Religious coping reconsidered.

Part two: a narrative reformulation

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ABSTRACT

The second article proposes a narrative reformulation of religious coping theories. Using the multidimensional framework of the first article, a narrative perspective is presented in which the four dimensions mentioned are conceptually connected. In addition, narrative criteria are proposed to discern individualized religious processes. In this narrative theory, existing research and theory are incorporated in a unifying model. The aim of this article is to provide an example of a unifying theory of religious coping and to show the usefulness of a narrative approach.

1 INTRODUCTION

Our objective in this second article is to provide a narrative reformulation of religious coping theories. Earlier we have given a short description of the personal narratives and their meaning for identity, context and religion (Ganzevoort 1993). Here we elaborate on this narrative theory, taking up some central remarks, and working in the direction of a reformulation of religious coping theory.

2 A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The history of the narrative perspective in psychology has only just begun, although stories have been an important source for psychologists and a vehicle for education and counseling. In our days, many regard the narrative perspective as a useful complement and correction to more positivistic approaches (see Boyd 1996, Gergen 1994, Sarbin 1986, Schlauch 1995, Shotter 1993, Vitz 1992 a, b). Bruner (1986) distinguishes between two forms of cognitive functioning, which he terms story and argument. Both have the purpose of convincing, but where argument convinces of logical truth, story convinces of lifelikeness. Characteristic of the narrative approach, in comparison to what he calls the paradigmatic thought, is that experience is explicitly

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placed in time and space, and that it does not try to transcend particular experience into abstractions.

We regard narrative here as a discourse in which (factual or fictional) events are placed in an order, structured by content and sequence, so that a coherence of meaning can be seen. Therefore not every experience, situation and action can be thought of as having a narrative structure. Structuring and interpretation (although often preconscious and not yet verbalized) are in our view essential for narrative (Robinson & Hawpe 1986). Metaphors and imagination are seen as specifications of the narrative mode. We suggest narrativity be defined as the story-like structure through which summoned authors experience and understand their lives, and by which they try to make, shape or break relationships, with the purpose of maximizing significance. Several features of a narrative theory can be summarized in the following working formula: The author tells a story to an audience with a purpose.

The first important feature of a narrative theory is the author. Every story has an author, even if the author is an abstract entity (as in archetypical or mythical stories or the narratives that shape a culture). The author is responsible for his or her narrative constructions. This authorship however is limited because of the social interactions in which a completely free choice of narrative motives and forms is not acceptable. Marginalised groups in society for example are assumed to speak in the language of the dominant group. This is true in an ethnic sense, but also in the sense that marginalised people are not allowed to use the stories, metaphors and paradigms relevant to them, but threatening to the leading majority. Consequently, Brown & Gilligan (1991) and Day et al. (1994) explicitly ask what voice is present in the stories. Others have given their attention to the silenced voices of victims (Cooey 1994, Ledbetter 1996, Neal & Mangis 1995) This matter of voice and authorship is especially important in the transcending experiences of religion and crisis. Both religious and crisis experiences have become ever more private and intimate, so that the individual is forced to make his or her own choices. On the other hand, many religious and coping responses are not acceptable to the context of the individual. The freedom of the author is indeed a very limited one.

The second feature in a narrative theory is the story itself. In the story we find the actors, the persons that have a part in this story. In personal narratives or life stories, the author usually refers to himself or herself as the I-figure or protagonist. Author and actor may be the same person in the real world, in the world of the story they are distinctly different. The author is the person who is telling the story, the actor is the person within the story, presented in a specific way that suits the experiences, expectations and demands of the author. Evidently, the author often alters the story in such a way that the factual actions of the actor are acceptable. The other actors in the story are the persons that are significant in a certain episode. Their conduct and character are reshaped and reinterpreted in the same way as is the main actor. In telling the story, the author has the opportunity of molding facts and fiction into a structure with which he or she can live. For that reason, specific roles and other stylistic motives are adopted in the story. As mentioned before, the scene of the story is determined by time and space. They form the background of the story, and set the limits for actions and interpretations. All these components are structured in a specific sequence we call the plot. This is the conceptual logic in the story that connects the beginning with the end through a series of events. At a higher level of abstraction, the series of stories together form a frame of reference, of which the central story line can

be called the personal narrative (Ganzevoort 1993). Later we will deal with the question whether the author is capable of creating a consistent personal narrative.

The third feature is the audience (cf. Day 1991, Gergen 1994). Here we are interested in the question to whom the author tells his or her story. This question is crucial to the understanding of every story. The listener present is to be seen as the primary audience; all significant others (including imaginary figures and God) can be part of the secondary audience. Whether present or not, the audience has an influence on the author and the story that can hardly be overestimated. They are the judges of every story told, forcing the author to tell the story so that it is accepted as legitimate and plausible. The audience is also initiating the story by summoning the author, asking for a response (Ricoeur 1995, Shotter 1989). This stresses the social origins of narrative action.

As Day (1993) points out, narratives are told and played out in the dramatic negotiation of social relationships. They serve to alter or strengthen the positioning of the persons involved. Through the interchange and negotiation of the authors, each bearing their own story lines, actors and purposes, the relational drama evolves. Therefore, narratives are seen as performative rather than representative (see also Gergen 1994, Shotter 1982).

The fourth feature is the purpose. The purpose of making, shaping and breaking relationships is maximizing significance. Following Pargament (1997), we use this term, because it is not limited to positive or constructive purposes like "meaning" or "purpose in life". Significance is a matter of personal interpretation, and is connected to the valued endpoint of the story line (Gergen 1994). Many detailed descriptions of significance can be given, but they are all subcategories of the two main purposes of every story: structure and acceptance. Structure is the inner purpose, enhancing personal identity. By imposing a (perceived as logical) order on the experiences of life, the author sees (or creates) a coherent and meaningful pattern. In principle, each story has this purpose, but it is not always the dominant objective. Acceptance is the contextual purpose, enhancing social identity. Given the weight of the audience, the author tries to convince his or her public of the legitimacy and plausibility of the narrative construction. The aim of this is that every author (i.e., every human being) is consequently seeking to be accepted, affirmed and loved. For that reason, the actors in the story play their role according to how the author wishes to be seen by the audience. No matter how paradoxical it may sound, even the stories in which the author presents his or her own guilt, failure, repulsiveness and inferiority serve this purpose of being accepted in a certain role.

3 NARRATIVE AND RELIGION

In narrative terms, we see the religious process as a specific type of storytelling and of stories. All the features mentioned above, can be applied to the religious narrative process. In the religious culture or group, the author may be more abstract than in the personal narrative, but the structure of this religious process is the same. The central question therefore is on what criteria stories can be classified as religious. Here we stress the notion of religion as a multiplex process. Religion cannot be defined in simple terms or measures. Pargament et al. (1995) are right, when they note: "... religiousness is, for many people, an organized, identifiable and individualized psychological construct." Still, this individual organization of religiousness begs for

conceptualization that does not disqualify religious phenomena that differ in content or form from the researcher's views. Therefore we suggest that a person, story or phenomenon be taken to be religious if any one criterion classifies as religious. This minimum-approach tries to do justice to new forms of religiousness, but it also meets the need for criteria that discriminate religious from nonreligious phenomena.

In the first article, we chose to speak of a religious identity if the identity-process is related to a transcendent Person or Object. In this view world-immanent perspectives are qualified as nonreligious. The relation with the transcendent (that is, the religious identity) can be traced in each dimension of our narrative theory: authorship, story, audience and purpose. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive. They describe a variety of perspectives in which religious processes can be discovered. We will propose several criteria, following the working formula we have chosen to describe narrative: the author tells a story to an audience with a purpose.

A narrative reformulation may be useful to clarify the concept of a relation with God. This notion is widely used in popular Christian writings. It also appears in more scholarly publications, but often without proper conceptualization (as in Mabe & Dawes 1991). The reason for this vagueness may be that the idea of relation is metaphorically transposed from the interpersonal to the religious domain. The elements of the metaphor however, do not easily correspond. In a narrative theory, a relation can be described by three criteria. First: the author's awareness of playing a role in the story of the other. Second: the author's inclusion of the other in his or her own story. Third: the awareness of the other as part of the audience to whom the story is told. In the religious domain these criteria are as useful as they are in the interpersonal. Awareness of playing a role in the story of God marks the religious author. Inclusion of God in the personal narrative marks the religious content of the story. Awareness of God as part of the audience marks the religious audience and purpose.

3.1 THE RELIGIOUS AUTHOR

First, (using the criterion of authorship) stories can be thought of as religious if their author is religious. That is, in telling the story, the author takes a religious stance. This does not necessarily mean that the actors of the story are portrayed as religious people, not even the "I" of the story one tells. Now what do we mean by the religious stance of the author? Several classic criteria can be useful to distinguish the religious from the nonreligious, among which the religious orientation is one of the best known. Allport's distinction between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religiousness, expanded by Batson's Quest-orientation, provides a framework for religious attitudes. Extrinsic Religiousness would refer to an attitude that has selfish / utilitarian motives, either toward social gain (Es - Extrinsic Social) or toward gaining comfort, security and protection (Ep - Extrinsic Personal). Intrinsic Religiousness would refer to personal religious commitment. We deliberately describe these orientations vaguely, because, as Kirkpatrick & Hood (1990) have shown, the I/E distinction lacks conceptual clarity and empirical support. It is not clear yet whether I/E scales measure attitudes, beliefs, motivations, values and/or behavior. Neither is it clear whether I and E represent opposite poles of one continuum, or two independent dimensions. Kirkpatrick and Hood further criticize the value-ladenness of the constructs (Intrinsic as "good religion"), the neglect of religious content in research and theory, and the fact that the

I/E distinction isolates psychology of religion from other fields in psychology. Instead they advocate approaches as attribution theories, coping theories and so on.

Instead of taking certain religious beliefs or behaviors as criteria, we propose that religious authorship be seen as part of the concept of religious identity. Religious authorship is then defined as the attitude in which the individual relates the telling of stories to the transcendent. Two questions might be useful markers to discriminate the religious from the nonreligious on this criterion of authorship. The first one is the question: to what extent is the author in his or her performance aware of the relatedness to transcendence. This does not imply the explicit inclusion of transcendence in the story, the audience or the purpose of the narrative process. Even if all the other dimensions show no explicit reference to the Transcendent, the awareness of the author would qualify him or her as religious. Ricoeur (1995) speaks of the "summoned self," arguing that religion (and in fact every story, Shotter 1989) is the response of the author to someone addressing him or her. Scobie (1994) explicitly mentions three attitudes: belief, unbelief and nonbelief. The first two attitudes would qualify as religious, as they speak (either positively of negatively) of the relation with transcendence. Only the third category (nonbelief) would qualify as nonreligious, because in that instance awareness of transcendence is absent.

The second issue is the question: to what extent does the author take responsibility? In their research on religious coping, Pargament et al. (1988) described three problem-solving styles: self-directing, deferring, collaborative. A self-directing style stresses personal agency and involves lower levels of traditional religious involvement. Deferring problem-solving implies awaiting solutions from God, and shows lower levels of coping competence. The collaborative style of problem-solving involves active personal exchange with God, internalized commitment and higher levels of personal competence. This distinction does not imply that one of these styles is nonreligious. However, a self-directing style could qualify as nonreligious in the dimension of authorship, especially if the other dimensions do not qualify as religious. When a person experiences and exhibits an independent coping style, not related to the Transcendent, and expects no divine presence or assistance, we would have to speak of nonreligious authorship. Our criterion here is that religious authorship implies the taking of responsibility in relation with transcendence. However tempting it may be (at the other extreme) to disqualify a deferring style, as it does not enhance narrative competence or responsibility, that would create another value-laden bias. Nevertheless, if the author avoids all responsibility, by that refusing to take authorship, this would seriously harm the notion of a relation with transcendence. Religious stories therefore should include a "search for the self," as Pargament & Park (1995) describe. In this context we note an important finding of Klein & Janoff-Bulman (1996). In an analysis of autobiographic stories by both victims and nonvictims of childhood sexual abuse, they found that victims used significantly more words referring to others than did nonvictims, and significantly fewer words referring to themselves. Trauma (at least this specific trauma) seems to diminish personal authorship. Religious coping in this light could (should) function in the enhancement and restoration of narrative competence.

3.2 THE RELIGIOUS STORY

Second, on the criterion of story, the theologians Luther (1992) and Ganzevoort (1994b) propose religious stories are characterized by motives of hope, trust and

openness. In the relation with God (or how the different religious traditions may call the Transcendent), these motives mark the distinction between belief and unbelief. In religious stories, the graceful acceptance by God asks for a response that is not self-justifying or accusing, but open to the vulnerability that transcends one's existence. These criteria may be too theological or too Christian to apply in a narrative psychology of coping and religion as we propose in this article. Still, some important issues are raised in this theological discussion.

Central in these issues is the notion of transcendence, which can function at several levels of experience and relationships. Religious stories concern the transcending of personal and private boundaries. In the experience of crises, of the relationship with other people, and of the relationship with God, openness for transcendence is a fundamental element and a necessary substrate for a religious story. A religious story in our view then presupposes openness for transcendence. The psychological basis for this relation relates to the Eriksonian identity-conflict between basic trust and basic mistrust. Although this does not coincide with religiousness, seeing how a relation with transcendence could do without at least some basic trust is hard.

Furthermore, we claim that the structure of a religious story implies openness for transcending experiences. As we noted earlier, development, change and discontinuity can be seen as necessary conditions for religion. Ricoeur's formula of religious language as "borderline language" points to the fact that both religion and life events transcend the individual. Stories structured in a way that excludes the brokenness, fragmentation and intrusion from outside may still use religious terms. However, structurally they should be qualified as nonreligious, because this very closure or exclusion prevents openness for a relation with transcendence. Religious stories are characterized by openness for transcendence.

Another issue is the notion that openness for transcendence implies the openness for a transcendent actor. The narrative construction can take many forms, but openness for the possibility of transcendent intrusion should be implied.

Then we emphasize religious story structures are characterized by symbolic and metaphorical language. Describing transcendence inner-worldly is logically contradictory. The only way we can refer to the transcendent world is metaphorical. Nonmetaphorical language may speak of transcendence, but its very structure prohibits openness for the transcendent. We clearly use the term "metaphorical" here on a different level than for example Lakoff & Johnson (1980), who claimed that all of our understanding of self and world is metaphorically based and structured. Their claim is congenial to our proposal for a narrative approach. Here we claim that metaphorical language is a prerequisite for a religious story. Specific contents and structures to discern religious metaphors still have to be defined. Researching the interaction of personal religious story structures with the narratives of religious traditions might be useful, including their variety of myths and symbols.

An important and illuminating aspect of the story is the role(s) the author attributes to him or herself, and the role(s) available for God. In the description of André in the first article, the connection between these roles became apparent. This can be understood by the notion of complement-roles. The interpersonal interplay between two persons demands a negotiation of roles, by which the players express their expectations, so that a role-play is established in which each player finds the space to function in a role (optimally acceptable to both). Every role a player might choose

involves necessarily a complement-role. For example, the role of dictator demands the complement role of either servant or rebel. In growing up, the individual organizes the roles attributed to him or her in a hierarchical model with central and marginal roles, each consistent with specific story lines and interpersonal relationships. Each role for the self also involves complement-roles for God. In conversation with the religious tradition and context, another negotiation of roles leads to specific religious images of God. This approach to roles and images of God denies a direct line between parental images and images of God, and stresses the importance of the self-role as mediating factor. It broadens the important contribution of Sundén's role theory, in which the roles are limited to biblical narratives (Belzen 1996, Ganzevoort, in preparation).

3.3 THE RELIGIOUS AUDIENCE

Third, stories can be viewed as religious on the criterion of audience, if their adressate is transcendent, that is to say, the significant other to whom the story is told eventually. This may be implicit or explicit (as in prayers and confessions). According to Luther (1992), this is important, because the narrative purpose of acceptance can only be accomplished in full by the grace of God. All human members of the narrative audience will eventually fail in giving complete narrative atonement. Central in religious stories therefore is that they are a response to God.

Again we have to move from these theological categories to narrative criteria. We propose to speak of responsiveness to transcendence (cf. Streib 1991). The religious story is characterized by the effort to respond to a transcendent Person or Object. Every story is implicitly or explicitly oriented toward the audience that will establish the legitimacy and plausibility of one's narrative constructions. If the author includes the Transcendent in his or her audience, then we can speak of a religious narrative process. This dimension has implications for ethical and behavioral choices of the individual. In fact, a person's actions are results and indications of the story one lives by and the audience one addresses.

Inclusion of transcendence in the audience can take direct and indirect, implicit and explicit forms. Direct and explicit forms are found in prayer and other religious practices. Indirect and implicit forms are found in the interaction with a religious context. Characteristic of direct and explicit forms is what Pargament & Park (1995) call the "search for the Sacred" as a function of religion. They describe this function as spiritual motive and purpose, which may be even harder to conceptualize than our notion of transcendent audience. Characteristic of indirect and implicit forms may be the "search for intimacy," which includes the social dimension of religion.

3.4 THE RELIGIOUS PURPOSE

Fourth, on the criterion of purpose, religious stories can be described by several motivations. As noted, Pargament & Park (1995) respond to a reductionistic view that accuses religion of being used as a means of tension reduction only, by adding four other functions or motivations: the search for meaning, the search for intimacy, the search for self and the search for the sacred. They probably are right in their reaction, but each of these motivations should be discussed to develop criteria on which religious and nonreligious purposes can be distinguished. We mentioned the search for self in our discussion of religious authorship, and the search for the sacred in discussing religious audience.

The search for meaning relates to the ordering of the experiences of life. Every story has the intention of constructing a coherent and consistent interpretation, perceived as meaningful and adequate to the situation. A story then is qualified as religious if it orders the experience in relation to transcendence. This dimension includes religious attributions and interpretations. Useful perspectives in this dimension can be derived from Janoff-Bulman's theory of assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman 1992), or McIntosh's theory of religion-as-schema, where he uses the following definition: "A schema is a cognitive structure or mental representation containing organized, prior knowledge about a particular domain, including a specification of the relations among its attributes" (McIntosh 1995).

The search for intimacy and the search for the sacred have in common the purpose of acceptance by the audience. They differ with respect to the content of the audience. The search for intimacy focuses on the social religious context, whereas the search for the sacred focuses on the transcendent audience. As mentioned earlier, Luther (1992) states that religious purposes by nature evoke responses (stories) that are not self-justifying or accusing, but open to the vulnerability that transcends one's existence.

Finally, religious purposes can be described as characterized by the motive of hope (Capps 1997). Here we find an interaction with the dimensions of story (basic trust, openness for transcendence). We discuss it here because the religious purpose of hope transcends the past and present into the future. Hope does not escape the present reality, but relates the momentary to a world-to-come (no matter how this purpose is theologically expressed). In discussing religious coping and the purpose of hope, we point to another finding of Klein & Janoff-Bulman (1996). They found that victims of sexual abuse used significantly more words for describing their past, and significantly fewer words describing their future. This might lead to the hypothesis that one of the central religious purposes in coping is the enhancement of hope.

3.5 SUMMARY

Our discussion of narrative criteria for religious processes in identity, coping and context can be summarized in the terms of figure 1. We remind the reader that in our proposal a story is classified as religious if at least one criterion qualifies. Of course it may be expected that more dimensions will then show religious features. Still, we advocate a minimum-approach, to do justice to the variety of individualized religious attitudes, beliefs, motivations, etcetera.

TABLE 1: NARRATIVE CRITERIA FOR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, CONTEXT AND COPING

Dimension	Narrative criteria
Authorship	Taking responsibility Narrative competence Search for self
Story	Basic trust Inclusion of fragmentation Transcendent actor Metaphorical speech
Audience	Responsiveness Transcendent address (Search for intimacy and Search for the sacred)

Purpose	Ordering the experience (Search for meaning) Seeking acceptance (Search for intimacy and Search for the sacred) Hope

In this narrative perspective, experience, interpretation and behavior (including ritual) find their place easily. Each of these dimensions are both antecedents, elements and resultants of religious stories. One advantage of a narrative model is that it can clarify many different phenomena, pointing instantly to their interactions as well. Each criterion needs further conceptualization and operationalization. Our proposal is limited to the sketch of a narrative approach for the psychology of religious coping. In further defining the concepts, we should bear in mind their narrative, contextual and process-determined nature. Conceptualization into paradigmatic, isolated, and stable measures would mean to abandon the entire framework of a narrative theory. We will leave the matter of further conceptualization aside, and focus again on religious coping, after making some remarks on narrative identity and context.

3.6 NARRATIVE, IDENTITY AND CONTEXT

Personal identity processes can be understood in a narrative way as the constant shaping and reshaping of life stories that try to hold together the experiences of life. In constant interaction with the context, the author is presenting and reconstructing the story with the purposes of finding structure and acceptance. These remarks make it clear that identity should be seen as a dynamic process, interacting with the fields of context, coping and religion, and evolving over time. McAdams (1990a, b) makes an important contribution in his narrative reformulation of Erikson's developmental scheme. He claims that the individual is " . . . a subjectively composed and construed life story that integrates one's past, present and future. The story is the person's identity." In youth, the dimensions of tone, image and theme are defined, leading to personal and social identity in an interaction between actorship and communion (power and intimacy). Every life stage creates new elements and dimensions of this life story: setting, scene, character, and script.

For personal identity, structure is the basic narrative purpose. For social identity, it is acceptance. These two processes are mutually dependent. A lack of acceptance in the social identity will be a negative complication in finding a meaningful structure. Lack of structure will make it infinitely difficult to find acceptance, because then there is no story to tell the audience. Both social and personal identity are needed in the construction of the personal narrative, if it is to be adequate and coherent.

Personal identity is also closely linked to both religion and coping. Coping processes are an essential part of the development of the personal identity, as is clear from Erikson's emphasis on crisis in the transition between developmental stages. Although his concept of crisis is not identical to ours, the notion of development through crises and coping suits very well in a narrative view. Thus we can see how coping and identity shape one another. Religion is in narrative terms also a part, antecedent and result of identity processes. Both religious and identity stories tell us who we are and where we stand in this world. They define, interpret and direct our relations with God and our fellow human beings.

From the outset, the narrative perspective takes the context seriously. Based on a notion of Day (1991), we speak of the narrative audience that judges the stories, as has been said earlier. At this point, the consequences of (post)modernity are extremely troubling. One of the central cultural developments in our time is the loss of a collective consensus how and on what grounds a human being can find acceptance and account for his or her life. Due to the increased pluralism, the context becomes ever more fragmented, leaving the individual in a series of contexts, each of which has its own norms, values and stories (Gerkin 1986).

This leads to the situation, that a single story will not suffice for a person to be accepted and justified (acceptance being seen as the central narrative purpose in the field of context). The author will need a whole series of (often contradictory) stories to legitimate his or her life. In this situation, two tendencies can be discovered. One is the withdrawal from a confusing world into a smaller sub-context of shared stories that become increasingly ideological. The advantage of this strategy is that it reduces the confusion and offers a coherence of meaning. The risk, however, is that the individual is forced to interpret life events in a way that is not completely adequate and satisfying to his or her own experience. This is what the Dutch psychologist Zwart (1993) terms a fundamentalist attitude. He uses this term to describe an attitude of socially imposed dogmatism at the expense of the individual narrative freedom, not to denote the specific theological contents of certain religious denominations. The other tendency is the construction of separate stories, incompatible with one another. The advantage is that the individual can live in a larger context. The risk is that the individual probably cannot find meaning in threatening situations, leaving him or her in a state of massive confusion. Here Zwart (1993) speaks of a postmodern attitude. It can be assumed that pathological types like multiple personality and borderline syndromes derive from this constant confusion of stories.

In coping and religion, these tendencies have an enormously damaging effect. Both in the development and preservation of a religious attitude, the context is very important for the construction of a religious story perceived as meaningful. A world as plural as ours, challenges heavily the plausibility of religious stories. In coping, the individual is highly dependent of a supportive context, both in a practical or socio-emotional way and in the search for meaning. The task for the individual to find a personal meaning in a threatening situation often outweighs the narrative capacity. This may lead to higher levels of stress on the personal narrative and an increase in identity questions.

4 NARRATIVE INTERACTIONS IN RELIGIOUS COPING

In this narrative framework, we can now attempt to reformulate crisis and coping. Following the discussion in our first article, we will focus on the event, appraisals, activities and coping-outcome. Central in the narrative perspective however is that we do not take our starting point at the moment a life-event occurs. A narrative theory presupposes a historical perspective. A crisis does not occur in a narrative vacuum, but at a specific point of an already existing personal narrative, a frame of reference, that has evolved over many experiences and interpretations. This personal narrative leads to a certain way of living, preventing some events from happening, and making the individual prone to other events. In the existing personal narrative, we encounter the previously made interpretations. These can be interpreted in Eriksonian terms as the outcomes of critical encounters (basic trust - mistrust, initiative - guilt, etcetera, cf.

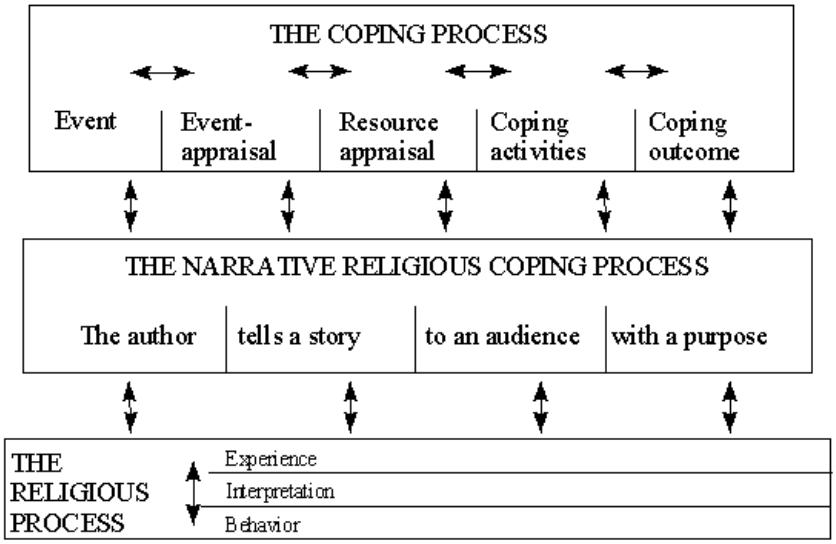
McAdams' narrative reformulation, 1990a, b). They can also be described as fundamental assumptions in the terms of Janoff-Bulman (1992). She proposes these fundamental assumptions to be generalized representations, formed in social interaction. The assumptive world constructed by these assumptions is conservative by nature, denying facts that do not fit in. As Janoff-Bulman & Timko (1987) put it: "Viewed within the framework of the individual's need to alter his or her assumptive world, denial following negative life events, is apt to be not only adaptive, but generally necessary in preventing a total psychological breakdown. Denial enables an individual to pace his or her recovery following trauma by reducing excessive amounts of anxiety and confusion" (cf. Ganzevoort 1994a).

Whenever a new event appears, be it situational or developmental, the author will try to interpret it and give it a place in one of the (central) stories of his or her personal narrative. If the person can do so, a coherence of meaning can be seen. This process is called primary or event appraisal in coping theories. Any event that fits in the stories available will not lead to an existential crisis, although it may cause an emotional (psychological) crisis, due to the taxing of one's resources. When finding a suitable interpretation seems impossible (i.e., to connect it to one of the available story lines), an existential crisis will occur. The secondary or resource appraisal is part of this process too, as the perceived resources are part of the story.

All coping-activities are directed toward the formation and preservation of a personal narrative perceived as providing an adequate coherence of meaning. Problem-focused coping tries to alter the situation, which is effective if the facts can be changed. The result is that the story can remain intact. Emotion-focused coping tries to change the meaning of the situation, which can be effective if the facts are inalterable. In both cases, effective coping leads to a reappraisal, in which the threat or damage is reduced. In narrative terms, the story line can be preserved or changed to place the interpreted experience in a meaningful pattern. When the author succeeds (and often in a trial and error sequence), positive coping outcomes can be found. The central narrative purpose in coping is structure. The purpose of acceptance may play a role in it, and quite often sets boundaries for acceptable coping activities, but the questions regard the loss of meaning and coherence.

Just as religion is taken as a specific type of stories, namely as stories related to transcendence, religious coping is seen as a specific type of coping. As people differ greatly on every criterion in each dimension of our narrative theory, and still be qualified as religious, we should not expect to find a single factor or scale to determine religious coping. Instead we suggest that the narrative framework apply to coping as well. In the coping-process the event, appraisals, activities and outcome may threaten, challenge or harm the author, the structure of his or her story, the audience and/or the purpose of the story. If the part of the narrative process affected is religiously oriented, then the religious process is affected as well. This may contain experiences, interpretations and behaviors. On the other hand, each part of the narrative process that qualifies as religious may contribute to the coping process, invoking religious appraisals (attributions, interpretations), religious activities and religious coping outcomes. This supports and advances the observation by Pargament (1990), that religion can contribute to the coping process, be part of the coping process, and result from the coping process. The theory outlined in our view clarifies some issues we described in the first article as shortcomings of present approaches in the psychology of religious coping. We conclude with a visual display of these interactions in figure 2.

FIGURE 2: THE NARRATIVE RELIGIOUS COPING PROCESS



5 CONCLUSION

A narrative theory of religion and coping sheds light on the process of religious coping. The narrative theory proposed is an example of a multidimensional unifying theory, as advocated in the first article. It overcomes several shortcomings of present non narrative approaches. First: It explicitly takes into account the bidirectional influence of religion and coping, providing theoretical explanations of these interaction. Second: it is based on a dynamic view of the nature of religion, coping, identity and context as processes of constant construction and reconstruction. Third: the processes of identity and context are integral parts of the narrative process, as it relates to both the religious process and the coping process. Finally: a narrative approach is open to new personal religious shapes and contents, which a priori theories and standardized research methods may easily overlook.

Despite these insights, much theorizing and researching has to be done concerning conceptualization of dimensions and criteria. This operationalization should be careful in not violating the narrative approach, but bear in mind the narrative, contextual and process-determined nature of the concepts. Conceptualization into paradigmatic, isolated, and stable measures would mean to abandon the entire framework of a narrative theory. The human tendency to describe their lives and life events in narrative ways should encourage researchers to take their objects seriously and fit their methods to the reality they investigate (Ganzevoort 1993).

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