.

Meaning-making and Well-being

Previous research has shown that maintaining self-consistency is important for psychological well-being and other mental health outcomes (Campbell et al., 2003). In particular, certain narrative variables and meaning-making strategies have been linked to

better well-being. McAdams and colleagues (2001) explored the relations among

redemption sequences, in which individuals describe negative experiences and seek to

improve the situations and/or feel positive at the end, *contamination sequences*, in which

individuals describe experiences as moving from positive to negative affect, and

psychological functioning. Redemption sequences were positively associated with

psychological well-being in both midlife adult and undergraduate students. Importantly,

use of redemption sequences was a stronger predictor of well-being than emotion tone,

suggesting that finding positivity in negative experiences is of unique significance in

understanding how meaning-making in narrative relates to well-being over and above the

simple presence of positive memories. Similarly, McLean and Breen (2009) found that

redemption sequences positively predicted self-esteem, indicating that the ability to make

positive meaning out of negative circumstances is important to one's explicit sense of

self.

Prior research has focused on how meaning-making strategies are used to process

traumatic experiences, events that can be seen as some of the most significant threats to

an individual's sense of self. Waters, Shallcross, and Fivush (2013) asked individuals to

describe the most traumatic event they had experienced and to complete measures

assessing post-traumatic growth (PTG) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

symptomatology. These narratives were coded for narrative meaning-making,

operationalized as coherence, theme, context, chronology, and cognitive processing

words. In contrast to the aforementioned studies, higher levels of meaning-making

predicted higher levels of PTSD symptomatology, suggesting that meaning-making might

not always positively influence the self. However, PTSD symptomatology was positively

associated with PTG. Thus, the processing and experiencing of psychological distress can

lead to positive psychological growth, painting a more complex picture of how we handle

negative, self-discrepant experiences.

Meaning-making has been linked to both psychological distress and to

psychological well-being, so the way in which meaning-making is used may predict

psychological outcomes. Cappeliez and Robitaille (2010) examined meaning-making as a

potential mediator for the relationship between reminiscence functions (how and why we

talk about our past experiences) and psychological well-being. Unlike redemption and

contamination sequences, reminiscence functions were measured via the Reminiscence

Functions Scale (RFS), a self-report scale that measures the degree to which individuals

reminisce for specific purposes. Positive reminiscence functions included death

preparation, identity development, and problem solving, as these strategies have been

linked to better physical and mental health. Boredom reduction, intimacy maintenance,

and bitterness revival have been linked to evasion from the present and rumination, both

of which predict decreased physical and mental well-being. These reminiscence functions

were grouped as negative self-functions. The results identified meaning-making as a

significant mediator between reminiscence functions and well-being, such that positive

reminiscences about the self are related to higher well-being, while negative

reminiscences about the self are related to lower well-being. It appears that when

individuals use meaning-making to maintain a positive sense of self, well-being

increases. However, using meaning-making to reflect negatively on the self implies a

fixation on the past, which predicts lower psychological well-being (Cappeliez &

Robitaille, 2010). This suggests that the manner in which individuals self-reflect and

integrate positive and negative experiences into identity plays a role in the relationship

between meaning-making and well-being.

Meaning-making and Self-Event Connections

Evaluating the personal significance of memories is central to the construction of the life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1993). The centrality of certain events may influence the relationship between meaning-making and psychological functioning, as it signifies the importance of an event to the self. McLean and Pratt (2006) found that the most common motive for sharing memories was self-explanation. In other words, memories can serve as tools to understand the self and communicate the self to others. Thus, making connections between the self and an event is a key manner in which we make meaning out of our experiences.

A recent study examining narratives of trauma explored the relationships among event centrality (the importance of an event to the self), post-traumatic cognitions (negative thought patterns that occur following a trauma), PTSD symptomatology, and post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Barton, Boals, & Knowles, 2013). Participants completed a series of questionnaires to identify a traumatic event and to evaluate these constructs. Participants reported increased PTSD symptomatology and reduced PTG in events that were rated as highly central to the self. Associations among PTG, PTSD symptoms, and post-traumatic cognitions were only significant in events of high centrality. These findings suggest that the extent to which we relate traumatic memories to the self can predict mental health outcomes. Furthermore, if individuals do not consider traumatic events to be highly significant in their life stories, they might experience fewer PTSD symptoms. However, they are also likely to experience less growth from the event, which poses an important question: what are the implications of making meaning out of negative experiences for the self?

To examine this question, Merrill, Waters, and Fivush (2015) explored how different types of self-event connections predict the manner in which individuals integrate information into the self. First, they collected narratives of positive and negative

memories, in addition to administering questionnaire measures. Next, they coded both

traumatic and highly positive memories for self-event connections, which indicate how

individuals integrate experiences into the self. In line with their hypotheses, participants

who exhibited self-event connections that were more positive in traumatic narratives also

reported higher levels of psychological growth and identity growth and were more likely

to report lower psychological distress. Making positive self-event connections in positive

events was related to marginally higher post-traumatic growth and higher identity

commitment. These findings suggest that both the emotional tone and event type relate to

how individuals integrate information into the self.

Conversely, more negative self-event connections in trauma narratives predicted

higher levels of psychological and identity distress. In line with the findings of Waters,

Shallcross, and Fivush (2013), individuals who reported greater identity distress also

reported higher levels of psychological growth. Higher levels of meaning-making and

negative self-event connections simultaneously have negative implications for identity

distress and well-being, while also predicting greater identity and psychological growth.

These findings suggest that perhaps, experiences that are more negative and more central

to the self also provide the most potential for growth following the experiences.

Furthermore, this study strengthens the initial findings of Barton, Boals, and Knowles

(2013) in using multiple methodologies (coding and self-report) to provide support for

the relationship between self-event connections and psychological growth.

Research examining important memories outside of trauma has shown similar

patterns. Banks and Salmon (2013) asked young adults to narrate high and low points in

their lives. These narratives were then coded for positive or negative self-event

connections. Results showed that using more self-event connections was associated with

higher levels of psychopathology for individuals who tended to reason about the self in

negative ways. However, the tendency to make connections between negative

experiences and positive self-characteristics buffered against psychopathology and poor

psychological well-being in narratives of low-points. This research demonstrates that the

relationship between self-event connections and psychological functioning can be

examined in a variety of narratives outside of the literature on trauma. Importantly, this

research supports the claim that it is not the amount of autobiographical reasoning and

meaning-making that is used to process our memories, but the ways in which meaning-

making is utilized that predicts psychological functioning.

Collective Memories in Political Contexts

Much of the literature on meaning-making and the self focuses on personal

narratives, such as self-discrepant memories, high and low moments, and narratives of

personal trauma. However, other memories shape narrative understandings of the self,

including the cultural and political climate in which a person is situated (McAdams,

2006). In particular, collective memories may help individuals form opinions and develop

value sets in relation to political conflict. Nicholson (2017) proposes that looking at

narratives of individuals who live in protracted conflict may help researchers to

understand what perpetuates conflict and how individuals see themselves as implicated in

that conflict. As people share experiences that become part of the socio-cultural milieu,

these *collective memories* help to justify group positioning in order to make sense out of

the present (Nicholson, 2017).

Individuals can make sense of political memories, particularly in the context of

group conflict, by integrating a self/other dichotomy into one's worldview (Nicholson,

2017). These narratives, like those drawn from personal experiences, become part of the

life story. Nicholson (2017) interviewed Jewish Israelis and Palestinians to understand

their experiences of living in conflict zones. These narratives were then coded for themes

concerning portrayal of the other group. Jewish participants described collective

memories relating to the historical right to the land based on biblical texts, whereas

Palestinian participants tended to focus on the lack of recognition of their own

victimhood in this conflict. The meaning of the land also reflected group differences:

Jewish Israelis saw the land as a safe haven from extinction, while Palestinians reported

feelings of oppression in their home. This reveals that culture and politics play a role in

the development of life stories and that the ways in which individuals incorporate

collective memories into their life stories may fuel seemingly intractable group conflict

(Nicholson, 2017).

Similar narrative differences have been observed between groups in the United

States. McAdams and colleagues (2008) explored thematic differences of politically

charged memories in the life stories of American conservatives and liberals. They

obtained life-narrative interviews from religious and politically active adults and

analyzed the content of different scenes to explore differences between the groups

relating to authority figures and family metaphors. Liberals narrated experiences

emphasizing the lessons they learned about addressing the suffering of others and

concerns for fairness, justice, and equality. Conservatives, on the other hand, provided

narratives that reflect the values of loyalty to family, patriotism, and the importance of

strict moral authority figures. These findings draw a link between implicit narrative

identity and individuals' explicit political beliefs and religious values. Importantly, the

implicit metaphors that parents pass on to their children relate to individuals' preferences

for political authority figures (Lakoff, 2002). Thus, both personal memories and political

memories can help individuals to make meaning out of their lives and develop life stories

that are historically, culturally, and politically contextualized.

Individuals remember public events both through lived experiences and through media coverage and public interest (Brown, 1990). Furthermore, public events are often interrelated. Although political memories may be similarly important to personal memories in the construction of a life story, the public nature of political events may alter the ways in which people process and incorporate political events into their identities. In a study examining the organization of public events in long-term memory, Brown (1990) asked individuals to generate free associations in response to a series of non-political and political public events. Participants were more likely to encode facts about public events along with personal information that contextualizes when those public facts were encountered. Importantly, personal information was recalled without cues to report such information, indicating that encoding personal information in the context of the public event was an important part of remembering the event. However, non-political public events and political events differed in that non-political events were more likely to be reported with personal, contextual information, while political events were more likely to be reported with thematic information about the historical period. Thus, in exploring the ways in which individuals incorporate public events into individual identities, it is important to consider public portrayal of the event and the content of the event itself.

The tendency for individuals to provide fewer personal details in political narratives points to an interesting relationship between personal experience and media/public exposure to political events as well as historical context, which should be taken into account when differentiating personal self-discrepant memories from public self-discrepant memories. Additionally, the extent to which individuals have collectively processed and discussed political events may also impact the ways in which they make meaning out of the event. The strength and frequency of opinion sharing among group members can dictate how individuals in a group come to shape the group's collective

memory (Brown, Kouri, and Hirst, 2012). Thus, both the political context of the memory and the manner in which it is shared can impact the way it is remembered and incorporated into an individual's life story.

The Current Study

Although previous research suggests that the ways in which individuals narrate public, political events may differ from those of personal memories, little research has examined differences in meaning-making and the ways in which individuals integrate public, political information into the life story. The current project seeks to bridge this gap by examining differences in both personal and collective self-discrepant narratives. A recent collectively discrepant memory, still fresh in the minds of many Americans, is the recent election of President Donald Trump. In particular, for non-Trump voters, the outcome of the election proved to be a meaning violation. As one NY Times commentator wrote, "To say that Donald Trump's victory was a shock may qualify as the understatement of the century. The polls were wrong. The experts were wrong. I was wrong" (Wehner, 2016). President Trump's election violated both liberal individuals' personal worldviews, as well as many individuals' understandings and trust in the media, suggesting that many people are likely still processing and making meaning out of this event.

Hypothesis 1. Individuals incorporate personal information into public, political narratives, but tend to provide fewer personal details in non-political narratives (Brown, 1990). Thus, I hypothesize that individuals will report more self-event connections in a personal self-discrepant narrative than in a narrative describing their experiences learning about the election results.

Hypothesis 2. I anticipate that across narrative condition, positive associations among meaning-making, self-event connections, and well-being will emerge, as the

political context and culture within which individuals grow up help to shape the narrative

characteristics of individuals' life stories (McAdams et al., 2008; Nicholson, 2017).

Hypothesis 3. As meaning-making functions as a coping mechanism between

reminiscence and well-being in order to preserve self-continuity and meaning (Cappeliez

& Robitaille, 2010), I predict that across narrative condition, meaning-making will

mediate the relationship between identity distress and psychological growth such that

greater levels of identity distress will reflect greater levels of meaning-making, which

will predict higher levels of psychological growth.

Hypothesis 4. As higher levels of meaning-making have been shown to predict

greater levels of PTSD and poorer psychological functioning (Waters, Shallcross &

Fivush, 2013), I anticipate that meaning-making will mediate the relationship between

identity distress and well-being, such that there is a positive relationship between identity

distress and meaning-making and a negative relationship between meaning-making and

well-being.

Hypothesis 5. As Barton, Boals, & Knowles (2013) found that post-traumatic

growth, PTSD symptoms, and posttraumatic cognitions were significant only in events of

high centrality, I predict that event centrality will moderate the relationship between

meaning-making and psychological growth such that the relationship will only be

significant if the individual considers the event to be highly central to the self.

Hypothesis 6. As individuals showed increased PTSD symptomatology in events

that were highly central to the self (Barton, Boals, & Knowles, 2013), I hypothesize that

event centrality will positively correlate with psychopathological symptoms and

negatively correlate with psychological well-being.

Hypothesis 7. Making connections between negative experiences and positive

self-characteristics buffers against psychopathology and poor well-being (Banks &

Salmon, 2013). Thus, I predict that in both narratives, positive self-event connections will positively correlate with psychological well-being and psychological growth, and negatively correlate with psychopathological symptoms.

Hypothesis 8. I anticipate that negative self-event connections will positively correlate with psychopathological symptoms, in line with the findings of Merrill, Waters, and Fivush (2015).

Hypothesis 9. As finding positivity in negative experiences has been shown to predict higher levels of psychological well-being and psychological growth (McAdams et al., 2001; McLean & Breen, 2009), I expect that redemption sequences will correlate with psychological well-being and psychological growth.

Hypothesis 10. In line with these findings, I hypothesize that contamination sequences will negatively correlate with psychological well-being and psychological growth.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty-nine students from Hamilton College (117 women, 37 men, 2 gender non-binary, 1 gender queer) took part in the current study. Sample size was determined via g-power analysis ($\alpha = .05$, $\beta = .80$). The sample was predominantly White (66.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (15.1%), Bi-racial (10%), Hispanic/Latinx (5%), and Black/African-American (4.4%). Participants were recruited via email, announcements made in courses, and through the SONA system, which advertises studies for psychology students. Participants were screened based on political identification and data were only included for those who identified as political liberals (i.e., scored "centrist" or higher on an item assessing political affiliation). Participants received either

one point of extra credit in a psychology course or five dollars as compensation for

participating in the current study.

Materials

The Centrality of Events Scale. This 16-item questionnaire measured the extent

to which an individual considered an experience to be central to his/her sense of self and

life story (Bernstein & Rubin, 2006). Participants rated their agreement with a number of

claims (e.g., "I feel that this event has become a central part of my life story") regarding

the centrality of the narrated event to their identities on a 5-point Likert-type scale

ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

Depression and Anxiety Symptomatology Scale. This 21-item questionnaire

measured current symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS; Lovibond &

Lovibond, 1995). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which statements apply

to them on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3

(applied to me very much, or most of the time). Scores on this measure do not reflect

Major Depression or Generalized Anxiety Disorder diagnoses, but capture depressive and

anxious cognitions and behaviors.

Identity Distress Survey. This 10-item questionnaire measured the degree to

which a participant has been upset, distressed, or worried about a series of life issues

(Berman, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2004) Items included categories of life issues such as

"values or beliefs" and "friendships." The first nine items utilized a 5-point Likert-type

scale that ranges from 1 (none at all) to 5 (very severely). The final item asked how long

the individual has felt distress as a result of these issues as a whole, with responses

ranging from 1 (never of less than a month) to 5 (more than 12 months).

Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB). This 42-item questionnaire assessed a

number of facets of psychological well-being including self-acceptance, connections to

others, autonomy in thought and action, management of the environment, goal pursuit,

life purpose, and personal growth and development (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Participants

rated statements on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating

stronger agreement and better well-being and lower scores indicating stronger

disagreement and poorer well-being.

Personal Growth Inventory. This 21-item questionnaire was adapted from

Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) to assess

growth following a challenging experience. Participants responded to a series of

statements using a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (I did not experience this

change as a result of this event) to 5 (I experienced this change to a very great degree as a

result of my crisis). Higher scores indicated higher levels of growth following the event.

Importantly, the words "crisis" and "trauma" were removed from each item as

individuals' narratives did not necessarily contain memories of trauma or crisis.

Procedure

Participants recruited via email were invited to the lab to participate in the current

study after being screened based on political affiliation. Participants recruited via SONA

were not screened and participants of all political affiliations took part in the study.

However, data for non-liberal participants were excluded (i.e., responses including

"extremely conservative", "moderately conservative", "mildly conservative"). First,

participants were told that the current study is interested in how people narrate certain

experiences in their lives. Next, they were asked to respond to both online questionnaire

measures and to two separate narrative prompts. Participants completed the study in a lab

alongside other participants with each computer separated by terminals to ensure privacy.

All narratives and questionnaires were administered using Qualtrics, an online

survey platform. First, participants were asked to complete a measure assessing

psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This questionnaire was administered

first to avoid the potential for negative mood induced by sharing challenging memories to

affect the participants' self-reported well-being. For the first narrative prompt,

participants were then asked to describe a personally challenging memory, inconsistent

with their current sense of self that is vivid, personally important, and highly memorable.

Following this they were instructed to complete a survey assessing psychological growth

since the event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and a measure assessing how central the

event was to their lives (Bernstein & Rubin, 2006). In the second narrative prompt, they

were asked to describe their experience learning about Trump's election and to consider

how the results had affected them. Immediately following this narrative, they were

instructed to complete the same surveys assessing psychological growth and event

centrality. Next, they completed the Depressive and Anxious Symptomatology Scale

(DASS) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) and the IDS (Berman, Montgomery, & Kurtines,

2004). Last, participants were asked to complete demographic information including their

gender, racial/ethnic identity, class year, age, self-reported level of political activism, and

political affiliation.

Narrative Coding

Narratives were coded by the author and a research assistant, who were both

blind to identifying information on each subject. Three different coding systems were

used: meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006), self-event connections (McLean &

Fournier, 2008), and redemption and contamination sequences (McAdams et al., 2001).

In accordance with McLean and Pratt's (2006) Meaning-making coding system,

narratives in which a lesson was reported were given a score of 1. In these narratives,

participants indicated that they had acted in relation to a specific thought. However, these

narratives did not reflect complex thought. Narratives that expressed vague meanings

with more sophistication than lessons were given a score of 2. Narratives that showed

complex insights were given a score of 3. These narratives looked beyond the event to

relate it to understandings of themselves and their relationship to the world. Narratives

with none of these characteristics were given a score of 0. Inter-rater agreement for 20%

of the narratives was excellent with an intra-class correlation coefficient of .89.

Next, narratives were coded for redemption and contamination sequences

following McAdams and colleagues' model (2001). A narrative had to transform from a

negative-affect state to a positive-affect state to receive a score of +1. The negative

situation needed to turn positive or produce some positive outcome. Reference to

redemptive imagery needed to be explicit. The narrative would receive a score of 0 if it

did not contain a redemptive sequence. Contamination sequences were scored similarly in

that a narrative would receive a score of -1 in the presence of a shift from a positive scene

to a negative outcome. The narrative would receive a score of 0 if there were no clear

account of contamination imagery. Redemption and contamination sequences were coded

on a per-narrative basis and inter-rater agreement for the presence or absence of a

sequence in 20% of the narratives was kappa .79.

Finally, narratives were coded for self-event connections using Merrill, Fivush,

and Waters' (2015) coding scheme. Self-event connections were characterized as explicit

connections that the individual draws between the working self and one's experiences.

Coders counted the number of self-event connections made in each narrative. Self-event

connections could relate to current dispositions ("I am the type of person who…"),

current values ("I believe that this was wrong of me…"), current outlook on the world ("I

see the world differently now…"), personal growth/maturity ("This has shaped my

development as a…"), and/or intimacy ("I now share a connection with my friends

who…"). Next, self-event connections were coded for valence: positive or negative

emotional implications for the self. A self-event connection was coded as neutral if there was neither a positive nor negative connection (not enough information to tell), as positive if the person positively evaluated the self (e.g., a positive trait or outcome realized from the experience), and as negative if the person negatively evaluated the self (e.g., a connection that results in a negative outcome for the self). Each narrative received a total positive self-event connection score, neutral self-event connection score, and a negative self-event connection score in addition to a summed self-event connection score. The number of self-event connections was calculated on a per narrative basis and inter-rater agreement for the total number of connections per narrative was kappa .76.

Results

Overview of Analyses

Descriptive statistics for the three coding measures are presented first, followed by hypotheses relevant to meaning-making, self-event connections, redemption and contamination sequencing, event centrality, and political activism. Data in the personal condition showed greater variability in emotional tone and event type, suggesting that there is more noise in the personal condition. Therefore, the analyses presented were largely separated by narrative condition.

Table 1

Frequencies for the Three Coding Measures Separated by Narrative Condition

Coding Variable	Score	Personal %	Political %
Meaning-making	0	45.3%	45.3%
	1	20.1%	15.1%
	2	22.6%	24.5%
	3	11.9%	15.1%
Redemption/contamination	Contamination	11.3%	18.2%

	None	74.2%	67.3%
	Redemption	14.5%	14.5%
Positive Self-Event Connections	0	63.5%	83.0%
	1	32.7%	13.8%
	2	3.1%	2.5%
Neutral Self-Event Connections	0	85.5%	79.9%
	1	13.2%	16.4%
	2	0.6%	2.5%
Negative Self-Event Connections	0	69.8%	56.0%
	1	25.8%	34.0%
	2	3.1%	8.8%
	3	0.6%	0.6%

Meaning-making

Hypothesis 1a. It was hypothesized that meaning-making, self-event connections, and well-being would positively correlate with one another. A Pearson correlation in the personal condition indicated that self-event connections ($M = .88$, $SD = .82$) significantly positively correlated with meaning-making ($M = 1.01$, $SD = 1.08$), $r(159) = .43$, $p < .001$. Contrary to my hypothesis, self-event connections did not significantly correlate with well-being ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .49$), $r(159) = .04$, $p = .606$, nor did meaning-making, $r(159) = .05$, $p = .518$. The same pattern was observed in the political condition. Self-event connections ($M = .96$, $SD = .88$) significantly correlated with meaning-making ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 1.14$), $r(159) = .66$, $p < .001$. However self-event connections did not significantly correlate with well-being, $r(159) = .07$, $p = .375$, nor did meaning-making, $r(159) = .06$, $p = .456$.

Hypothesis 1b. To follow up, it was hypothesized that meaning-making would significantly correlate with well-being, only in events of high centrality to the self. Thus, event centrality was examined as a moderator of the relation between meaning-making and well-being. This hypothesis was examined only in the political condition. In the second step of the regression analysis, the interaction term between meaning-making (in the political condition) and event centrality was entered, and it explained a marginally significant increase in variance in well-being, $R^2 = .031$, $\beta = .52$, $p = .053$. As can be seen in Figure 1, the hypothesis was supported, with meaning-making positively predicting well-being in events of high centrality.

Figure 1. Moderation of the relation between meaning-making and well-being by event centrality (plotted at ±1 SD from the mean).

Hypothesis 1c. It was initially hypothesized that meaning-making would mediate the relation between identity distress and well-being across narrative conditions, such that higher levels of identity distress would predict higher levels of meaning-making, which would predict lower levels of well-being. However, as data in the personal narratives was inconsistent and difficult to analyze, analyses were conducted separately. A hierarchical regression and Sobel's tests revealed this model to be significant only in the political condition. Well-being was predicted by identity distress, $\beta = -.44$, $p < .001$, but this relation was partially mediated by the inclusion of meaning-making, $\beta = .16$, $p = .025$, as confirmed by a Sobel's test, $Z = 2.00$, $p = .045$. Identity distress remained a significant negative predictor of well-being, $\beta = -.47$, $p < .001$, suggesting that meaning-making offers a positive pathway that mitigates the impact of distress on well-being. In the personal condition, meaning-making did not significantly reduce the strength of the relation between identity distress and well-being, $\beta = .06$, $p = .413$.

Hypothesis 1d. Given the previous mediation finding and the interaction of meaning-making by event centrality on well-being, it was further hypothesized that a moderated mediation would exist such that meaning-making would mediate the relation between distress and well-being, but only when event centrality is high. In order to test this hypothesis, a moderated mediation, as shown in Figure 2, was conducted using Hayes' Process Model 14 (Hayes, 2018). The results of this analysis can be seen in Table 2. As can be seen in Figure 3, bootstrapping with 5000 samples confirmed that at high levels of event centrality, meaning-making mediated the relation between distress and well-being, CI [.0111, .1156], but not when event centrality was low CI [-.0774, .0124] or medium CI [-.0041, .0524]. The difference between direct and indirect effects can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 2. Conditional Process Model 14 corresponding to the meaning-making study in

conceptual and statistical form.

Table 2

Coefficients for the Conditional Process Model in Figure 2

| Predictor | Consequent | | | | | |
| | Y(Meaning-Making) | | | Y(Well-Being) | | |
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Distress	0.421	0.147	.005	-0.441	0.061	<.001
Meaning-Making				0.051	0.031	.109
Event Centrality				0.035	0.043	.415
MM x Event				0.110	0.033	.001
Centrality						
Constant	-0.960	0.348	.007	5.383	0.142	<.001
	$R^2 = .049$			$R^2 = .276$		
	$F(1, 157) = 8.147, p = .005$			$F(4, 154) = 14.690, p < .001$		
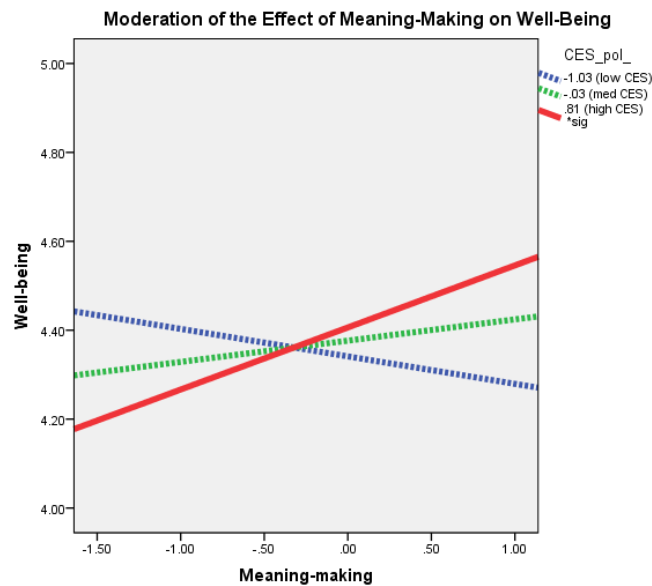
Figure 3. A visual representation of the moderation of the effect of meaning-making on

well-being by event centrality, using the 16th, 50th and 84th percentiles on each predictor.

Figure 4. A visual representation of the conditional indirect and direct effect of distress

on well-being, with the indirect effect operating through meaning-making.

Hypothesis 1e. A second hypothesized mediation model stated that identity distress would positively predict meaning-making, which would positively predict psychological growth across narrative condition. Analyses were conducted separately for the political and personal conditions. A Pearson correlation revealed that identity distress ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .60$) did not significantly correlate with psychological growth ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.15$) in the personal condition, $r(159) = .08$, $p = .320$. Therefore, a mediation analysis was not conducted for the personal condition.

The hypothesized mediation was marginally supported in the political condition, using a hierarchical regression and Sobel's tests. Psychological growth was predicted by identity distress, $\beta = .37$, $p < .001$, but this relation was partially mediated by the inclusion of meaning-making in the model, $\beta = .19$, $p = .014$, as confirmed by a Sobel's test, $Z = 1.88$, $p = .060$. Identity distress remained a significant predictor of psychological growth, $\beta = .33$, $p < .001$, suggesting that meaning making accounted for some of the variance in this relation, but not all of it.

Hypothesis 1f. Given the moderated mediation found in hypothesis 1d, it was further predicted that a moderated mediation would exist such that meaning-making would help to explain the relation between distress and psychological growth, and that this mediation would function when event centrality is high. In order to test this hypothesis, a moderated mediation was conducted using Hayes's Process Model 14 (Hayes, 2018). Bootstrapping with 5000 samples did not reveal a significant moderated mediation, such that event centrality did not significantly moderate the relation between meaning-making and psychological growth at high event centrality 95% CIs [-.0544, .0690], medium event centrality [-.0351, .0474], nor low event centrality [-.0434, .0548].

Self-Event Connections

Hypothesis 2a. It was predicted that personal narratives would contain significantly greater amounts of self-event connections than political narratives. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, a correlated groups t-test that compared self-event connections in the personal condition ($M = .89$, $SD = .82$) and the political condition (M = .97, SD = .88) was statistically nonsignificant, $t(156) = -.99$, $p = .322$.

Hypothesis 2b. It was hypothesized that in both narrative conditions, positive self-event connections would positively correlate with psychological growth. The hypothesis was partially supported. Across narrative condition, positive self-events predicted higher/greater psychological growth, $r(157) = .25$, $p = .001$. However, when split by narrative condition, only the political narratives showed a positive relation between positive self-event connections and psychological growth, $r(157) = .379$, $p < .001$. The relation between positive self-events and psychological growth in the personal condition was statistically nonsignificant, $r(157) = .13$, $p = .092$.

Hypothesis 2c. It was further hypothesized that positive self-event connections would negatively correlate with depressive and anxious symptomatology and that negative self-event connections would show the opposite pattern. Positive self-event connections did not significantly correlate with depressive and anxious symptomatology, $r(157) = -.05$, $p = .501$, nor did negative self-event connections, $r(157) = .10$, $p = .214$.

Redemption and Contamination

Hypothesis 3a. It was hypothesized that those who used redemption sequences in their narratives would show significantly higher psychological growth and well-being than those who had contamination sequences or the absence of either in their narratives. A one-way ANOVA was used to test this hypothesis in each narrative condition. In the political condition, psychological growth did not significantly differ amongst redemption ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.18$), contamination ($M = 2.31$, $SD = .80$), and no sequencing ($M =$

2.12, $SD = .90$), $F(2, 156) = 1.74$, $p = .179$. Well-being did not significantly differ

amongst redemption ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .37$), contamination ($M = 4.35$, $SD = .55$), or no

sequencing ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .49$), $F(2, 156) = .90$, $p = .409$.

A one-way ANOVA on psychological growth as a function of redemption and

contamination sequencing in the personal narrative condition was statistically significant,

$F(2, 156) = 10.79$, $p < .001$. The strength of the relation, as indexed by eta^2, was .14,

indicating a medium to large effect. A Tukey HSD test indicated that mean psychological

growth was significantly higher for participants who reported a redemption sequence in

their narratives ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.15$) 95% CIs (3.12, 4.11) than those without any

sequence ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.06$) 95% CIs [2.37, 2.75] and those with a contamination

sequence ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.17$) 95% CIs [1.65, 2.81]. Well-being for those with

redemption sequences ($M = 4.49$, $SD = .44$) 95% CIs [4.30, 4.68] did not significantly

differ for those with no narrative sequences ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .51$) 95% CIs [4.29, 4.47] or

for those with a contamination sequence ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .37$) 95% CIs [4.34, 4.71].

Event Centrality

Hypothesis 4a. It was hypothesized that event centrality would positively

correlate with depressive and anxious symptomatology and negatively correlate with

well-being. A Pearson correlation was run for each narrative condition, revealing no

significant relation between event centrality and well-being, $r(159) = .01$, $p = .880$, nor

between event centrality and depressive and anxious symptomatology $r(159) = -.02$, $p = .$

810 in the personal condition. In the political condition, there was also no significant

relation between event centrality and well-being, $r(159) = -.04$, $p = .606$, nor between

event centrality and depressive and anxious symptomatology, $r(159) = .13$, $p = .104$.

Political Activism

Hypothesis 5a. As meaning-making can function as a tool to guide future behavior (Mutluturk & Tekcan, 2015), it was hypothesized post-hoc that in the political condition, meaning-making and positive self-event connections would positively correlate with political activism. A Pearson's Correlation revealed that meaning-making ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 1.14$) significantly positively correlated with political activism ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.15$), $r(159) = .28$, $p < .001$, as did positive self-event connections ($M = .19$, $SD = .45$), $r(159) = .23$, $p = .004$.

Discussion

The aims of the current study were as follows: 1) to compare narrative tendencies in personal self-discrepant events to those employed when narrating a collectively discrepant event, 2) to understand under what conditions meaning-making and self-event connections are useful for the self, and 3) to uncover the implications of meaning-making for well-being, growth, and activism. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the number of self-event connections were equally prevalent in both narrative conditions. Furthermore, predictions based on combining across both conditions were largely nonsignificant. However, when split by narrative condition, relations among meaning-making, psychological growth, well-being, and distress were largely supported in in the political condition. In the political condition, a framework with which to understand meaning-making's function as a buffer against the negative effects of distress on well-being was supported.

How Do Personal and Political Discrepant Memories Differ?

With respect to the first aim, personal and political narrative conditions showed no significant differences in the number of self-event connections reported. This contradicts earlier research, which showed that individuals tend to encode non-political events with more personal information (Brown, 1990). There are several potential

explanations for the lack of significant differences. First, to better capture differences between personal and collective narratives, it may have been better to include multiple personal and collective narrative conditions. Brown (1990) asked individuals to respond to a series of 32 political and non-political event prompts, increasing the variation and quantity of personal information reported. These included political events such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as well as U.S. boycotts of the Moscow Olympics, whereas nonpolitical events included the Jonestown suicides and Mother Theresa winning the Nobel Prize. Furthermore, Brown (1990) controlled for the effect of time on recall abilities, with every event having taken place within the past four years. In the current study, there was no time constraint in the personal condition, and individuals described events ranging from early childhood to experiences within the past year, which may have created more variation in the personal narrative data.

The similarity in number of self-event connections in the personal and political narrative conditions, may also highlight the uniquely personal nature of the 2016 presidential election as a political event. Trump's threats to repeal DACA, his sexist rhetoric towards female colleagues, and his ban of trans individuals in the military threaten feelings of safety for many groups of minorities. Furthermore, the unexpected nature of the event and the ways in which it violated liberal individuals' worldviews may distinguish this political event from others. Therefore, although my findings were not in line with my initial hypothesis, they may, in fact, underscore the unique nature of the election as simultaneously political and collective as well as highly personal.

There was only one finding that was significant in the personal condition and not in the political. Individuals who narrated with redemption sequences reported significantly higher psychological growth than those who narrated with no sequencing or with contamination sequences. This finding is interesting given the fact that the

hypotheses related to self-event connections and meaning-making were supported only in the political condition. Why would redemption and contamination sequences show a different pattern in the personal condition? One potential explanation may be that the distribution of redemption and contamination sequences was skewed, with the majority of participants showing neither redemption nor contamination sequencing in both narrative conditions. The higher levels of variation in event type in the personal condition may have been advantageous in this case, allowing for detection of a significant effect in the personal and not the political condition. Furthermore, Blumer (1969) suggests that meaning creation is in a constant state of transformation. In relation to the political condition, it may take more time before redemption and contamination sequencing about the election will positively impact individuals' psychological growth and well-being.

When looking at the two different narrative conditions, two core observations are suggested to help frame the findings. It appears that the personal narratives showed more variation than the political narratives in event type and time period. Secondly, as aforementioned, some of President Trump's policies may impact individuals on a day-to-day basis, suggesting that the election may be more personal and distressing than other political memories and that this collective memory may not be representative of other political or collectively experienced events. Thus, we cannot pinpoint differences in the ways that individuals narrate personal versus collective experiences. To better address this question and to capture differences in narrative tendencies, future research should collect multiple types of personal and collective narratives and control for variation created by event-specific factors.

Despite the lack of findings in the political condition, it is still notable that the hypothesis was supported in the personal condition. Individuals who made positive meaning in negative circumstances showed more psychological growth following the

experience. Brockmeier (2009) posits that the narrative construal of meaning can help extend agency into the external world. Perhaps, in narrating personal experiences, individuals who used redemptive sequences made meaning with more agency and perceived control. The benefits of redemption associated with perceived control would likely be difficult to find in an event like the election over which the individual had very little control. Although the study did not find concrete differences in the ways in which individuals narrated personal versus collective experiences, it appears that the ways in which these narrative tendencies relate to the self and well-being may vary by event type, and that perceived agency provides one potential avenue for understanding this pattern of results.

How do Meaning-making and Self-Event Connections Shape Responses to Distress?

Findings regarding the relations among meaning-making, distress, well-being, and psychological growth helped to clarify the role of meaning-making in response to distress. It was initially found, contrary to my predictions, neither meaning-making nor self-event connections significantly correlated with well-being in the personal and political conditions. The lack of finding was surprising, given that Banks and Salmon (2013) found that making positive self-event connections helped to preserve well-being in narratives of high and low points. One potential explanation may be that individuals did not narrate with high amounts of self-event connections. The average number of positive self-event connections in the political condition was 0.19, compared to 1.50 in low point narratives in the aforementioned study. Furthermore, individuals in the high and low point study reported mean event centrality scores of 4.53 for low point narratives and 4.83 for high point narratives, whereas in the current study, mean event centrality scores were 2.73 and 2.34 for personal and political narratives respectively. Perhaps individuals engaged in less meaning-making and self-event connections in these

narratives because many individuals in this sample did not consider either the election or their personal narratives as self-defining.

To examine the role of event centrality in the relation between meaning-making and well-being, a moderation analysis was conducted post-hoc. The results showed that event centrality moderates the relation between meaning-making and well-being, such that meaning-making and well-being positively correlate in narratives of high event centrality. This finding supports prior research showing that the benefits emerging from meaning-making were only seen in events considered highly central to the self, as Barton, Boals, and Knowles (2013) found that growth and distress significantly correlated in events of high centrality. Taken together, these findings indicate that negative events that are considered highly central to the self produce both negative and positive outcomes for the self. The significance of these negative events may lead to greater rumination, and as a result, higher levels of distress. However, the greater time and energy spent processing such events also predicts greater engagement in meaning-making, which links to improved well-being and psychological functioning.

The literature regarding the relation between meaning-making and well-being has been mixed. One study supported the use of meaning-making as a coping mechanism, as it helped individuals to preserve well-being in the face of negative and distressing information (Cappeliez & Robitaille, 2010). However, it was also shown that meaning-making correlated with higher levels of PTSD symptomatology (Waters, Shallcross, & Fivush, 2013). To better tease apart the different relations among meaning-making, well-being, and growth, and to address the lack of consistency in prior research, I predicted two different mediations: one in which meaning-making would mediate the relation between distress and well-being and another in which meaning-making would mediate the relation between distress and psychological growth.

Given the finding that individuals showed greater psychological growth in events considered more distressing, I expected a positive pathway from distress to meaning-making and a positive pathway from meaning-making to growth. This hypothesized mediation was supported. For the second mediation, I expected that again distress would positively predict meaning-making, but that meaning-making would negatively predict well-being, as ruminating too much on distressing experiences has been linked to lowered well-being (Newman & Nezlek, 2017). The second mediation was also found to be significant. However, contrary to my prediction, meaning-making positively predicted well-being, mitigating the negative effects of distress on well-being. It is notable that in both mediation models, the effect of distress on well-being remained significant. However, these findings suggest that meaning-making offers a positive pathway by which individuals process negative experiences as a means of producing growth and preserving well-being. Importantly, these mediation findings make a strong case for meaning-making as a tool to negotiate between one's experiences and one's sense of self (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012).

To better understand the ways in which meaning-making and event centrality affect the relation between distress and well-being, a potential moderated mediation was examined post-hoc. It was found that distress positively predicted meaning-making, which positively predicted well-being, but that this mediation was only significant in events considered highly central to the self. This moderated mediation provides a framework that enables us to understand the context in which meaning-making is beneficial. It indicates that although distress significantly negatively associates with well-being, there are individuals for whom the effect of distress on well-being was reduced. Specifically, meaning-making was only beneficial for those who considered the election to be highly central to their life stories.

This finding supports Cappeliez and Robitaille's (2015) proposition that meaning-making serves as a coping mechanism, such that finding meaning helps to preserve well-being, and clarifies it by showing that this process may only be beneficial to individuals who place great significance on the specific event. Importantly, meaning-making in the political condition significantly reduced the effect of generalized identity distress on general psychological well-being. Perhaps individuals who made meaning when processing the election also make meaning similarly in other discrepant or negative events. In other words, meaning-making in this single event may capture a broader trend in individuals' narrative tendencies. This finding also highlights an important question in the field of meaning-making research: do events elicit meaning-making or is meaning-making a characteristic of certain individuals?

Research has shown that people tend to make meaning differently in positive and negative events (Merrill, Waters, & Fivush, 2015). Additionally, the current study highlights that event centrality plays an important role in determining the usefulness of meaning-making for the self. However, it has also been suggested that individuals who possess certain traits such as flexibility in adapting to situational demands may tend to make more meaning (Pasupathi, 2013). Understanding the interaction between personality and event type is key to addressing this question. A recent study found that in narratives of low points, finding resolution in a low point narrative positively related to well-being, while this relation was not observed in self-defining or turning point narratives (McLean, Pasupathi, Greenhoot, & Fivush, 2016). This finding suggests that various aspects of personality and narrative style emerge in different types of events. The current within subjects study examines the role of event type in determining meaning-making strategies. However, it is important for future research to consider the roles that

event type and personality play in determining the relations between narrative tendencies and well-being.

An exploratory moderated mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether event centrality would similarly moderate the mediation found for distress, meaning-making, and psychological growth. The proposed model was non-significant, suggesting that meaning-making helped to explain the positive relation between distress and growth independent of event centrality. One potential explanation may be that while this study measured psychological well-being more generally, it looked at psychological growth specific to the narrated event. Therefore, meaning-making out of the election narrative and psychological growth related to the same narrative would correlate regardless of the event's centrality to the self. Prior research related to growth, meaning-making, and event centrality has shown mixed support for the importance of event centrality to growth. Barton, Boals, and Knowles (2013) found that the relation between PTSD symptoms and growth existed only in events of high centrality. In contrast, Waters, Shallcross, and Fivush (2013) observed associations among post-traumatic growth, meaning-making, and PTSD symptoms independent of event centrality. Another potential explanation is that measures assessing post-traumatic growth can be seen as a form of meaning-making in that individuals must self-reflect on the significance of the event and the ways in which it has shaped the self moving forward. Thus, individuals engaging in meaning-making about the election without being prompted to narrate in such a way would very likely report higher levels of growth.

I was also interested in the role that event centrality plays in predicting variables related to well-being and the self. Given that individuals showed increased PTSD symptomatology in events considered highly central to the self, I expected that event centrality would positively correlate with psychopathological symptoms and negatively

correlate with well-being (Barton, Boals, & Knowles, 2013). However, neither of these hypotheses was supported. This analysis showed similar limitations to the first hypothesis that examined the relations among meaning-making, self-event connections, and well-being, as I correlated event centrality, a self-report variable related to a single event, with more generalized scales measuring depressive and anxious symptomatology and psychological well-being. Therefore, even though the election may have significantly impacted individuals' well-being, these measures did not capture distress directly linked to the election. Furthermore, the lack of findings related to this hypothesis may in fact strengthen the aforementioned mediation models. Individuals who considered the election central to their identities showed positive relations between meaning-making and well-being. While event centrality is linked to distress, it is also linked to increased positive processing of the experience.

In line with prior research, the ways in which individuals made connections between the self and events were significantly linked to perceived growth from the experience. The current study found that making positive self-event connections in the election narratives significantly correlated with psychological growth from the same event. Similarly, Merrill, Waters, and Fivush (2015) found that participants who exhibited more positive self-event connections reported higher levels of psychological and identity growth in traumatic events. However, the aforementioned study also found that positive self-event connections significantly negatively correlated with distress, which the current study was unable to support. The current study found no significant relation between positive or negative self-event connections and depressive and anxious symptomatology. Similarly, Banks and Salmon (2013) failed to find significant relations between self-event connections and depressive and anxious symptomatology using the same measurement tool. One potential explanation is that Merrill, Waters, and Fivush

(2015) measured trait level anxiety, while the DASS measures current symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Future research should use multiple measures of psychological distress in order to capture both state and trait characteristics to better understand this relation. Furthermore, Pasupathi (2013) suggests that finding positive meaning may take time to show positive outcomes for the self. The election narrative captures meaning-making in a single snapshot only one year after the election. Collecting data at a single time point does not tell us how levels of distress have changed over time, and it is unclear whether this meaning was newly arrived at or whether its effects will last. In order to see reductions in psychological distress and to study changes in meaning-making, particularly given the widely publicized nature of this event, future research should collect narratives of this event at multiple time points.

What are the Implications of Meaning-making for Well-being, the Self, and Activism?

According to sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969), "meaning creation is a collaborative venture, the product of interaction in particular settings." Although the current study was unable to provide specific information as to how collaborative and individual processing differ, it does suggest that making meaning in a collectively discrepant event can help to preserve well-being in the face of distress. One individual exemplifies this by making a positive connection between him/herself and the negative event: "I am much more passionate about my own beliefs now and talking to people who are different than me" (Participant 33). This participant also identifies that passion for his/her own beliefs has been an important factor in directing conversations with differently minded individuals. Evidently, not only has this perspective positively influenced this individual's well-being, it has also influenced the ways in which he/she has interacted with others moving forward.

How might this sort of meaning-making predict political activism? The relations among meaning-making, positive self-event connections, and self-reported political activism were examined post-hoc. It was found that both meaning-making and positive self-event connections significantly positively correlated with political activism. These findings suggest that individuals who made more meaning and connected the self more positively to the event saw themselves as more politically involved over the past year than those who did not. It is important to note that the direction of the relationship cannot be inferred and another explanation may be that individuals who are more politically engaged may have naturally made more meaning out of the event. Regardless of the direction of the relationship, this finding highlights that the importance of understanding how individuals narratively processed the election may extend beyond individual's well-being to how individuals are able to create change and impact the world.

These findings may help to inform the ways in which we discuss discrepant or negative experiences in activism work. For example, a recent study in a sample of education activists found that one of the major contributing factors to activist burnout is the deterioration of psychological and emotional well-being (Gorski & Cher, 2015). It was further shown that individuals who made negative meaning out of their positions, and became hopeless, were more likely to experience burnout and withdraw from activism. Participants in the study identified a common dialogue that exists among activists that diminishes self-care as indulgent, resulting in a "culture of martyrdom." These findings highlight the importance of dialogue in creating the meaning behind activism work. Furthermore, the types of meaning created can have impact on individuals' abilities to participate in activism and on their own well-being.

A recent study in a population of Cambodian community leaders who survived the Khmer Rouge genocide found that both meaning-making and engagement in

community activism were important factors in their ability to grow and recover (Uy &

Okubo, 2015). Specifically, individuals identified that disclosing and reconstructing their

trauma narratives significantly improved their distress symptoms and enabled them to

engage in community activism. Importantly, meaning-making served as the means by

which individuals who experienced hardship saw themselves as leaders and activists, and

continued their important work supporting others in their communities. These studies,

together with the current study, underscore the importance of meaning-making to both

individual well-being *and* political engagement. Future research should further examine

these relations, to understand the best ways to foster productive conversations around

politics and activism.

Limitations and Future Research

Although these findings helped to clarify divided research on the effects of

meaning-making and added valuable information to the literature on discrepant

experiences, the current study had some limitations that future researchers should

address. First, data in the personal condition were much less consistent, painting a less

coherent picture of the relations among meaning-making, well-being, and distress. The

narrative prompt may have been too broad, as it did not specify a particular time frame or

emotional valence. Furthermore, the election was a collective event that happened *to* the

country, and could be likened to a national trauma for liberal individuals. However,

individuals narrated discrepant memories of both trauma and transgression in the

personal condition. By this, I mean that participants described experiences in which

something discrepant happened *to* them (trauma) or experiences in which they acted in

ways that were discrepant from their "normal self" (transgression). A recent study found

that traumas and transgressions show differing patterns of narration, such that memory

telling was more predictive of growth in transgressions while incremental theory (the

belief that personality can change) predicted growth in traumas (Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013). Perhaps, as the current study showed a wider array of types of discrepant memories in the personal condition, it was difficult to detect relations among meaning-making, well-being, and self-event connections. Future research should better match collective and personal discrepant memories both in terms of the time of occurrence and event type (trauma vs. transgression) in order to reduce noise in the personal data set and to better tease apart the role that collaboration plays in shaping meaning-making.

Another limitation of the current study was the homogeneity of the sample. Participants were predominantly white, moderately liberal, and attend an elite liberal arts institution. Therefore, the current study's findings are not generalizable to all Americans identifying as politically liberal. A consequence of this limitation is that the data may not capture individuals most affected by Trump's policy changes. Meaning-making may be beneficial to a population that is overwhelmingly unaffected on a day-to-day basis by Trump's policies, but it is unclear if it is also beneficial for those most directly impacted. Sales, Merrill, and Fivush (2013) found that meaning-making was positively associated with depression and distress among at-risk African-American girls, suggesting that meaning-making may not be helpful in all populations. Interestingly, a recent study examining the effectiveness of narrative therapy in a population of individuals with unresolved traumas found that participants initially showed increases in negative affect compared to a control group, but after combining across the 6 time points, showed significant decreases in negative affect compared to the control group (Pascual-Leone et al., 2016). These findings indicate that perhaps meaning-making may take time to show positive effects, and importantly, can be learned as a coping skill. Perhaps a longitudinal study could track changes in meaning-making and well-being over time, particularly in

populations that have shown initially negative relationships between meaning-making and well-being. This study would help to clarify the evolving nature of meaning in our lives and generalize the current study's findings to a broader demographic.

The current study found that meaning-making has the capacity to reduce the impact of distress on well-being. It was additionally linked with political activism over the course of the past year, which suggests that meaning-making may benefit individual's emotional well-being as well as foster benevolent actions. However, it is unclear why certain individuals make meaning more than others do. Although meaning-making styles have been linked to certain personality characteristics such as low neuroticism, meaning-making may be a skill that an individual can acquire over the course of his/her lifetime (Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013). Given that meaning-making and positive self-event connections have been linked to beneficial outcomes for the self, it would be interesting to examine the effectiveness of an intervention that teaches individuals how to use these narrative tools. In particular, if only certain individuals tend to use meaning-making, perhaps community narration might inspire meaning-making in others.

Stapleton and Wilson (2016) examined the role of shared narratives as a resource for sense-making. Participants from two different urban communities gathered to discuss political processes in Ireland and the impact of the Belfast Agreement of 1998 on their own lives. This study found that when engaging in community dialogue, these groups followed similar narrative patterns and tended to narrate their respective groups as the protagonist of the story. This research supports the idea that meaning can be co-created and that meaning-making can emerge as part of a group dialogue. A future study might examine this type of collaborative meaning-making as an intervention, and measure meaning-making tendencies pre- and post-intervention. As meaning creation is a sense-making resource and has shown positive outcomes for individual well-being and

community activism, it is important that we examine ways to foster narrative meaning-

making.

Conclusion

Human beings are subject to the influence of internal states such as beliefs,

desires, emotions, and moral commitments that are contextualized in culture, society, and

history (Bruner, 1986). In effect, meaning-making processes bond human beings to the

external world and the culture in which they are situated. The current study shows that

the extent to which individuals created meaning out of a discrepant experience that has

become a part of our individual, cultural, and historical narratives, reduced the effect of

distress on well-being. Why does meaning-making appear to be an effective coping

mechanism? According to Brockmeier (2009), "reaching for meaning might be the

ultimate form of human agency." Participants in the current study articulated that the

2016 presidential election had completely changed their views of their nation and of their

fellow Americans. Many participants expressed feelings of confusion, shock, and

powerlessness. In spite of this, individuals who showed higher levels of insight into

themselves and their worldviews as a result of this experience and articulated the

experience as central to their life stories, preserved well-being. Furthermore, finding

positive meaning about the self predicted higher levels of activism in the year following

the election. Therefore, perhaps meaning-making is the tool with which individuals can

construct narratives of agency even in experiences that lead to feelings of powerlessness.

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