Centrality of Event across Cultures
Emotionally positive and negative events in Mexico, China, Greenland, and Denmark

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Abstract

During their lifetime, people experience both emotionally positive and negative events. The Centrality of Event Scale (CES; Berntsen and Rubin, 2006; Berntsen, Rubin and Siegel, 2011) measures the extent to which an event is central to someone’s identity and life story. An event becomes central when it is an important part of our identity and life story, when it changes the way we view the world in everyday life, and when we use it as a turning point in our life story. CES research has produced important findings regarding how the emotionality of a life event influences the way we incorporate an emotional event into our life story and our identity. Key findings: 1) Positive events are rated as more central to identity than negative events; 2) The extent to which highly traumatic and negative events become central to a person’s life story and identity varies as a function of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression symptoms. Participants with higher PTSD and depression scores reported that a traumatic or negative event was highly central to their identity and life story; and 3) A significant number of positive events occur during participants’ adolescence and early adulthood, while negative events increased as participants grew older.

What about cultural differences?

Key Questions

(1) Are positive events more central to identity and life stories than negative events? Do we find this positivity bias and self-enhancement across cultures?

(2) Do individuals who rate a negative event as highly central to their identity and life stories experience more PTSD and depression and less life satisfaction across cultures? Do we find an association between depression, PTSD, and event centrality scores for negative events?

(3) When do the most positive and the most negative events occur in life across cultures? Do we find that positive events are clustered during adolescence and early adulthood, following the life script?

Method

- Participants
  - 565 adults over 40 years old, 65% females, from Mexico, Greenland, China, and Denmark
  - Mean age = 52.31, range 40-91

- Materials
  - Centrality of Event Scale (CES; Berntsen & Rubin, 2006)
  - 7-item Centrality of Event Scale for negative events
  - 7-item Event Centrality Scale for positive events
  - Depression, PTSD, and Life Satisfaction
  - Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)
  - The PTSD Checklist. Civilian version (PCL-C)
  - Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

Are positive events more central to identity and life stories than negative events?

![Graph showing centrality of positive and negative events across cultures](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Centrality</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Greenland</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centrality of Positive Event</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.50 (0.70)</td>
<td>4.54 (0.62)</td>
<td>4.44 (0.64)</td>
<td>4.45 (0.59)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality of Negative Event</td>
<td>3.02 (1.26)</td>
<td>3.44 (1.00)</td>
<td>3.80 (0.98)</td>
<td>3.47 (1.08)</td>
<td>12.25**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When do the most positive and the most negative events occur in life?

![Graph showing percentage of positive and negative events across ages](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of events</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Greenland</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-24 years</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-39 years</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-59 years</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 years and older</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

(1) Positive events are more central to identity and life stories than negative events.

(2) Centrality of negative events is associated with high scores depression and PTSD.

(3) A significant number of positive events are life script events and therefore, they cluster between 15 to 30 years of age.

References


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