The Social Psychology of Account-Making: Meaning, Hope, and Generativity

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The present paper reviews a program of research starting with a focus on divergent perspectives in attributions of causality and the conditions leading to spontaneous attributions and eventuating in a focus on story-like constructions containing attributions, description, and emotional expression that we define as accounts. In the course of our analysis, we review the attribution heritage for account-making research and the several different literatures that overlap with work on the social psychology of account-making. We describe a conception of the value of account-making under conditions of severe stress and recent data that relate to this conception. We conclude with reasoning about the role of account-making in giving humans meaning and hope and in stimulating generativity in times of great anguish and psychological suffering.

In this paper, we will trace the development of a program of theoretical and empirical work on the social psychology of account-making. In this review, we will discuss how this topic evolved in the early 1980s based on earlier work on attributional processes associated with distressed close relationships. After reviewing the foundation work on attributional processes, we will consider some of the characteristics and dynamics of account-making, provide a sketch of the many literatures that relate to the emerging literature on account-making, and summarize some of our recent empirical work on this phenomenon. The final theme to be drawn out in this paper is that account-making is central to people's search for meaning and hope and for the development of generativity regarding major life quests and crises.

Before we go too far, a definition of the focal phenomenon is in order. In brief, account-making refers to the construction of story-like understandings for events in our lives, with the resultant accounts including attributions, plots, characters, perceived inter-personal and personal characteristics, emotional expressions, and behavioral expectations and plans for the future. We theorize that accounts may be formed either in private reflection or in interaction with others. As argued by Weber, Harvey, and Stanley (1987), accounts often are targeted, presented to, and tailored for an audience. Accounts usually have beginnings, middles, and endings, and may have scripted markers for these stages (see Gergen & Gergen, 1987). For example, after disclosing the early and middle portions of a story, one may suggest, "And now you know the rest of the story". We refer to our focus as that of the social psychology of account-making because we wish to emphasize that accounts usually are developed in the context of interpersonal relations, often are disclosed or confided to others,

and frequently are refined and modified through social-communicative processes. Similar to the contention sometimes made about narratives, we argue that account-making is omnipresent in our daily lives. As Hardy (1968) said regarding narratives, "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative" (p.5). Relatively complete accounts weave a rich tapestry of meaning and feeling about a set of people, their interactions, and their place in time and space.

The Attributional Heritage

Developed by Heider (1958) and elaborated into testable form by Jones and Davis (1965), Kelley (1967), and others, attribution theory in social psychology has become a major market-place for ideas in social psychology over the last three decades. Heider's work cannot be given enough credit for its penetrating power in analyzing people's "naive psychology". His emphasis upon the rules and psychological principles by which people "on the street" make inferences in interpersonal relations is most congenial to our own focus on people's regular and facile account-making activity.

Attribution theory, concerned as it is with the processes by which people perceive causality and impute responsibility, is the starting point for our work on the social psychology of account-making. Why is this so? Because at its general core, attribution theory is concerned with people's search for meaning. As recognized by Kelley (1983), people often think in terms of perceived causal structures, or chains of causes, in understanding events. One cause is seen to lead to an effect which itself becomes the cause for a further effect, and so on. Also, several causes may be seen as jointly determining a single effect, or a given cause may give rise to several different effects. Kelley cites as illustrative of the use of perceived causal structures people's accounts for various events, and in this connection, he includes Fletcher's influential (1983) report of people's explanations for their marital separation. From our position, this logic about perceived causal structures provides one of the few leads in traditional attribution theory suggesting the need for conceptual work on how people package attributions and related thoughts and

feelings, especially in complex real world situations. We argue that people's more singular and less interwoven attributional constructions only address "the tip of the search for meaning iceberg".

Two general hypotheses that derive from attribution theory have guided our research program for the last twenty years. These hypotheses are: (1) People often diverge in attributions of causality for the same action, with the actor's attributions influenced by self-interest and the observer's attributions more influenced by salience and knowledge of the actor. This tendency was implied by Heider and given definition by Jones and Nisbett (1972) in their well-known actor-observer divergent perspective hypothesis. Although Jones and Nisbett did not emphasize self-interest or motivation as influencing the actor, we have emphasized self-esteem motivation in our work on divergent perspectives (e.g., Harvey, Harris, & Barnes, 1975). (2) People are constantly either implicitly or explicitly ascribing meaning to events in their worlds. As will be elaborated later, we only seem to sense the great need for meaning in our daily nonproblematic life but begin to understand the need for meaning when our nonproblematic lives are shattered or disrupted (e.g., Frankl's, 1959, stunning analysis of his search for meaning while in a concentration camp desperately struggling to survive). A corollary of this hypothesis is that people spontaneously make attributions and often in the form of trait ascriptions to self and others. Below, we will discuss representative work on these hypotheses.

Attributional Divergence

The first hypothesis described above was pursued by Harvey, Wells, and Alvarez (1978) in one of the early studies in our program on divergent perspectives. This work also involved the investigation of attributional conflict in young couples and of accounts presented by couples who were in the process of marital separation. In developing this research, we were interested in examining whether (1) males and females encountering relationship conflict would diverge in their attributions about the sources of conflict, and (2) what kinds of themes were evident in accounts for the bases for separation as reported by persons in the throes of separation. In this latter regard, we were very much influenced by the invaluable work of Weiss (1975) who was one of the first

scholars of close relationships to use the accounts concept (as we will discuss below, it had been used in somewhat different ways in sociology going back to Goffman's, 1959, classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). Weiss studied a group of persons who were newly separated and introduced the concept of accounts as a major mechanism by which these persons began to come to grips with their losses. Weiss suggested that through the use of accounts, separated persons were better able to organize these often confusing events, achieve a degree of catharsis about these events, and acquire a motivating and control-enhancing perspective about the need to move on in their lives. He did not give much attention to the definition of the account, but did note that it was a story-like fragment that encompassed a person's search for explanation.

In Study 1 conducted by Harvey et al. (1978), persons who had been living together in close relationships and who indicated that they were having serious conflict answered an advertisement concerning research on the sources of conflict in close relationships. Partners separately provided answers to a questionnaire regarding attributions about conflict. There were quite a few instances of agreement between men and women, but also on certain salient items, there were disagreements. The disagreements showed differences between men and women on the items of incompatibility in sexual relations, the influence of important events in the relationship, financial problems, and stress associated with work or educational activities. In addition, systematic inaccuracy in prediction was exhibited. For example, on a question about the importance of sexual incompatibility, females underestimated males' position on this question, and males overestimated females' position. Although we did not further explore the role of this type of divergence and inaccuracy in conflicted relationships, we are glad to note that other researchers (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Gray & Silver, in press) have continued the pursuit of these types of patterns and, in so doing, have provided a useful and refined profile of attributional differences in distressed couples. A topic that awaits investigation is the comparison of each partner's accounts about the sources of conflict in, or even the break-down of, a close relationship. Informal evidence collected in this first study suggested that divergence in the stories also would occur and that such divergence might not be well-understood by each person. Perhaps in relationships beset with conflict, people may communicate their accounts of relationship problems more to confidants than to their own partners.

Study 2 of Harvey et al. (1978) involved collecting diary records over a 6-month period from persons (most of whom were women) going through separation, regarding their perceptions of the reasons why their relationships had ended. We were principally interested in the themes of these accounts. The most salient themes pertained to perceived affairs on the part of their partners, insensitivity or lack of affection and warm sexual intimacy in the relationship, quest for freedom from the constraints of marriage and desire for new lifestyle, different personal values and habits, alcoholism and physical abuse, and escalation of conflict and commitment to separation. The respondents wrote at length about their separation and the accompanying grief they experienced. The reports also indicated the toll separation was taking on their personal identity, as suggested by the following comment: "I can't have a relationship with anyone now — not until I can get myself straightened out. I'm really screwed up . . . I'm feeling that there is no hope for my ever finding anyone with whom to spend what is left of my sometimes miserable life" (Harvey et al., 1978, p. 255). Also, consistent with Weiss' (1975) description of the obsessive review many newly-separated persons undertake, Harvey et al., found that these vigilant, restless periods may be filled with incessant causal analyses.

Unsolicited Attribution

In the late 1970s, before developing further a conception for these accounts and their role in people's understanding, Harvey, Yarking, Lightner, and Town (1980) asked the general question of whether or not people generally make spontaneous attributions — without being asked to do so as part of a questionnaire or formal inquiry. If such spontaneous interpretive activity occurs, we also were interested in whether it could be readily coded along theoretically useful dimensions. Some critics of attribution theory have suggested that people might not make attributions if they were not asked to do so. We wanted to provide evidence relevant to this challenge. Further, we felt that

the answer to this challenge would be important to our further research on "packages of attributions", or accounts, since it might be contended that they simply are stories made up in order to satisfy an investigator's queries, and that they do not represent the way people naturally think and reason.

An aspect of the "search for meaning" hypothesis outline above was also examined in this study of unsolicited or spontaneous attribution ("spontaneous" may be too strong, since we do not know whether respondents would make attributions if absolutely no requests were made of them in the situation). In this study, we asked college students to respond to one of two videotaped episodes in which a man and a woman who had been dating engaged in an interaction that led either to a serious fight or a moderate tiff, but with no serious damage to the relationship. The respondents were also given a set either to be empathic with or to be detached from the actors in the videotaped version. After they had watched the event, we asked them to engage in a thought listing task similar to that often employed by attitude change investigators (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and to list the thoughts and feelings that they had as they watched the event.

As we had anticipated, the thoughts and feelings displayed by respondents could be reliably coded into attributions (most of which were dispositional in nature regarding the stimulus persons), and these attributions showed systematic patterns for the experimental conditions. Respondents who saw a serious outcome and who received an empathic set exhibited a relatively high degree of what we called unsolicited attributional activity (an index of number of attributions divided by total number of thoughts listed). Presumably, these respondents were more cognitively and emotionally involved in the episode than were respondents who saw the moderate outcome event and/or who had the detached set. Another analysis by Harvey, Turnquist, and Agostinelli (1988) discusses the coding and classification procedures and problems for work on free response attributional activity as might be examined in the examples of accounts presented below.

Before moving on to accounts, per se, we should note that several other scholars have also investigated the topic of spontaneous attribution. Weiner (1985) has summarized this work and pointed to directions for future inquiry. Also, Fletcher, Blampied, Fitness, and colleagues have contributed valuable evidence on spontaneous attribution within close relationships (e.g., Grigg, Fletcher, & Fitness, 1989; Fletcher, Fitness, & Blampied, 1990). Using spontaneous attribution dependent measures, these investigators have replicated earlier work showing that happy partners produce attributions that enhance relationship quality; whereas unhappy partners produce attributions that maintain their current levels of distress.

Early Work on Account-Making Conception

After the 1978 diary study by Harvey et al. pointed to the value of the accounts concept, we began to consider the concept in a broader light, although still within the purview of close relationships. We began to theorize about account-making as the central variable in our program and focused initially upon the motivational bases for accounts. A presentation in 1982 by Harvey and Weber at the Madison, Wisconsin, First International Conference on Personal Relationships coordinated by Robin Gilmour and Steve Duck gave us the occasion to examine the "whys" of account-making. As reported by Harvey, Weber, Galvin, Huszti, and Garnick (1986), and later by Weber et al., (1987), we argued that people engage in account-making in order to: seek a greater sense of control and understanding in their lives, maintain or enhance their self-esteem (which may involve self-presentational public displays designed to produce certain effects in others), engage in emotional purging or catharsis, as an end in itself (viz. the Zeigarnik Effect which suggests that people dislike unfinished business), and as a way of stimulating enlightened feeling and enhanced will and hope. As an illustration of some of these processes in account-making, we provide the following excerpt. This excerpt is from a memoir by the writer Willie Morris (*Esquire,* June, 1990) in which he is writing about the termination of his marriage that occurred some twenty years earlier. It shows not only cartharsis but a questing for control over events that no longer were under his control; but ultimately a sense of understanding and control begins to prevail, along with enhancement of self-esteem and greater hope for the future:

> ... The anger, bafflement, jealousy, and sting threatened never to go away, and their scar tissue is probably on my heart forever. Yet

whose *fault* (author's emphasis) is it? . . . It took me a long time to acknowledge she was truly gone. It was like death, but worse: She was not dead. I tried diligently to consign her to oblivion, but it did not work. I still loved her. There descended on my poor betrayed spirit a bizarre, enveloping jealousy, an acid sexual envy, tortured images of her with other men. The mounting carnage in Vietnam, its headless gluttony and cataclysm, only reinforced my indulgent fever . . . With divorce one gives up a whole way of life — friends, routines, habitudes, commitments. You are on your own again, and in diaphanous territory, and for a while your most fiendish habits may worsen. Then I told myself I could not *afford* (author's emphasis) to be deranged. I had a demanding job, after all, and scant choice but to function. The problems of real day-to-day life were easier to deal with than the imaginary ones; I willed my own salvation . . . For the longest time I thought I could never love again. I was wary and afraid and remembered too much. Yet as the days slowly pass, on into the years, you discover you *can* (author's emphasis) love again, and that, of course, is a whole other story . . . (pp. 170-175).

Thus, within the account, one finds many attributions being made, often accompanied by vivid imagery (e.g., Harvey, Flanary, & Morgan, 1986). It is our belief that if attributions are taken out of the structure of the account, they are less meaningful regarding a respondent's understanding than they are in the context of the respondent's story.

The critic might be wondering about the extent to which accounts accurately portray events. Certainly some accounts are reasonably accurate reports of events — as hopefully is the case with scientific accounts of evidence collected. But as accounts relate to personal relations and matters of affective moment to us, they may be more subject to distortion processes (Bartlett, 1932). Weber, Harvey, & Orbuch (in press) contend that when a close relationship ends, neither partner's story is likely to resemble an "objective" rendering of the relationship events but what is revealed is a level of psychological reality that is unassailable in terms of objectivity. Robbe-Grillet (1986) has observed that memory sometimes belongs to imagination; it is part of the imaginative pro-

cess. O'Brien (1990) makes an even more provocative point about the truth of stories in his acclaimed book about Vietnam experiences *The Things They Carried*: "Yet even if it [a horrible event he has described as happening to his platoon] did happen — and maybe it did, anything's possible — even then you know it can't be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (p. 89).

Relationship To Other Literatures

Space precludes a complete review of the various literatures with which our conception of account-making coheres. Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) provide a general view of points of similarity and dissimilarity with many of these literatures. But to give the reader an idea of the breadth of comparisons, we would list the following topics and writings as highly relevant to the present approach:

1. Work on narratives (including early work by Mills, 1940, on the "vocabulary of motives" and by Burke, 1945, on the "grammar of motives" and later work by scholars such as Cochran, 1986; Shotter, 1987; and Gergen and Gergen, 1988). We do consider the topic of accounts to be similar to that of narrative but to include other forms of expression (e.g., diary/record keeping, private reflection) in addition to talk that is the usual focus for the narrative. One of the most interesting recent programs on narratives is being conducted by Baumeister and colleagues (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, in press) who are pursuing what Gergen and Gergen (1988) refer to as *micronarratives*.

2. Work on self-presentation (e.g., Goffman, 1959) and excuse-making (Jellison, 1977; Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983) especially as people are involved in situations in which their actions are seen as potentially blameworthy, or that lead to moral or ethical predicaments in general. This line of work that was given direction and definition by Scott and Lyman (1968) continues to be pursued by scholars in communications studies, sociology, and psychology (e.g., Cody & McLaughlin, in press; Riordan, Marlin, & Kellog, 1983; Schlenker, Weigold, & Doherty, in press) and focuses on communicated explanations in which a person offers an apology, excuse, justification, or

denial. As suggested in our analysis above, we wish to entertain a broader conception of account-making, one that includes, but is not restricted to, these types of justifications for predicaments.

3. Work on self-disclosure (e.g., Jourard, 1971). We assume that ultimately people disclose most of their account-making, especially to confidants. We also have begun to explore people's social perception and behavioral reactions to others as a function of the types of accounts others disclose (Harvey et al. 1990).

4. Work on thought suppression, blunting, and catharsis as ways of dealing with trauma (e.g., Pennebaker's 1985, 1989 influential work on how various groups deal with unpleasant memories and how such coping affects their long-term health). In the next section, we will elaborate on our own view of account-making as part of stress-reduction sequences.

5. Theory and research on griefwork (e.g., Rosenblatt's, 1983, powerful analysis of 19th century diarists' grieving over the loss of loved ones).

6. Work on story-telling as a way of enhancing the quality of one's life and the lives of the recipients of stories (e.g., Coles', 1989, poignant writings). Scholars pursuing this theme have argued that the story has great potential to illuminate human reality (Cochran, 1989; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Sarbin, 1986).

7. Work on folk psychology (Bruner, 1987). This approach concerns often taken-for-granted aspects of culture and emphasizes the value of narratives. Bruner suggests, "While the act of writing autobiography is new under the sun — like writing itself — the self-told life narrative is, by all accounts, ancient and universal. People anywhere can tell you intelligible accounts of their lives" (1987, p. 16). Bruner goes on to suggest a potency of the narrative that we also ascribe to the account when he argues that life-narratives may structure perceptual experience, organize memory, and segment and "purpose-build" the very events of our lives. And in the end, Bruner contends that we "become" the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" ourselves.

This sampling is only illustrative of the variety of phenomena relevant to account-making. Many more lines of work that have relevance could be noted. For example, some of Antaki's (1985, 1989) recent work has probed ordinary explanation in conversation and the causal structure of accounts. Given this centrality of concepts quite similar to those of accounts and account-making in current social and behavioral sciences research, we believe that the future for avenues of scholarship is virtually limitless.

Linking Account-Making to Coping Under Conditions of Severe Stress

We now are in the process of vigorously investigating the role of account-making under conditions of severe stress. We believe that one of the greatest efficacy-conveying benefits of account-making comes at times of great personal anguish and grief (e.g., when one's spouse or child suddenly dies, or when one's long-time lover unexpectedly announces that, "It's over"). After the early shock, numbing, and panic stages, it is during these times of mental and emotional grappling and grieving that the power and value of account-making seem to be most clear-cut in human life. Thus, this line of work extends our previous analysis from the domain of close relationship distress to encompass many types of human dilemmas. A recent paper by Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber (in press) outlines our conception. In brief, we have borrowed and elaborated on Horowitz's (1986) sequential stage-model of reactions to stress. Figure 1 shows these stages proposed by Horowitz and our modifications regarding when account-making is proposed to occur in the sequence.

As can be seen from Figure 1, we propose that account-making is particularly apt to become mature in what Horowitz calls the "working through" stage of coping. We suggest that in earlier stages, such as those involving denial, only rudimentary account-making may be occurring and that later it is virtually complete except for long-term and periodic review and revision activity. It can be seen from Figure 1 that we endorse Horowitz's proposal that failure to work through major stressors may lead to chronic problems including psychosomatic illness. Importantly, as Figure 1 shows in the "working through stage", we accord considerable value to the activity of confiding in close others about one's grief. Such confiding is a form of account-making. In order to be effective in allaying grief, however, the confiding activity has to be met with an empathic and caring audience. We also extend Horowitz's model to include the stage of identity change,

	START		MIDDLE		END	

SEQUENCE

| TRAUMATIC EVENT Involving **Shock** (feeling overwhelmed, numb) | OUTCRY Involving **Emotional Expression** (panic, exhaustion, despair, hopelessness) | DENIAL Early Stage of Account-Making Possibly Involving **Escapism** (avoidance, isolation) | INTRUSION Continued/ Initial Account-Making Involving **Flooded States** (distraction, obsessive review) | WORKING THROUGH Intensified Account-Making Confiding with Close Others | COMPLETION Completion of Story Acceptance Possession of Coping Skills | IDENTITY CHANGE Behavioral Expectations in Line with Account |

POSSIBLE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE TO ENGAGE IN ACCOUNT-MAKING DURING LATER STAGES OF SEQUENCE

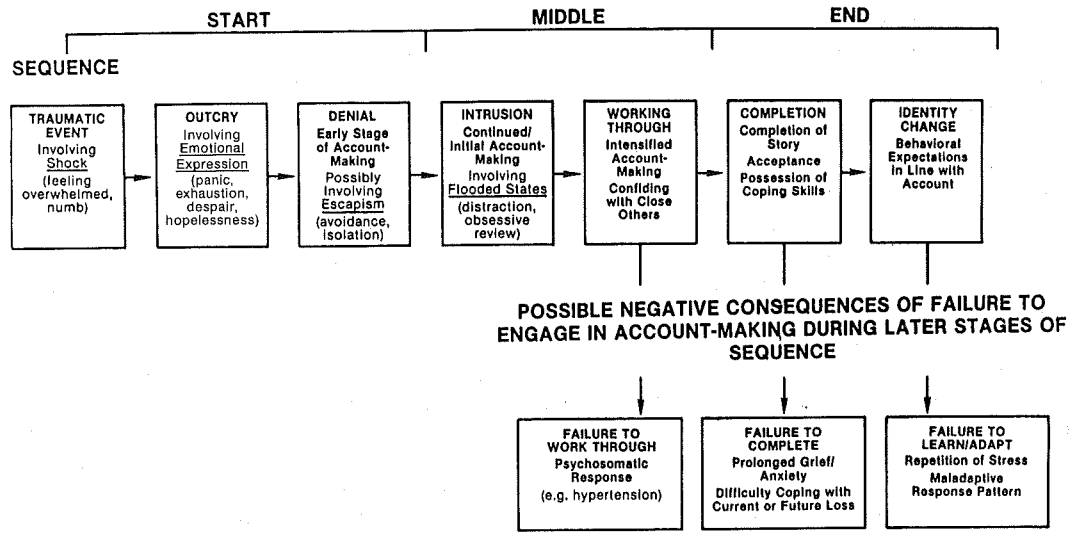| FAILURE TO WORK THROUGH Psychosomatic Response (e.g. hypertension)	FAILURE TO COMPLETE Prolonged Grief/ Anxiety Difficulty Coping with Current or Future Loss	FAILURE TO LEARN/ADAPT Repetition of Stress Maladaptive Response Pattern

Figure 1. *Model of occurrence of account-making in stress response sequence (Adapted from Horowitz, 1986, p. 41)*

which is the final stage in our conception. In addressing the long-term effects of traumatic experience, a number of scholars have pointed to the fundamentally altered beliefs now held by survivors. These new beliefs may involve a sense of great vulnerability and need to continue to search and make meaning out of one's existence (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983). Another feeling often entertained by survivors is that the world is not a just place and that one's personal control may be ripped away "in a heartbeat" (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). All of these specific beliefs may constitute part of the new identity of the survivor, who has an account with these kinds of elements, a new behavioral orientation for the future, and a new self/personhood that embodies new images of and scenarios for self (such reasoning is quite congenial to Kelly's, 1955, personal construct theory). Following the logic of Bem's (1972) self-perception theory, the survivor of major trauma at a certain point may be able to say, "Look at all that I have gone through. I somehow survived, and I'm a totally different person now."

One study that offers suggestive evidence about this identity change process was conducted by Harvey, Agostinelli, and Weber (1989) who asked newly separated partners of romantic relationships what new behavioral expectations they entertained as a consequence of the termination of their relationships. It was found that those who felt that a major factor in

their separation was that they had moved too quickly into sexual/romantic relationships with their ex-partners expected to "seek slow development" and "work at the relationship" in the future in their liaisons. In other words, these young adults felt that they had learned from their relationship loss that in the future, a gradual transition into intimacy, along with working on obstacles to closeness including personal problems, would be more conducive to a strong, long-term relationship.

So far, our research designed to evaluate this conception has involved collection of data from several populations of respondents who were dealing with different types of traumas in their lives. We have obtained evidence from persons who have recently separated after close, romantic relationships, Vietnam combat veterans, elderly persons who have lost loved ones to death, and women who have suffered incest or nonincestuous sexual assault. We also now are in the process of collecting data from the spouses of persons who have been severely brain injured.

Our ideas about the role of account-making and confiding in coping with severe stress are similar to those advanced by Pennebaker (1985, 1989). His theory of behavioral inhibition has been influential in stimulating research in the arena of trauma research (e.g., Murray, Lamnin, & Carver, 1989; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Pennebaker has postulated and provided evidence showing that

survivors of traumatic events often have improved psychological and physical health if they have confided to others about their trauma. Our focus differs somewhat from that of the Pennebaker team in that we are concerned with the contents of the confiding, or account-making, and the social dynamics involved in the confiding experience. We also believe that the confiding or account-making often requires much work and many years in order for a sense of completion and tranquility to develop. On the other hand, Pennebaker and colleagues have found that brief confiding experiences (e.g., told by college students in laboratory circumstances regarding personal events such as date rape or loss of grandparents by death) may have a positive effect on individuals and that writing, in particular, appears to be an effective agent in these types of confiding circumstances. It would be our contention that the more severe and enduring the stressor, the less helpful will be this type of intervention (Murray et al.'s 1989 evidence is supportive of this view). In such cases, only long-term cognitive/emotional work in the form of account-making and productive confiding with close others or skilled professionals would be likely to be efficacious. The following evidence from our sexual assault study addresses this contention.

Sexual Assault Study

In this study (Harvey, Orbuch, Chwalisz, & Garwood, under review), a group of 12 incest and 13 nonincestuous female sexual assault survivors responded to a questionnaire concerning a sexual assault they had suffered at some time in the past. They were asked to provide accounts of the assault experience; whether or not they had confided in others about this experience, and, if so, with what effect; how they had coped in general; and their beliefs about how the experience had affected their close relationships. The respondents ranged from 20 to 44 years-of-age and were generally well-educated, middle-class/income people living in the Midwestern United States. The respondents' answers were coded along dimensions relevant to: the extent of account-making activities (e.g., formal therapy, informal discussion with friends, diary or record-keeping, private reflection about the event, and its whys and wherefores), the nature and success of confiding if it occurred, the success of coping in general, perceived impact

on their close relationships, and present negative affect about the assault.

The resulting data were potent in showing first that the group of incest survivors exhibited a much greater sense that the assault had negatively influenced their close relationships, success in coping, and present affect than did the group of persons assaulted by nonrelatives. Further, in accord with our model of the role of account-making in stress reduction, it was found that account-making type activity was significantly positively correlated with successful coping ($r = .53$, $p < .01$) and significantly negatively correlated with present negative affect ($r = -.35$, $p < .05$). Regarding the confiding evidence, it was found that confiding that led to an empathic, helpful reaction from others was significantly, positively associated with successful coping. Also, such confiding was significantly negatively associated with negative affect. On the other hand, confiding that was met with uncaring or indifferent responses from others resulted in relatively low successful coping and with relatively high present negative affect.

There are many limitations to the evidence and conclusions of the Harvey et al. (under review) study. They include the small sample and self-selection issues, including the possibility that the people who participated differ in many ways from those who chose not to participate. Although the evidence was collected in such a way that the identities of the participants were not known to us, it took much courage for participants to agree to "spill their guts" about such an often humiliating and degrading experience as were the assaults reported by many of our participants — especially by members of the incest group. These participants may have been people who were now much more ready than the typical survivor of such assault to "tell their message" and, in so doing, try to help others and themselves through futher catharsis and possible insight gained. They may have been more involved in formal therapy and related account-making type activity than are those who elected not to participate.

Despite these limitations, we believe that these data are representative of what one would find in general in dealing with how people cope with major trauma. For example, the data on account-making generally are consistent with evidence from a study of incest survivors reported by Silver et al., 1983. The findings for

confiding also are consistent with data reported by Andrews and Brown (1988). These investigators report that women abused by their husbands, and who then experience non-optimal confiding encounters with others, show various negative reactions such as characterological self-blame for the abuse. Our data also cohere well with our model and the general thesis that account-making and confiding are essential to psychological health in the wake of severe stressors. Before leaving this study and presenting final arguments, we wish to present a modicum of the descriptive evidence reported by Harvey et al. that show more pointedly the plight of many of our participants and how they coped or did not cope well:

After an assault by a priest when she was a small child, a woman gave this response to the question about how the assault had affected her close relationships: "I had a chronic, long-standing fear and mistrust of men. I have had from 50 to 100 lovers. I avoid real intimacy with the opposite sex . . ." This same woman reported the following attempts to confide in others about her assault: "I waited until I was 19 to tell my mother about the priest. She said it never happened." An excerpt from the account of the assault given by an incest survivor: "I would have to write a whole book to answer this question. From the time I was 5 to 16 I was raped repeatedly by male family members [father, grandfather, brother], and I was beaten when I told on them. No one believed me . . ." An example of account-making activity described in the coping question (after an assault at age 10 by her brother): ". . . stayed a virgin for many years . . . went for counseling, family counseling several times . . . psychotherapy & group therapy this last year [now 34 years old] . . . Emotional healing course twice lately . . . letters & phone calls to the family, parents, sisters & brothers, to my brother the abuser. I'm right now making a family tape & a letter to my ex-husband who was emotionally and physically abusive." Finally, another example of nonhelpful confiding by a woman who between the ages of 8 to 18 was assaulted repeatedly by her brother: "The first time I revealed the abuse was to DHS [Department of Human Services] and my parents was when I was twelve. DHS concluded it was normal sibling curiosity. My parents reacted with anger towards me, yelling about my brother's reputation if it should get around town. Their reactions left me feeling totally isolated and alone . . . forcing me to be victimized for another four years."

Limitations to Our Approach

Before turning to what we view to be the over-arching value of account-making as a positive force in human adaptation, we must return briefly to the topic of limitations. Both our conceptual model and our empirical research are subject to many crucial questions at this juncture. They include:

1. How is account-making causally related to other important variables such as psychological health? The evidence thus far is correlational and suggestive at best. We need longitudinal research in which account-making is assessed at various points along with measures of presumed related psychological and physical states and processes.

2. Despite many efforts to strengthen and demystify the coding process for spontaneous attributions and more general presentations of account-like material, we still are at the mercy of rather crude coding and classification techniques. Further, efforts to quantify this type of material via coding procedures are open to the possibility that other scholars will not be able to replicate these procedures.

3. There are numerous related concepts and models in this area of work. This state of affairs makes integration of ideas and/or clear-cut differentiations difficult. Beyond this conceptual fuzziness, empirical work is needed to evaluate the merit of related concepts.

4. The theory at this point is quite general and even vague about particular relationships such as the relationship between account-making that is private and account-making that involves confiding in others. Nor has work been done to address central questions such as when will people feel that their account is complete? Or when will they feel satisfied with relatively incomplete accounts? Theoretical and/or empirical work to date does not begin to tell us whether or not people can engage in too much account-making at various times and how various degrees and types of account-making are optimal for different types of situation.

Although we have begun to study account-making in different populations encountering traumatic experiences, we have only suggestive leads that different groups respond in quite different ways to trauma. It may help to provide some examples regarding this important issue.

One was a recent study of the coping process in times of loss of loved ones to death exhibited by a sample of elderly respondents. Several respondents reported to us that the loss of their spouses or close friends was "a blessing" because the departed had lived a full life and suffered a lot in disease prior to death, or that the death occurred after a full lifetime and was "peaceful" in nature. Accordingly, they reported little need to engage in account-making activity or to talk to others about it (or to "burden others" with their feelings). In short, the trauma did not come as a surprise, and in a sense, sometimes it came as a relief to the survivor. This reaction is likely to be quite different for spouses who lose loved ones early in life, or in mid-life, and perhaps in a sudden fashion.

In another ongoing study of the spouses of brain injured patients, we are finding that respondents' search for meaning is beset with flux. The erratic behavior and feelings of the injured person make life uncertain. As one spouse said in her account about living with her husband, "There is no sense to it. We have to take each day as it comes. There are no guidelines as to how any day will go. It can change very rapidly. . . . I don't grieve [about her husband's injury] anymore. Now there are reminders almost everyday and more than anything they make me angry, sometimes frightened. I realize how dysfunctional my relationship is, but it is safe in that I know where Dave [her husband] is . . . Very few people have ever seen Dave at his worst — I mean during angry spells. So they can't understand why I'm so scared and paranoid. His family thinks I'm crazy, that Dave is fine . . . and I'm a bitch and all around bad person." Again, then, the account-making process (and that of confiding) would appear to be very different for persons in this type of situation. In fact, one may have to suspend account-making in order to have enough tranquility simply to get by from day to day, and crisis to crisis, in living with the brain injured. Thus, available evidence points to the diversity of the account-making process across different types of trauma.

We noted at an earlier point in this paper that our concept seemed to be a central one in the social and behavioral sciences and that many avenues for further inquiry existed. We now must acknowledge that some of these avenues must necessarily involve a lot of refinement in theory and method. But we do have a few counter-points to these limitations. Virtually all useful psychological theories possess many limitations, including the fact that not enough causal information has been obtained and that the methodologies used to explore them usually have not been comprehensive and/or totally defensible and persuasive. This point is particularly true if one believes that it is important to try to study phonomena that are rich in complexity and to study them in their natural contexts.

Meaning, Hope, and Generativity

In this concluding commentary, we will briefly discuss how account-making is related to the concepts of meaning, hope, and generativity. The concept of meaning is central to our case and follows closely the emphasis Frankl (1963) placed on the search for meaning as vital to a human's survival. Our thesis is simply that account-making and related social activities such as confiding are highly conducive to the development of meaning in any type of situation. Hope, too, lies at the center of our analysis. A recent monograph by Averill, Catlin, and Chon (1990) presents a theoretical statement of hope and a series of studies designed to investigate its phenomenal experience. Averill et al. concluded that at least for Americans, hope is treated like an emotion, is viewed as transitory and hard to control, but it also is viewed as a critically important almost passion-like state by many. Metaphors of hope abound in the culture and include: Emily Dickinson's characterization of hope as "the thing with feathers that perches in the soul", Kierkegaard's argument that hope is "the passion for the possible", and well-known maxims such as "hope springs eternal in the human breast." Averill et al. contend that similar to the beneficial role attributed to optimistic outlook (Scheier & Carver, 1985), hope also may be seen as a valuable quality of the human mind in times of crisis and stress, because it allows the human to continue trying to work toward solutions — even in situations that suggest pessimism is warranted. We would extend this argument with the hypothesis that the experience of hope in a situation will be enhanced to the extent that account-making has occurred.

Finally, how does generativity enter into our question? We would suggest that data such as

those derived from the aforementioned study of sexual assault survivors, along with a vast array of formal and informal evidence — only some of which we have described in this paper — point to the role of accounts in facilitating identity change and generative growth in human beings. As Erikson (1963) argued, one of the greatest challenges of adulthood, and by implication personhood in general, is generativity. Generativity is the process of guiding and promoting the next generation through such creative behaviors as parenting, teaching, leading, and contributing to one's community in many ways. Generativity is also the process of dealing with grief and deep psychological suffering in a way that gives strength to others. Many have used account-making as part of this generative process. Two recent examples are the actresses Gilda Radner and Jill Ireland who each succumbed to cancer in recent times, but who also fought the disease valiantly and in the process wrote books about their fight and hope. Most of all, these courageous writers have used their accounts and personal search for meaning, following as they were in Frankl's (1959) distinguished tradition, to motivate others in similar situations and people in general toward a fuller realization of their potential to create meaning and hope and to affect others in positive ways.

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