

# The LAAF Procedure for Exploring Offenders' Narratives

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*Abstract: The Life As A Film (LAAF) procedure is described. This was developed for use with offenders, building on McAdams's (1993) explorations of autobiographical accounts from effective individuals. The advantages of the LAAF procedure for a prison population are discussed, together with the content dictionary used for analysing LAAF responses. The LAAF reveals implicit and explicit aspects of self-concepts and relationships to others, as well as perceived agency and future orientation within a dynamic storyline. Quotations are given to illustrate those psychological processes that underlie criminality, complementing Presser's (2009) work on offender reform and Maruna's (2001) study of narratives of desistance. The values of the LAAF procedure for understanding the maintenance of offending behaviour and the consequent implications for interventions with offenders are discussed.*

**Keywords:** offender narratives; desistance; self-concepts

## The Value of Offenders' Narratives

The potential benefits from understanding offenders' personal narratives are being increasingly recognised. Stimulated by Toch's (1987) demonstration that offenders' background stories elucidated the processes that led to their criminality, a growing number of researchers are exploring the accounts criminals give of their lives. Important examples of this emerging approach include Maruna's (2001) argument that desistance from crime is underpinned by the development of a particular narrative – redemption. More recently, Presser (2009) identified a number of narrative themes that characterised offenders' understanding of their involvement in the criminal justice system which carry implications for rehabilitation. She pointed out that offenders' personal narratives provide the directive processes that shape criminal actions. This is part of a general framework she has articulated (Presser 2010) that emphasises the importance of subjective and qualitative accounts in criminology.

In a more speculative mode, Canter (1994) argued that it was an individual's destructive narrative that drove offending and gave coherence

to the particular pattern of offending actions, or *modus operandi*. These speculations were developed using structured questionnaires by Canter and Youngs (2009). Their statistical analyses revealed patterns of criminal action that could be interpreted, fruitfully, in terms of narratives that have their theoretical origins in studies of fiction (cf. Frye 1957). This provided an empirical model of offending style for a broad range of offence types, including robbery and burglary, arson and serial killing (Canter and Youngs 2009).

Following Presser's (2009) proposal that narrative processes may act as antecedents and instigators of criminal action, Youngs and Canter (2011, 2012) were able to identify four distinct narrative roles in offenders' descriptions of an offence. These are roles offenders see themselves playing during their criminal activity, implying a broader narrative sweep, as when the offenders see themselves as victims or heroes, professionals or adventurers.

Toch (1987), Canter (1994), Maruna (2001), and Presser (2009, 2010) all focus on life narratives. In contrast, Agnew (2006) and Youngs and Canter (2011, 2012) emphasise the criminal roles and stories that characterise particular crimes. Agnew (2006), for example, has demonstrated that the way in which an offence emerges can be explained in terms of storylines directly related to the nature of that offence. Both the perspectives of the life story and the focus on the narrative of the crime point to the value of understanding offenders' personal narratives as they drive and shape involvement in crime. Consequently, an understanding of what is the actual content and substance of those narratives opens up new etiological perspectives in criminology that, as Canter and Youngs (2012b) note, have the potential to integrate a number of existing explanatory processes, including identity, cognitive biases and justification. By incorporating the dynamic, agentic features of narratives it is possible to show how cognitive and interpersonal processes in offending are given momentum, operating to direct, instigate and shape criminal action, as well as sustaining it.

### **The Need for a New Methodology**

For a quarter of century McAdams (1993) and his colleagues have worked with students and effective individuals, obtaining detailed account of their lives and key episodes within them. Their interviews often extend over many sessions with one person (McAdams 2001). In some studies, respondents are asked to describe their life as a book, with distinct chapters, providing a rich framework for significant responses (McAdams 2006).

As Presser (2010) discusses, the interpersonal context for obtaining narrative accounts also gives special significance to the narrative. It is a direct conversation between interviewee and interviewer, about the interviewee. This empowers the individual to convey a message within that interaction. For example, indicating, as Sandberg (2009) illustrates, 'I'm

interesting'. This is an aspect of what Harré (1993) described as treating the respondent as an expert on his own drama.

There are, however, a number of difficulties in obtaining narrative material from criminals in the form that has been so productive for McAdams and his colleagues. To derive understanding of the core activating processes, the underlying personal storyline, may require a less direct, subtler process. McAdams's (1993) 'Life as a Book' and subsequent studies have been developed for use with effective individuals discussing constructive, rather than socially proscribed, lives. This has generated detailed, often factual, descriptions of events and the sequence of events. The descriptions do generate rich material about the narrative context of those events and the underlying themes driving the individual's involvement in them. However, this relies on fluency and understanding of themselves and their lives that are less likely to be present in an offending population. These intensive procedures also tend towards concrete accounts of life events and episodes rather than an overarching perspective that emphasises identity and the dynamics of an unfolding story.

#### *Challenges of Obtaining Life Narratives from Criminals*

There are a number of difficulties in exploring offenders' life narratives. It is helpful to recognise what these are in order to develop an approach for use with offenders which complements existing procedures. The intensive interview framework that most narrative researchers employ when working with other social groups are more challenging to use if the respondents are criminals interviewed in prison. It has been found in initial explorations, that many convicted people do not understand the notion of their life as a book, with distinct chapters. Often also, their conceptualisations of their life have little clear coherence to them, either because of their limited intelligence and/or education, and/or because their life has been so dysfunctional.

There are also practical challenges to discussions with offenders. They are often not able to express themselves well. The generally low literacy of people in prison (cf., for example, Greenberg, Dunleavy and Kutner 2007) also greatly limits the ability of many to articulate accounts of themselves with reference to literary models. Furthermore, there are likely to be strict time limits on contact with them. Recording interviews is usually not allowed in prison, so everything they say has to be written down. There is also a rather different interpersonal relationship from that which occurs in narrative interviews with students or effective individuals. The incarcerated respondent may fear that any comments made may be used to their detriment. It is reasonable to assume that criminals talking about their lives will be defensive, especially in relatively brief interviews, when there is no time to develop in-depth rapport. There is, therefore, a need to avoid a justificatory focus for the narrative procedure.

Beyond the practical challenges that require a direct, engaging process, there are also the conceptual, psychological demands of finding a mechanism that allows offenders to generate content/material, which reveal the dynamic processes of an unfolding story; but not any plausible story, one

that elucidates the ways in which their narratives indicate offenders' perspectives on their past and aspirations, or beliefs, about their future. This is a requirement for a procedure that indicates naturally unfolding events that lead forward in time. It seems possible that the 'life as book' (McAdams 1993) will tend to generate a historical, 'autobiography' style account, structured by social milestones (for example, leaving school, getting married) rather than by significant events that are intrinsic to a personal perspective on their life story. In other words, the objective is to find a way of exploring the personal narrative the offender can articulate rather than a case history or sequence of events.

These challenges to obtaining offender life narratives when taken together with benefits of exploring such narrative as indicated by Toch (1987), Agnew (2006), Maruna (2001), Presser (2009, 2010), and Youngs and Canter (2011, 2012), indicate there would be value to a methodology that complements earlier procedures, developing a shorter, less threatening, yet engaging, process to which convicted men and women would respond readily.

Interestingly, these objectives are not that dissimilar from those couched in more psychodynamic terms that gave rise to projective techniques, notably the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Murray 1938). The TAT consists of giving respondents ambiguous pictures about which they are required to tell a story. They are drawings of actual events, such as a couple sitting on a bed with their back to each other, rather than the better known Rorschach inkblots (Rorschach 1927). The value of the TAT is revealed by its constant use over three-quarters of a century (as indicated, for example, by Westen 1991), with many developments over recent years (for example, Holmstrom, Silber and Karpov 1990). However, the projective quality of the TAT with its distancing of the subject through ambiguous pictures gives less connection with the personal narrative that guides action.

So although projective techniques are sometimes associated with studies of the unconscious, it is important to note that here the assertion is simply that, in the absence of a detailed specification or template, what the individual chooses to focus on may relate to his/her central concerns in life. This draws on the benefit of storytelling requiring some imaginative leap, thereby revealing aspects of the person that may otherwise be defended against. This imaginative aspect of personal narratives is emphasised by Bamberg (2011), who argues that revelations of self and identity are particularly likely to emerge if some fictional or hypothetical framing is provided. These revelations are more likely to reduce socially desirable responses than more obviously structured approaches.

With this objective, a procedure based on a modification of the techniques used by McAdams (1993, 2001) for the derivation of constructive life stories has been developed. This is the Life As A Film (LAAF) procedure presented below, with its associated content analysis framework. Examples of components of offenders' narratives derived from its use with a sample of 61 incarcerated offenders are used to illustrate its value.

Initial explorations indicated that thinking about a film was more culturally appropriate for offenders than a book with chapters. It also encourages a simpler momentum, making it less obvious that the narrator is the object, but engaging the narrator in episodes that have distinct significance and context. Respondents connect with this, avoiding any feeling that they need to justify their actions directly, but finding the process to be enjoyable and emotionally significant.

Unlike life as a book or other life story interviews, the film framework elicits a future orientation. It requires some sort of conclusion or outcome rather than only emphasising what has happened in the past. This assists in exploring the respondents' understanding of what their life trajectory might be, which contributes further to indicating their self-concepts.

It is also possible to derive a number of essential components that are present for any film, giving a rich set of information. This includes aspects of the dominant characters, inevitably including a representation of the self, revealing interpersonal interactions, change over time, and, of course, some kind of plot, with a beginning and an ending. There are also structural issues that relate directly to the developing narrative model put forward by Canter and Youngs (2012a), which are revealed by asking the respondent what sort of film (genre) is being described.

### **The LAAF Elicitation Procedure**

The general LAAF technique used to elicit narrative-relevant content is presented below. (The extended series of prompts to encourage more detail are given in *Appendix 1*.)

#### *Instructions*

*If your life were to be made into a film, what type of film would that be and what would happen?*

- *Tell me more, what would happen?*
- *Who would the main characters be?*
- *What would be the main events that might happen in the film?*
- *How do you think it might end?*

Responses are written down verbatim and content analysed for a number of different aspects.

### **Data Source for Examples**

For the present article, examples are drawn from interviews with 61 male, incarcerated offenders who were recruited using opportunity sampling in a major UK prison. Their ages ranged from 21 to 61 years, with a mean of 34 years (SD = 9.4). Twenty-six of the incarcerated offenders were under the age of 30 years when the interviews took place. The majority of the

offenders were white (n = 50). The second largest ethnicity was Black-Caribbean (n = 8). A further three were from other ethnic backgrounds but did not state which.

### **The LAAF Interpretation Procedure**

Riessman (2005) helpfully identifies four models of narrative analysis. These distinguish essentially between considerations of *what* the narrative deals with and *how* it is dealt with. The latter includes consideration of the way the material is organised, as well as the nature of the interaction between the narrator and the listener. This framework is elaborated in the important review by Presser (2010), of ways of collecting and analysing narratives. She questions the Glaser and Strauss (1967) ‘grounded theory’ proposal that analysis should ignore previous studies and somehow let the data speak solely for themselves. Presser (2010) recognises that any analysis will be influenced by the analyst’s previous experience and ways of thinking about the material, although accepting that she guard against forcing the data into preconceived categories.

However, Presser (2010) demonstrates that the ways in which narratives are conceptualised carry implications for the general approach to analysis. In particular, she emphasises that the context in which the story is told has to be taken into account when interpreting/analysing the narrative. For the LAAF this context is the freedom to describe the life as they would like it to be seen. This puts the emphasis on what Presser (2010) calls the ‘interpretation of reality’ (p.444) as distinct from a record or shaper of reality.

In order to develop an understanding of the meanings of the narratives, what Presser (2010) calls ‘themes of interest’ (p.439) were generated. This approach to content analysis has a long history in narrative research and has been found to be fruitful in many studies of criminal activities and various accounts of those activities. Indeed, Canter and Alison (2003) characterise this as turning the information available to the police – ‘evidence’ – into something available for systematic study – ‘data’. In the present case the ‘evidence’ is the account the offender gives in the LAAF. The content analysis framework is what makes it amenable to psychological interpretation.

The framework for analysing the LAAF responses was influenced by existing narrative psychology theories. In addition, a range of psychological concepts identified in recent investigative psychology studies (Canter and Youngs 2012a; Youngs and Canter 2012) pertinent to an individuals’ agency in relation to criminal action were also drawn upon. This gave rise to four psychological issues derived from considerations of the role of narratives in shaping human actions:

1. Psychological complexity.
2. Explicit processes used to organise content.
3. Nature of agency in relation to others (agentic roles).
4. Cognitive distortions.

The full content analysis coding framework is given in *Appendix 2*.

### **Offenders' Response to LAAF Request**

Before considering the content categories that have been derived for considering LAAF responses, it is important to note offenders' reactions to LAAF instructions. Two aspects of this are of particular note. The first is that they all found it an interesting and engaging activity, generating rich, but typically concise, accounts.

The second is that they typically used their response to give an overt account of the essence of their lives as they saw them. They did not use the opportunity to derive fantastic or unrealistic versions of how they saw their lives. One representative example from a 30-year-old, imprisoned for drink driving illustrates this:

I was going to the gym, watching cage fights, working security and neglecting the kids. I wasn't getting on with the ex and didn't get on with her mother and father. I beat up her father once. The ex was constantly nagging, wanting to go on holidays with the family and phoning all the time – she would be wrecking my head. I needed some space and would tell her to go out with her mates. But if I went out with her I'd get into fights with guys looking at her. If she was out with her mates she'd phone me and tell me some guy had pawed her and I would race over to her and fight the guys. I think she liked the idea of me fighting for her. Like in the movies, typical women spending all the man's money. The audience would think I was lucky to get rid of her.

It can be seen that the narrator uses the LAAF procedure for a direct, first person account that centres on the key issues that he believes characterise his life. It indicates the significant people in his life, in this case as antagonists – his 'ex' and her mother and father. His view of the representation of 'typical women' is also revealed and used as justification for his getting rid of his 'ex'. In other words, the LAAF is used as an opportunity to present an account of the self in an unfolding, dynamic context. However, it does also indicate the sorts of cognitive processes that shape the offender's understanding of his actions.

#### *Psychological Complexity*

The success of the LAAF procedure can also be gleaned from the substantive (for example, number of distinct people; number of distinct psychological ideas) and formal complexity aspects of accounts (for example, account length-number of words, presence of contingent type sequences). *Table 1* gives the mean frequencies across the sample.

It can be seen in *Table 1* that despite the shortness of the responses there are all the narrative components. About a third of respondents give a clear beginning middle and end, but most do mention two or more distinct characters and typically give about three key events. Interestingly, the procedure does generate more distinct psychological ideas than people,

TABLE 1  
*Mean Frequencies (Standard Deviations) of Components of Complexity for the 61 Respondents*

Distinct psychological ideas	4.67 (2.76)
Distinct events cited	2.6 (2.48)
Number of people	2.2 (1.63)
Distinct beginning, middle and end components	22 (36%)
Roles for characters	13 (21%)

showing that it is a useful device for exploring offenders' ways of thinking about others and their interactions with them.

### **Aspects of LAAF responses**

#### *Explicit Processes used to Organise Content*

Two broad approaches to the frameworks on which people draw for life narratives are available for considering the explicit forms that life narratives can take. One derives from the extensive work of McAdams (2001). He distinguishes four themes which can be understood as different ways in which people organise their accounts to produce a life narrative. These relate to the dominant issues of agency and communion which McAdams argues are fundamental to how people see themselves relating to the world. A further distinction, elaborated by Maruna (2001), of particular relevance to offenders, is whether narrators see themselves as on a path of 'redemption' or suffering from 'contamination'.

#### Narrative Themes

##### *Agency theme*

The dominant aspect of agency revealed in 23% of the 61 respondents was 'self-mastery', although others expressed their agency in terms of 'empowerment' (10%), 'victory' (8%) or 'responsibility' (8%).

For example, offender 3, a 29-year-old, convicted of robbery with violence said:

It would be about coming into prison, getting off drugs and then doing well at the end. There would be a happy ending. It would be like 'Rocky' and I'd be the champion, everyone would get up and start clapping.

##### *Communion theme*

Communion consists of togetherness in 30% of cases and direct reference to love and friendship in another 25%. In 13% this is reflected in a direct reference to caring for or helping others. However, this is more often than not a negative perspective on relationships, or a concern about their survival.

This is illustrated by a 50-year-old respondent convicted of rape:

It would be about a hard life. I was knocked around by my old man who was in and out of jail. I was bought up by my mum and I never thought I'd end up here myself.

If my second Mrs doesn't stand by me I won't be happy. I was with my first wife for 20 years and my second wife for 20 years.

#### *Redemptive theme*

This reflects the transformation of negative life events into something positive, the seeking of prosocial goals. Across the 61 criminals, 28% revealed this in their narratives, indicating a view of themselves as moving beyond the constraints of their earlier criminality.

For example, a 22-year-old, convicted of robbery said:

They would be angry at the beginning because they would be able to see what was happening, but then they'd be happy at the end when I have my own business, I'd be married and have children.

Or a 39-year-old, convicted of murder:

Instead of crying, he turns his life around and it was a blessing in disguise. Instead of jail being a bad place, think of it as a college where you can use your time positively. Instead of thinking of the world as negative, think big, there is hope. I've just got to make sure that I don't come back here. There is a pot of gold at the end.

#### *Contamination theme*

In contrast to the redemptive theme, 64% of respondents developed a theme of showing a movement from good to bad. This included such aspects as 'getting with the wrong crowd' despite a good upbringing, being victimised and betrayed. Typical of this theme was the comment from a 35-year-old, convicted of shoplifting:

I had a good friend before 1998 but since then I've been by myself as our friendship got chucked back in my face. I was nicked on charges that I wouldn't have been and since then I find it hard to trust people and now I only have acquaintances. . . . He was always having a crack at me too. I was always trying to get my family back together but I ended up in care . . . I ended up cutting my wrists and every relationship since has been chaotic.

#### Narrative Forms

The valuable framework of themes described above is complemented by considering the form the LAAF narratives can take in relation to the offence-specific narrative roles identified by Canter and Youngs (2009, 2012a, 2012b). They have drawn upon dominant narratives in literary studies, notably – as mentioned – from the writings of Frye (1957). Their empirical analyses of offenders' accounts have supported the recognition of four dominant narrative forms. These have a clear relationship to film genres, so are especially interesting as a framework for analysing responses to the LAAF. Furthermore, respondents are aware of these genres and will describe their films as tragedies, or comedies or action films.

Drawing on the earlier studies four general narrative forms have been identified:

- Tragedy/Revenger
- Irony/Victim
- Adventure/Professional
- Quest/Hero

As found in earlier studies (Canter and Youngs 2009, 2012a, 2012b), offenders do draw on a variety of narrative forms when considering their lives. In the present sample the 'Irony' form, characterised by hopelessness, confusion and misunderstanding, is the only one that is not well represented. The other three narrative forms are more or less evenly spread across the sample.

Almost a third of the sample of 61 (20 respondents) generated a tragic story such as this told by a 38-year-old, convicted of burglary with wounding:

It would be a sad film. I brought a daughter into the world and I had everything going for me, but then I had a breakdown of my marriage and I ended up in here. I was married for the wrong reason; I was under pressure from her father to marry her because she was pregnant. I went off the rails and started using crack and heroin and I'm in here now doing a life sentence. . . . I'll never do this again as it has destroyed my life. It has taken 5 years out of my life and I feel guilty for what I have done.

A further 20 respondents provided 'Adventures' that indicated effective skills and achievements. For example a 26-year-old, convicted of murder, said his LAAF would be:

It would probably be a film like 'Brave Heart' or 'Rob Roy', standing up for what I believe in. I would be dishing out my own punishment for wrongdoings.

Eighteen respondents provided a narrative that indicated a 'Quest' built around the overcoming of struggles as with a 39-year-old, convicted of murder:

It would be like the 'Simpsons' or the 'Jungle book', like Mogli, because he was a man cub with the rules of the jungle. Then he took his wings and there was a happy ending. I don't want no sad ending. He turns from a man cub into a full grown man. Start off innocent then there are dilemmas. Instead of crying, he turns his life around and it was a blessing in disguise. Instead of jail being a bad place, think of it as a college where you can use your time positively.

The richness of these narratives combining the themes and narrative forms provide significant potential for future research. They demonstrate the ways in which responses to the LAAF reveal the underlying psychological material couched in a way that is clearly linked to dominant stories embedded in the respondents' culture.

#### *Dominant Roles*

One important aspect of characterising a life in the form of a film is that the narrator, invariably the protagonist, assigns himself to a dominant role.

This reflects McAdams's concept of 'imagoes' which he draws from analogies to Jungian archetypes. He proposes these are similar to Stevens's (1982) 'neuropsychic systems' or the even earlier suggestion by Bowlby (1969) of the existence of 'goal-directed blueprints'. However the rather static quality of these earlier proposals takes on a more dynamic form in the LAAF, being indicators of the ways in which the respondent sees himself having active agency in his dealing with others.

Interestingly, the most common role offenders assigned themselves was that of the 'Escapist', ten of the 61 describing their film protagonist in this way. As in the account of a 35-year-old, imprisoned for robbery:

Doing a heist for millions and then lying on a yacht . . . After the heist I'd set off with a gorgeous woman and go fishing, go away with the money and lady.

### *Cognitive Distortions*

The roles embedded in narratives also indicate the sorts of cognitive distortions, justifications and minimisation that many have pointed out as inherent in offenders' thought processes (for example, Covell and Scalora 2002). The frequencies are indicated in *Table 2*.

TABLE 2  
*Frequencies of Justifications and Cognitive Distortions in 61 Offenders' Narratives*

Denial of responsibility	20 (33%)
Assume the role of victim	15 (25%)
Diffusion of responsibility	8 (13%)
Distorting the consequence	5 (8%)
Condemnation of condemners	4 (7%)

These are illustrated by comments such as this from a 23-year-old, convicted of murder:

My mum had no control and didn't give a fuck. She got a new fella, I tried to stab him, I just couldn't accept him so I moved out . . . I had no stable home from 13–19 years old. I have been in and out of jail, I have to rob to keep myself going.

## **Discussion**

The acceptability to imprisoned respondents of being asked to describe their life as a film has been demonstrated. It is an enjoyable task that they engage with seriously. Their responses tend to be quite short but are, nonetheless, rich in psychological content. They reveal issues of identity and relationships to others as well as aspects of their aspirations. Of note is the way respondents draw upon known genres of films to situate themselves, thereby revealing fundamental aspects of their personal narratives that relate to many developing explanations of criminality. The richness of the responses open the way to using this procedure as an integral part of working with offenders and exploring the bases of their criminality.

The modal form of response, but not given by a majority, is of an escapist film dominated by tragic consequences but paradoxically illustrating self-mastery. The psychologically conflicting aspects revealed here do suggest this procedure reduces the influence of social desirability and the inappropriately coherent responses that may be generated by questionnaire procedures. This challenge to limited explanations of criminality requires much further testing with other samples and the detailed analysis is not appropriate for this introductory article.

One the challenges of using the LAAF procedure is deriving reliable content information from the responses. To facilitate this, a detailed content analysis framework is given in *Appendix 2*. This reveals further aspects of what it is possible to derive from LAAF responses.

### **Future Studies**

There are many different forms and narratives that the 61 respondents generated. This opens the way to future research that relates these differences to aspects of their criminality and opportunities for interventions and rehabilitation. Consequently, this relatively simple procedure allows explorations of many important aspects of criminality. It opens the way to a variety of studies. These include comparisons of incarcerated offenders and non-offenders in order to determine what the essence of offenders' narratives is. Cross-national comparisons of the narratives offenders generate is also of great interest in determining if national or cultural issues play a part in how offenders see themselves and their crimes. Comparing the narratives of offenders convicted of different types of crime will also be of significance. There are some indications that people who carry out property offences may see themselves and their life trajectories rather differently from those whose crimes are typically against the person. The LAAF procedure would allow a non-threatening exploration of that possibility. The age of the offender at the time when they provide the narrative will also be useful in considering the role of lifespan development in how offenders see their future. This could be especially useful in parole decisions and other aspects of intervention with offenders. Contrasting male and female offenders' narratives is another area of research that will elucidate established aspects of gender differences in criminality.

### **Appendix 1**

#### *The Life As A Film (LAAF) Technique – Long Version*

If your life were to be made into a film, what type of film would it be?

What would happen?

Who would the main characters be?

What would the main events that might happen in the film?

How do you think it might end?

**The Main Scene of the Film**

What happens in the most exciting scene in the film?  
Where is it?  
What is going on?  
Who else is there? What are they doing?  
How are you acting?  
How do you feel?

**How the Film Opens**

When does the film start?  
What is going on?  
What are you like then?

*Now tell us in as much detail as you can what happens between this Opening Scene and the Main Scene*

**You in the Film**

What sort of person are you?  
Who do you have good feelings about and why?  
Who do you have bad feelings about and why?  
What do other people think about you?  
What mistakes do you make?  
How do you change during the film?

**Appendix 2**

*LAAF CODING SYSTEM\* for Narrative Themes in Life as a Film Interviews*

• **REMIT: IMPLICIT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTENT**

**1. DESCRIPTIVES**

a. Content

Genre Comedy – Yes–1/No–0  
Genre Romance – Yes–1/No–0  
Genre Crime – Yes–1/No–0  
Genre Action – Yes/No  
Genre Tragedy – Yes/No  
Genre Thriller – Yes/No

Events – all Yes = 1/No = 0  
Doing Crime  
Imprisonment  
Victim of Crime  
Birth  
Death  
Material success  
Relationship problem  
Relationship success

Message (cf. Sandberg 2009)  
It was my own choice  
I'm decent  
We're the same  
I'm interesting  
I'm smart  
I'm dangerous

Happy Ending/Sad Ending  
Positive Tone/Negative Tone  
Passive/Pro-active

## 2. EXPLICIT PROCESSES USED TO ORGANISE CONTENT

Agency themes (all Yes = 1/No = 0) from McAdams (2001)  
Self-mastery  
Status – Victory  
Achievement/Responsibility  
Empowerment

Communion Themes (all Yes = 1/No = 0) from McAdams (2001)  
Love/Friendship  
Dialogue  
Caring/Help  
Unity/Togetherness

Change type (adjusted from McAdams (2001)) see <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/> for definitions

### a. Redemption (all Yes = 1/No = 0)

General Redemption: Movement from negative situation to positive  
Specific Themes: Enjoys a special advantage  
Specific Themes: Witnesses suffering or injustice in lives of others during childhood  
Specific Themes: Development of sense of moral steadfastness  
Specific Themes: Repeatedly encounters negative events that are transformed into redemption sequence (i.e., become good/obtain positive results from)  
Specific Themes: Sets forth prosocial goals

### b. Contamination

General Contamination: Movement from positive to negative  
Specific Forms of contamination: (see <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/> for more detail) yes = 1; no = 0  
Victimisation

Betrayal  
Loss of significant others  
Failure  
Physical or psychological illness or injury  
Disappointment  
Disillusionment  
Sex guilt, humiliation

Classic Narrative themes  
Mention of following ideas (all Yes = 1/No = 0)  
Overcoming Struggles/Obstacles/Mission  
Wrong done to them/theirs  
Impotence/Hopelessness  
Effectiveness/Skills/Competencies  
Victory/Proving Self/Success  
Revenge  
Fate  
Tangible Rewards/Acquisitions  
Masculinity/Bravery  
Compulsion  
Confusion/Misunderstanding  
Fulfilment/Satisfaction

### **3. PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY**

Length in words  
Number of people cited  
Presence of distinct roles for 'characters' – Yes – 1/No – 0  
Number of distinct events cited  
Number of distinct psychological ideas  
Presence of contingent sequences – Yes – 1/No – 0  
Presence of distinct beginning, middle and end components to story – Yes  
– 1/No – 0  
Presence of coherent theme(s) – Yes – 1/No – 0

### **4. AGENCY**

Behaviours described by interviewee (all Yes = 1/No = 0):  
Locus of Agency  
Proactive  
Reactive  
Avoidant of others  
Confronting others

Imagoes – Characterisations of self in terms of following Imagoes: (all yes  
= 1; no = 0) see McAdams (1993, p.124) for definitions  
Healer

Teacher  
Counsellor  
Humanist  
Arbiter  
Warrior  
Traveller  
Sage  
Maker  
Lover  
Caregiver  
Friend  
Ritualistic  
Escapist  
Survivor

Characterisations of others in terms of following Imagoes: (all yes = 1; no = 0) see McAdams (1993, p.124) for definitions

Healer  
Teacher  
Counsellor  
Humanist  
Arbiter  
Warrior  
Traveller  
Sage  
Maker  
Lover  
Caregiver  
Friend  
Ritualistic  
Escapist  
Survivor

Self identity as Stronger or Weaker than others  
Others as Significant or Non Significant to them (self-identity)  
Empathy for others  
Hostility towards others

Emotions from Aroused – Positive Quadrant  
Emotions from Aroused – Negative Quadrant  
Emotions from Non-aroused – Positive Quadrant  
Emotions from Non-aroused – Negative Quadrant

Justifications of general types used (all Yes = 1/No = 0) see Sykes and Matza (1957) and Bandura (1990) for definitions:  
denial of responsibility,  
denial of injury,

denial of the victim,  
condemnation of condemners,  
appeal to higher loyalties,  
displacement of responsibility,  
diffusion of responsibility,  
distorting the consequences of an action,  
dehumanising the victim,  
assuming the role of victim for one's self.

Incentive (Bandura 1986)

For Material/Financial gain

For Sensory gain (pleasure based, sensation, stimulation, boredom avoidance)

For Power/Status gain

For Social (approval, advancement) gain

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