

Values Narratives for Personal Growth: Formative Evaluation of the Laws of Life Essay Program

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Abstract

Evidence that even very brief writing exercises can change the way people see themselves and promote more positive mental and physical health has led to increased interest in their use in school settings and elsewhere. To date, however, research designs rely heavily on samples of college students and experimental studies of writing tasks carried out in the lab. There has been less investigation of the potential impact of more naturally occurring expressive writing exercises that exist in places like schools and that focus on adolescents. The current study was a process evaluation of the Laws of Life Essay, a values-based narrative program that was part of participants' secondary school experience. It examined participants' views of the impact of the program on their personal growth and, given the age range of participants, allowed for process evaluation of its perceived short- and long-term effects. Qualitative, semistructured interviews with 55 adolescent and adult participants were collected. Themes in participants' responses included the importance of reflection and reappraisal of values, adversity,

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and relationships. Participants also discussed the importance of an audience for their writing, a novel finding that suggests one possible way to increase the impact of other narrative programs. Participants described variability in their engagement with expressive writing. This is one of the few studies that examined participants' own views of the value of expressive writing and their responses suggest directions for future research and implications for designing expressive writing tasks to support social emotional learning and character education in schools and promote well-being at key developmental moments.

Keywords

narrative, expressive writing, character education, posttraumatic growth

Two interesting lines of research have received growing attention among those interested in positive youth development. One is the field of social-emotional learning (SEL; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), which has highlighted the importance of teaching skills related to emotional regulation and social development along with academics in school. This work has been grounded in developmental psychology and prevention science. Recently, researchers have also connected SEL to work in moral development about the importance of character education, which often involves using school curricula to consider broad values such as respect, responsibility, or fairness to promote personal growth during the adolescent years (Elias, Kranzler, Parker, Kash, & Weissberg, 2014; Smith, 2013). Separate from this work but also concerned with positive youth development has been research on how written and spoken accounts of important events and beliefs—narratives—can be linked to personal growth and well-being (Austenfeld, Paolo, & Stanton, 2006; Burton & King, 2009; Pennebaker, 1997). For example, the Freedom Writers is a set of educational curricula that encourages positive growth via personal writing exercises (<http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/fw-methodology>). Other programs use digital storytelling, a process grounded in theories about how personal growth can be encouraged via narrative (Sadik, 2008).

There is evidence that even very brief writing exercises can change aspects of the self and promote more positive mental and physical health (e.g., Burton & King, 2004). To date, however, research designs have often relied heavily on samples of college students and experimental laboratory paradigms. There has been less investigation of the potential impact of more naturally occurring expressive writing exercises with younger samples that could serve as components of character education or social emotional learning efforts

(Kliewer et al., 2011). The current study examined participants' views of the impact of a personal value narrative writing program, the Laws of Life Essay Program, which was part of their secondary school experience. We conducted qualitative analyses of participants' reflections about how the essay writing affected their developing identity. As such, the study was a formative program evaluation of the Laws of Life Program including an exploration of underexamined questions about the ways that writing assignments can be a character development intervention.

The Benefits of Expressive Writing

Work emerging from the fields of character education and SEL has focused on developing positive identity, fostering healthy relationships, and instilling strong coping abilities. These components have all been explored in relation to expressive writing, and suggest that it may be possible to promote healthy adolescent development in educational settings through expressive writing. Research on identity development and personality indicate that "narrative identity," or the stories that people tell about themselves to themselves and to others, is an important part of one's self-concept (McAdams, 1985, 1995). Narrative identity helps give individuals a sense of purpose and make connections between diverse parts of their life experiences (Adler, 2012) and help create a coherent sense of self. McAdams (1993) noted that narrative identity can change over time, in some cases through engagement with narrative exercises like psychotherapy and expressive writing. McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) discuss the related construct of "situated stories" in their model of the ways that storytelling about the self promotes identity development. They describe how stories of specific instances in one's life that one chooses to tell others bridge experiences and the sense of self. Telling stories creates identity and may even change identity over time (McLean et al., 2007). Most of this research has been conducted with college students, or other adults and less is known about how narratives may contribute to identity development in younger adolescents.

Expressive writing exercises used in research are designed to encourage the telling of "situated stories" in writing. Most exercises ask people to write about negative experiences or emotions, which can include traumatic events (Austenfeld et al., 2006; Frattaroli, 2006; Lu & Stanton, 2010), anxiety prior to a performance (e.g., Ramirez & Beilock, 2011), and changes or transitions in life (Adler, 2012). Participants are randomly assigned to writing conditions and followed over a short period of time to assess psychological distress and physical well-being. Through a variety of hypothesized mechanisms, including overcoming avoidance of emotion and promoting emotional awareness and meaning making, those who write about negative experiences generally

do better on short-term mental and physical health outcomes than participants in comparison groups who write about neutral topics (Austenfeld et al., 2006; Frattaroli, 2006; Lu & Stanton, 2010; Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997; Ramirez & Beilock, 2011). Some studies suggested that solitary writing about trauma may be as therapeutic as in-person sessions with a therapist (e.g., Resick et al., 2008).

Although fewer in number than studies of adults, several studies also found links between expressive writing and mental health benefits for adolescents (Giannotta, Settanni, Kliwer, & Ciairano, 2009; Margola, Facchin, Molgora, & Revenson, 2010; Soliday, Garofalo, & Rogers, 2004; Taylor, Wallander, Anderson, Beasley, & Brown, 2003; Warner et al., 2006). Importantly, however, other research suggests that in some circumstances expressive writing may have minimal or even negative effects on adolescents or on certain outcomes (Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, & Brewin, 2007; Giannotta et al., 2009). For example, children who wrote about negative situations or interpersonal problems showed increased depressive and anxiety symptoms. More research on the psychological effects of expressive writing during adolescence is needed to sort out these inconsistencies.

A variety of theories exist about why such benefits of writing are found. Writing may promote cognitive processing of adversity (reframing and reflection), increase emotional awareness and processing, and facilitate meaning making. Lyubomirsky et al. (2006) found that for negative events, writing or talking about these experiences—what they term “external documentation”—produced more positive effects on measures of well-being than just thinking about the experiences. They stated, “the highly structured nature of language and syntax invites organization and analysis that occur in the process of creating narrative, which often leads to searching for meaning, enhanced understanding, and identity formation” (p. 693). They asserted that this process of organizing takes place in creating written or spoken narratives but is less present when just thinking about life experiences. Pennebaker (1997) and others have addressed the reinterpretation or reappraisal of stressors or problems through writing, and Pennebaker et al. (1990) found that participants report cognitive processes, such as gaining perspective on what happened to them, to be the helpful aspect of expressive writing. In addition, writing about negative events also can help individuals attend to and label their emotions.

As a form of exposure, expressive writing can work against emotional avoidance and promote the mobilization of emotion-focused coping resources (Low, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2006; Lu & Stanton, 2010). Lu and Stanton (2010) argued that “self-regulation” is at the heart of the beneficial psychological effects of narrative and involves both cognitive reappraisal processes

and emotional processing. Other theorists have emphasized the benefits of narrative writing for meaning making, which is a complex synthesis of cognitive, affective, and motivational elements (e.g., Adler, 2012; McLean & Pratt, 2006). Wilson and Gilbert's (2008) "affective adaptation theory" held that negative emotional reactions to events decrease as people make sense of what happened in their lives.

Researchers have also found psychological benefits of writing about positive events or aspects of the self (Burton & King, 2004, 2009; Frattaroli, 2006; Fredrickson, 2001; King, 2001). Interestingly, in a sample of adolescents, Facchin, Margola, Molgora, and Revenson (2014) reported self-concept improvements for those who wrote about the positive aspects of the transition to high school rather than just writing about their thoughts and feelings or writing about neutral school activities.

The Current Study

What has been largely missing to date is exploration of participants' own perspectives on what was valuable about expressive writing. What are their own views of the benefits and impacts? How do they describe participating in expressive writing? How do participants perceive the expressive writing task over time, beyond short-term measured outcomes? Given Lu and Stanton's (2010) call for more complex models, qualitative methods are uniquely positioned to illustrate factors related to narratives that may be missed in quantitative studies using established measures. For example, to date the range of outcomes studied is rather narrow, consisting primarily of inventories of psychological distress or physical health symptoms rather than indices of positive development or well-being.

The purpose of the current study was to extend the findings reviewed above by examining both adolescent and young adult participants' reflections on an essay project for middle and high schools called the Laws of Life Essay Program (Veljkovic & Schwartz, 2001). This program has been instituted in schools across the United States and abroad, and tens of thousands of middle and high school students each year are invited or required by their schools to write an essay about one of their "laws of life," which is defined as a value or idea that guides how they see themselves or how they live their lives. Despite its widespread implementation, the Laws of Life Essay Program has received little empirical study. As part of a larger mixed methods evaluation of the Laws of Life program, character development, and coping, the current analyses examined semistructured qualitative interviews that asked participants what they remembered about their participation in the Laws of Life Essay Program and any impact they felt it had on them. We approached this project

seeking descriptions of their writing experiences that emerged from their own recollections, rather than a priori codes we developed. Our aim was to identify participants' own views of why narrative might be important or not and to do this over a much longer time frame of reflection than is typical of experimental studies of narrative effects. Furthermore, though all participants wrote their essay during middle or high school, the age at which they were interviewed for this study ranged from adolescents who had recently completed the expressive writing task to adults for whom some time had passed since the experience. This broad age range allowed us to explore both short- and long-term reflections on the impact of the expressive writing experience.

The Laws of Life Project. The Laws of Life Essay was developed by John Templeton in 1987. Students in middle or high school write a values narrative about a topic of their choice related to a "law of life." Students choose a principle or value that was important to them and that they think has guided their development to date and into the future. Fact sheets for teachers describe a range of prompts students may choose to respond to that center on this theme

Describe a personal experience that has helped you develop your law(s) of life.
Describe a time in your life when someone has helped you. How has this affected your law(s) of life? What law(s) of life would you like to develop to become a better person? (Laws of Life Essay Program, n.d.-b)

The purpose of the program is to foster reflection among youth about their values with the assumption that this reflection will create a more positive sense of community in the classroom, promote character education, and lead to recognition of positive student values (School for Ethical Education, 2014). The program is required in some schools, while in others students can choose to participate. It was mandatory in many schools in the geographic region in which the current study took place. It is a contest in that judges (in or outside of the school) assess the essays and choose winners who may receive some sort of recognition (for more information, see <http://capabilities.templeton.org/2004/character02.html> and <http://www.lifepathsresearch.org/for-educators-and-therapists/>). The program has been implemented around the United States and internationally. It is similar in its use of narrative to school-based personal growth programs, including Freedom Writers.

Method

Participants

Participants were part of a larger, multimethod community study that recruited over 2,000 residents of rural Tennessee for a survey about character development,

coping, and their participation in the Laws of Life Essay Program (see Procedures section, for a more complete description). The Laws of Life Essay Program has a 25-year history in Franklin County, Tennessee, and this county served as a major recruitment site for the study. Participants in the current analyses were 55 individuals residing in Tennessee all of whom reported that they had written a Laws of Life essay as part of the program and remembered details of their participation that they could talk about. The mean age was 25.24 ($SD = 9.62$) with a range from 13 to 44 years. Thirty-five participants (63.6%) were women and, consistent with the demographics of the area, most (80%) indicated they were White/European American.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from communities in rural Tennessee using a number of procedures including word of mouth, newspaper and media advertisements, flyers, and booths at local festivals. Anyone between the ages of 12 and 45 years was eligible to participate in the broader study, though for this set of analyses only self-reported essay writers' interviews were used. Participants were given a \$50 Walmart gift card for their participation.

Semistructured interviews asked about a variety of aspects of a participants' life story to understand some of their most memorable moments, including high points, low points, and how they coped with stress. Relevant to the current analyses, the appendix lists the questions we asked as part of the interview and that focus on participants' reflections about the expressive writing exercise, the Laws of Life Essay. We note here that although theoretically the current research draws from the narrative theory of McAdams (2006) and expressive writing work by Pennebaker (1997) and others, we were interested specifically in participants' reflections about their writing and thus the interview questions look quite different from those used in these other research traditions. For this section of the study, we analyzed only interviews from participants who took part in the Laws of Life Essay Program. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

We used principles of conventional qualitative content analysis given our interest in description and our desire to clearly anchor descriptive themes in the words of participants (Goodman, Glenn, Bohlig, Banyard, & Borges, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996). Coding proceeded in three steps (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Tutty et al., 1996). The first level involved a team consisting of all four authors who initially reviewed six interview transcripts to identify a set of meaning units. They

used participants' own words to create a list of thoughts and experiences that participants described in relation to their participation in the essay program. Discussion of these six interviews included examination of points of agreement and disagreement until consensus was reached on an initial set of codes that described participants' reflections about their essay writing experiences. Given the large number of codes on this initial list, the team of authors then reduced the number of codes by grouping them into a smaller set of higher order secondary codes. These codes remained grounded in the words of participants but were broader and more general to better encompass the responses of several participants at a time rather than the unique language of any one specific participant. Each of the codes in this list was described and explained in a codebook. During the third step of data analysis, the first author trained a team of three research assistants to do content analysis on the interviews. Training began with the first 14 interviews using the consensus review process the author team used above (Goodman et al., 2009). When consensus was reached on these initial interviews, the team of three research assistants coded the remaining interviews independently and then met to reach consensus through discussion of each. Consultation with the full authorship team was ongoing to discuss comparing and contrasting and any needed refinements of codes during the full coding process. Following all three coding steps and after all interviews were coded, the authors discussed and created a set of integrated themes that combined codes into three central findings of the study (Weiss, 1995). Throughout this process, attention was paid to negative cases, that is, responses that did not fit into the themes as we began to describe them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We discussed these in detail and as a result refined categories and themes or created new subthemes to better capture the full range of participants' experiences.

Results

Below, we describe three major themes that emerged from participants' responses as well as subthemes. We used participants' own words to describe and illustrate key themes as much as possible.

Reflection, Gaining Clarity, and Reappraisal

Many participants commented on how writing the essay provided them with opportunities to think about and reflect on aspects of their lives, which for some also resulted in gaining clarity about coping with adversity, their values, and themselves. It was a chance to step back to review something that had personal meaning to them and perhaps take a different perspective.

Reflection. The “reflection” code was used to describe responses that indicated that the essay writing itself was a process of reflection and this process was valuable. One young man stated,

It made me sit there and think about things that I should have done, that I should do, and things that I should’ve have done . . . that I wish I had’ve done. . . . And then, that . . . I think since I know what to do now and what not to do, that I think later on the in . . . how can I explain it? Like . . . let me think how to explain it. I ain’t very good at explaining stuff. In case something bad happened and I don’t get to see them again. It just put it all in perspective. (18-year-old male)

Participants described a range of more specific topics that were the subject of their essays and their reflection and that made up three subthemes: reappraising adverse or stressful experiences, reflecting on relationships, and reflecting on values that guided their actions. Some also described how this reflection was connected to taking different perspectives on these topics, clarifying their thoughts and feelings.

A subtheme was reflection on adversity. Participants talked about reflecting on adversities including significant losses and traumas ranging from car accidents to victimization experiences. One 20-year-old male stated,

I wrote it actually on my dad dying and having to deal with it and how actually after he died, I had to go to the therapist. And having to deal with everything at home. Because I didn’t write all that in the essay, just having to deal with basically him dying, taking on responsibility, and still going to school and wanting to do stuff. Just how you take care of myself and my family.

A young woman (age 23) wrote about the stress of her parents’ divorce and her reaction to it:

It made me reflect on that experience more with the more mature-like thinking because, like you know, that was something I experienced in seventh grade, so writing about it helps me reflect on it and seeing the changes that I made since that experience, so it was good. I feel liberated a little bit.

Another adolescent participant talked about the value of reflecting on the past and coping with adversity including a fire that affected her family:

I like writing, it helped me kind of—I think writing the last one I wrote helped me more understand what happened in the experience. I’ve never really like sat down and recalled it all, and it helped me do that . . . I think it’s helped me reflect on it, more than shape it. It’s helped me to understand what’s gone wrong, or what’s gone right, and help me be thankful for more things. (17-year-old female)

Other participants wrote about the stress of developmental life transitions like moving from middle to high school, such as these comments from a 17-year-old male:

I was really worried about, like, the things that I've learned in middle school. I was scared that it really wouldn't apply to high school. Like, it'd be something completely different, and I was worried about getting bad grades and, like, for some reason I was worried about failing my ninth grade year because I wasn't smart enough. I know [the essay] was about my middle, like, being in the private school so long, what I was accustomed to and worried about. I was really worried about the transition of going into high school.

Clarity. A number of participants described a general sense of clarity gained from writing about adverse or stressful experiences. For example, one young woman stated,

Yeah, writing about it made me more open to my thoughts. It made me focus and everything that I really didn't understand. So, writing about it really helped me understand what I was going through and everything. (16-year-old female)

Another wrote,

Really, it helps you realize basically about yourself, because you're writing about what, what you have to cope with and what helps you be a better person. And then it makes you realize you're not as bad as you make yourself think. (17-year-old female)

A young man (17 years old) talked about how the essay helped him gain clarity, which resulted in better coping for him,

I remember the reason I wrote it, I was in the seventh grade, and in the seventh grade teachers started to get a lot more serious about preparing you for high school, and that really worried me. And, that's why I wrote it. I wrote it, like, I wrote it to kind of share, like, my thoughts about preparing, like I said, I was kind of scared and worried about it . . . It made me realize a lot more things. Like, it kind of like, I had a bunch of like jumbled ideas in my head about high school and stuff, and when I was writing it on paper, it made it a lot more clear.

One participant remarked about gaining more emotional clarity,

It really was a way to release some feelings. It had been a few years since my mother died, it had been 3 years, so it was a way to release some of that. . . . Writing the essay, it put a totally different light on it. It was more of a

positive—it was not a negative of how I felt when she—it was a positive of how I was moving on. So it definitely helped in that aspect. (24-year-old female)

Another said,

Yeah, I think, uh, I think since I was able to write it all down, the way I felt, and stuff, that it, you know, helped me and made me feel better and I guess to get it all out and stuff, even though I didn't actually tell my dad how I felt, and stuff, and yeah, I think it helped me. (43-year-old female)

As a second subtheme, a number of participants described how the essay was a process of thinking in a different way about a significant relationship. For example, one adult man (39 years old) said,

What it did was, I mean, it kind of opened me up to a lot of things. I mean, as I was sitting there writing, I never really just took the conscious decision just to think about the dynamics of my mom being a single parent, working her butt off. But still, for the most part, I think she raised four decent children, and it kind of opened up a little bit more about my mother's personality, and the characteristics that she displayed. Being a hard worker. I think more than anything, I learned a little bit more about my mother.

Another participant (16-year-old male) described,

that I was sometimes very disrespectful and very angry with them [my family]. But it made me realize they were extremely important to me. Somewhat, it showed me that I actually had to show that I care about people to actually make them realize what was making me angry, and how they could help me with it. It showed me what was really important in life, and how you can take those things and apply them to your life.

Reappraisal. In addition to relationships and stressors or adversities, participants described using the writing to review values they held. One woman in her twenties stated, "I wrote about love and compassion and how that can sometimes turn into anger and selfishness." A young man (19 years old) said,

It was tough to, like, write such a short essay, but, but in trying to make it concise, it helps me think about things, like my perspectives on growing up . . . I wrote about, like in the conclusion I wrote about how it's taught me diligence and perseverance to keep going despite the odds.

The different values described were as varied as the participants' experiences as two women in their twenties and thirties describe:

My dad was a Vietnam veteran, and so um, just, that even though he was sort of, you know, a painter and could have been a hippie, he went in to the military because, you know, it was what you should do and, you know, that sort of . . . [sigh] I don't know, just, he felt like it was his duty, you know, and he had that sense of loyalty to his country like patriotism is, was a big thing. My dad (was) very patriotic and in, you know, helped instill that in me, you know, with—not being blind to this, you know, that our country's not perfect but just that you do love your country and you do, you know . . . (38 years old)

For me it was a lot about putting a solid idea or, you know, putting it into words, what I'd learned from other people, and um . . . and it wasn't so much that I was suddenly discovering that honesty was the best policy, but it was, it was trying to define what exactly I thought about that quality, you know. . . . So, again, at the beginning it was a lot of still repeating of my parents and then by the time I was older it was, these are the things that . . . it was coming from a base of what I'd learned and it was me describing what I thought was important as, as a young adult. Um, so I guess it, you know, it was important to make me think about that. (22 years old)

Yet another (21 years old) described how the essay helped her gain clarity about values learned from family:

I don't know exactly how I phrased it but, just about like serving others and being kind, being hospitable. I talked about um, thinking about consequences, like thinking things through before doing them because my grandfather had a phrase that he always said and my dad still quotes him on it to this day every time, you know every time he says, "Bye," he'll say like "Remember [name] said, he always said you can get into more trouble in 5 minutes than you can get out of in 5 years." And so I wrote about that and kind of the impact that that's had on just making me, you know, just teaching me that it's important to think things through before you do them.

Audience

The second theme that emerged was titled "audience." A number of participants talked specifically about how an important facet of the essay writing was expressing themselves to others or being heard by others. Participants in this category talked about writing not as just journaling their experiences but writing with a sense that they had something important to say to others. There was a relational aspect to these responses—that the essay was a form of communication. There were three subthemes here: benefiting others, being seen differently by others, and expression of one's own voice.

Benefiting Others. The first subtheme is the most explicitly relational and was termed “benefitting others.” Participants’ responses included a clear awareness that others would read their essay and could gain benefits from doing so. Participants hoped that others could learn something from their experiences and their story, something that would help others in their own lives either through lessons learned, gaining strength or perspective, or knowing that they were not alone in what they were going through. One participant remarked (28-year-old female)

putting it down on paper and writing it out a little bit and actually knowing that someone else is going to read it. And maybe get something out of it. That was exciting to me that other people might read the essay and it might help them in some way.

Three women from different points in the life span, one a teen, one a young adult, and the other an adult put it in these ways:

I did not realize people actually liked it as much as they did and when people started reading it and started to see that other people feel that way, like my grandparents they passed it around to all of their friends, and they were like, oh, this reflects on my life too, and it made me just see the connection between everybody, and what they’ve been through. (17 years old)

Teachers reading it, it might help somebody else. A lot of times when people read your life and they’re like, “Wow, well they did this,” then it might help somebody else. (25 years old)

These Laws of Life, they are a reality check. Um, ‘cause you never know who’s going to be reading them. You never know who you’re speaking to in your audience when you’re reading them. Um, words can touch people, and it all depends on how you want to touch them. Good or bad. (30 years old)

Being Seen in a New Way. A second subtheme seemed to describe changes in relationships with others as a result of writing the essay. We labeled this “Being seen by others in a new way.” In these responses, participants described how they felt that other people—teachers, peers—learned something new about them from the essay and understood the participant in a different way, perhaps saw them in a new light because of what they had written. A young woman (18 years old) stated,

It helped, it actually explained how the problems in my life have helped me be the person I am today and how I take care of those problems and figure those

problems out. It also helped my classmates and my teachers figure out a little bit more about myself and how my childhood made me the person that I am.

Another participant talked more about classmates, “And I think they related to me differently after that, and probably in a more favorable way, and so I think that probably changed things somewhat” (26-year-old female).

Voice Expression. The third theme we termed “Voice expression” and in this sub-theme audience and the presence of others was more implied than explicit. Responses in this category were about participants indicating the importance of finding their own voice, of sharing experiences out loud that they had kept inside. Embedded in these responses was a sense that they had a valuable perspective to share and that the act of telling through writing the essay was empowering. One participant put it this way, “It’s something that in life you’ll look back on it, and you know, it’ll help you. And you can tell your story to people” (32-year-old female). This sharing of thoughts was also described by another participant, “I mean, so other people could read it. Like, so my teacher would know what I was thinking. I didn’t have to write it, so, like, I really wanted to share, like, my thoughts with people” (17-year-old male). Two women were quite clear about how voice through writing in particular as a medium of expression, particularly writing about adversity, was important to them:

Reflecting on it helped, because like I said, you can’t help anybody if you get a total wreck when you talk about stuff. And then you know, some people will immediately take that as wanting attention or pity, and so you have to go about things a certain way. So reflecting while you’re writing an essay, you know, you’re telling, you’re writing someone that you won’t meet, so there’s no judgment there to influence you on how you write, and it’s a freedom that you probably don’t get all that often. So reflecting and writing helped. (15 years old)

When the Laws of Life essay came up that year I decided to concentrate on my early childhood and my beginning and how that shaped the person I was at that time, because my early childhood was physical, emotional and sexual abuse and up until that point I hadn’t talked about it . . . I enjoyed writing that last essay. Um, because like I said I was more free, open and more honest with my emotions. It was the first time I stepped outside the box. I didn’t worry about what others may think. (30 years old)

Narrative Disengagement

Some essay writers reported that they did not remember what they wrote in their essay but made statement about the experience of writing the essay that

fit within the codes. Many of these responses contained statements that we described as “narrative disengagement.” This code was used for indications that the participant did not take the essay writing seriously, did not do a lot of thinking about it, did not spend much time on it, or just did it to complete it as a school assignment. These responses usually included some discussion of not choosing to write something personal. For example, one participant described,

The reason that probably I don't remember it and it wasn't very significant with me is because I didn't write about something that was personal or from the heart. . . . It was probably me attempting to write about something, um, but it wasn't truly heartfelt and that's probably why I don't remember it. (34-year-old female)

Another noted,

I think it may have had more opportunity to if it wasn't for having to check the grammar and everything and worry about. If I could have just wrote freely and made half sentences and—like I'm sitting here talking to you—then it probably would have meant more. Instead of being homework. (29-year-old female)

Another participant remarked, “So it wasn't like a soul-searching like opportunity for me to investigate, you know” (24-year-old female). Another said, “Basically, it was just abstract and I'm sure I talked about, like, Mother Theresa and gave some song lyrics or something, but it was, like I said, really not personal at all, just something I had to do” (24-year-old female). This suggests that the way the essay was presented or how participants chose to participate made a difference in whether it was an expressive writing assignment that made an impact or not. We called this “narrative disengagement” in contrast to participant responses like this one: “I mean we had to write essays anyway, so might as well be about something, you know, that you felt was important instead of just, you know, somebody else picking it out of a book” (25-year-old female), which indicates more narrative engagement. This distinction between narrative engagement and disengagement suggests an interesting moderating variable that may need to be considered in further analyses of the impact of expressive writing on outcomes.

Indeed, a few participants (less than five) talked about the essay program in more ambivalent terms—at the intersection of engagement and disengagement. This was a small subset of participants but their responses were interesting. They described taking the writing seriously and writing about something quite personal. They then seemed somewhat surprised by what they had written and did not want to share it with others:

Because really it was just personal and I felt like it [writing the essay] was helping me get through it [adversity involving the loss of a significant family member]. And then as soon as I wrote it I was just like, "I'm not turning this in," so I threw it away.

This suggests that for some, writing the essay without an audience and alternately engaging and disengaging from the writing may be helpful strategies for processing emotionally challenging material.

Discussion

There is growing evidence that expressive writing exercises can promote changes in views of the self as well as changes in emotions and well-being that are related to self-concept (McLean et al., 2007). As schools examine how to teach about issues such as emotion regulation and coping, respect, fairness, and responsibility in addition to academics, a focus on understanding the stories we tell about ourselves has emerged and schools are using expressive writing as a tool to promote positive development among students (Facchin et al., 2014; Kliewer et al., 2011; Smith, 2013; Wilson, 2011). The current study was a formative evaluation of a school-based essay writing program during adolescence. Our goal was to understand through participants' own eyes their impressions of this writing exercise and whether they felt it influenced them in any way. Participants' provided self-reflections across a range of years after they wrote their essay, thus the current study used a time frame for reflection and assessing impact that was much longer than most other research on expressive writing. The study used a community rather than college student or clinical sample and assessed an expressive writing task in a more naturalistic setting (a school) rather than one that was experimentally induced. A number of interesting themes emerged from what participants recalled and described. The three themes of reflection, audience, and narrative disengagement are not an exhaustive list of ideas contained in these sections of the interviews, but they do reflect aspects of experience that appeared in many interviews as well as ideas that help us both confirm previous research and understand different aspects of individuals' experience of expressive writing narratives than usually appear in the empirical literature. The importance of audience and sharing one's narrative is a novel impact that has not been identified in previous research. Furthermore, while most quantitative studies of narrative focused on physical and mental health symptoms checklists as outcomes, participants in the current study noted changes in their views of themselves as a key benefit, an outcome less measured in previous research.

The Importance of Reflecting and Engaging

Consistent with previous research, participants talked about cognitive benefits of expressive writing (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker et al., 1990). Participants noted the benefits of reflecting on their own experiences. It helped them gain perspective on life events and stressors and in some cases promoted better coping efforts. Participants described greater self-understanding, improved clarity about goals and values, and changed perspectives on important relationships as a result of writing the essay. Researchers have hypothesized that reflection and perspective taking are important mechanisms that account for the benefits of expressive writing (Pennebaker, 1997). The current qualitative data support this theory.

Also consistent with the expressive writing literature, participants in the current study reported writing about a variety of personally meaningful topics. The most prevalent were adversities and stressors, although some wrote about developmental moments or learning experiences. Indeed, participants discussed how engaging with the writing process with personal material was a key component of making the writing meaningful and beneficial to them. Participants who indicated what we termed “narrative disengagement” did not report benefits to writing. It is interesting that in this naturally occurring expressive writing task, participants seemed to replicate the conditions that are created in expressive writing experiments (where some individuals are assigned to write about something personally meaningful and some to write about neutral everyday behaviors). That is, some people chose to write their essay about a personally meaningful topic and these people described benefits to this writing process. Other participants described a lack of engagement—they did not take the essay seriously, treated it as a standard or boring homework assignment, or wrote about something that did not really resonate with their life experience. These participants often remarked that they remembered little about writing the essay and did not perceive much benefit from writing. This finding suggests that in order to leverage the possible benefits of the expressive writing, students in expressive writing programs like the Laws of Life Essay should be explicitly encouraged to write about something personally meaningful to them. Furthermore, public and formal writing programs could also perhaps be partnered with more private journal-type reflections that students might be encouraged to do prior to writing the more formal essay. This might increase meaningfulness for some participants.

New Insights From Participants’ Voices: The Importance of Telling Others

We felt that one of the most interesting findings in the current study was the theme of audience. This theme was unexpected and differed from what has

been found in previous research on narrative. Most theorizing about the function of narrative has focused on the value of reflecting on the self, and the few studies examining the effects of sharing the narratives with an audience have suggested that it has little benefit and perhaps some cost. An early study by Czajka (1987, as cited in Pennebaker, 1997) found no benefits to writing when the participant thought someone else was going to read it and Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) echoed this in their review. Furthermore, Frattaroli's (2006) meta-analysis found that participants who did not show their writing to anyone showed slightly more positive effects of writing, though Frattaroli noted that relatively few studies have people write and actually keep their writing private, because in most study designs, the experimenters read the writing. Resick et al. (2008) described how expressive writing in cognitive processing therapy for trauma typically includes discussions of the writing with the therapist. Thus, most models of expressive writing seem to include audience implicitly but have not studied this aspect.

Interestingly, several participants specifically remarked that one benefit of writing the essay had to do with the potential impact on others. Some cited the hope that other people would learn from their experiences and this would help readers in their own lives. Others said they gained a sense of empowerment from knowing others heard what they had to say, while a subset also hoped that this communication would enable peers or teachers or family members to see them differently. Differences between the current findings and past studies may come from methodological differences. Participants in the current study wrote a Laws of Life essay that was part of a contest. Thus, they were aware that other people would read their essay, including their teachers, a panel of judges, and—for winning essays published in the newspaper—their peers and families. By contrast, participants in more traditional lab-based studies had a more implicit audience that consisted of researchers who were unknown to the participant. The communicative function of expressive writing was likely much more salient to participants in the current study and thus may be related to different benefits (or costs). The current study seems similar to what McLean et al. (2007) described in relation to the benefit of storytelling for self-development as telling the story to others is a key component of their model. Our findings suggest that future studies should more carefully explore how a writer's perceptions of who may be reading their writing moderate effects of expressive writing.

Appreciating Complexity in Reactions to Narrative

The topic of audience is complex and warrants further research. A few participants in the current study explicitly did not want others to read what they

had written. These participants described throwing away their essay, which they described as containing personal reflections they did not wish to share with others. For example, one participant who noted,

But I think the main reason I remember it is just because all of my family ended up reading it after it won, which is something that I didn't really like. I don't really like it still. I don't know why, but just something about showing my family things that I've written, I just don't like it. Like I'm always really personal with it.

These examples, while few in number, are a good reminder that reactions to expressive writing are complex. Ullman (2011) reviewed research that suggested that for some trauma survivors, expressive writing or disclosure to others has few positive and even potentially negative effects. Although most participants in the current study reflected positively on their experience, some seemed to derive benefit from writing but did not wish to share what they had written or expressed ambivalence about what they learned from their reflections. Further research is needed to better understand the moderating variables that may explain these different experiences including age differences.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the current study. The sample, though large for a qualitative study, was small in comparison to the number of people who have written a Laws of Life essay. We relied on a single informant and future research would benefit from other informants such as peers or teachers. Our sample, and the community from which it is drawn, is fairly homogeneous with respect to race and socioeconomic status and it would be valuable to study these processes in other communities. Thus, caution must be exercised in generalizing the present findings. The study used cross-sectional methods and further studies of the benefits of using narratives in community settings are needed that follow individuals over time.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The current study suggest that expressive writing holds promise as a strategy to support work in schools on social emotional learning or character education (Elias et al., 2014; Kasler, White, & Elias, 2014). It may help adolescents navigate the developmental challenges of identity formation and bolster coping with stressors they encounter. The study also brought to light new areas

of narrative, specifically the role of audience as part of what expressive writers found beneficial in the narrative process. These themes suggested future research questions. For example, new quantitative measures of narrative engagement are being developed to more clearly assess how individuals approach the expressive writing process (Roberts, Hamby, Grych, & Banyard, 2015). As these measures are refined researchers should consider how to expand items and create subscales that perhaps capture these different aspects of people's experiences with expressive writing. Researchers should also assess a broader range of possible benefits to expressive writing, moving beyond mental and physical symptoms to assessing outcomes such as self-concept and identity development.

Appendix

Questions Used

General Recall. What do you recall about writing the Laws of Life Essay? Some people wrote several of them, during different school years, usually starting in sixth grade and going through their senior year of high school. Do you remember how many you wrote? Do you remember the topics of your specific essays? Did you enjoy this experience?

Impact on Life Story. Do you think that writing these essays shaped your life story at all? Did reflecting on the Laws of Life and then writing about a specific law that applies to your life influence who you became? If so, please explain.

Most Salient Essay. Please tell me about a specific Laws of Life Essay that you wrote. Which was the most memorable or meaningful to you? What was the theme of this essay? How old were you when you wrote it?

Law of Life and the Story of One's Life. Thinking about that most memorable essay, are there ways that it connects to the life story you have told me today? Is it related to how you have handled difficult situations? To the values that are a part of your childhood setting? To the virtues that you possess?

Authors' Note

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