Interpersonal Decentering Appendix for Oral Stream of Consciousness Personal Narratives

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[This document was used to adapt the Interpersonal Decentering scoring system developed for thematic apperceptive techniques to score oral stream of consciousness personal narratives used by Molly Tucker for her masters thesis. Tucker, M.S. (2015). Interpersonal decentering in relationship breakups: Social cognitive maturity and distress recovery in young adults. Masters thesis, University of North Texas.]

The following adaptations were made to score personal narratives in a manner consistent with established Decentering theory and the scoring rules used for third-person narratives such as TAT stories. In order to control for potential differences affecting the expression of decentering ability between storytelling methods, alternative scoring rules have been designed to account for the unique characteristics of personal narratives: first-person perspective, narration in present time of a recalled past event, and possible intermittent timeframes. In addition, the oral stream of consciousness (OSOC) narratives are divided into sections by a series of auditory prompts delivered at intervals. These prompts provide more structure as to timeframe than is typical in the Pennebaker expressive writing essays, and slightly different scoring rules apply to each of these sections.

First-Person Perspective

Personalized references (e.g., first-person perspective) within third-person TAT stories indicate a lack of psychological distance from the card used as the stimulus material. In this context, the psychological distance necessary for decentering is achieved when the participant begins to tell a story about the characters depicted on the card rather than simply looking at and describing the picture from their own perspective (e.g., "This is a picture of me and my friend when we played outside yesterday"). For this reason, the scoring manual for Interpersonal Decentering (Feffer et al., 2008) states that personalized references reflect lack of distancing and should not be scored. However, this rule does not apply to personal narratives because these stories involve writing or talking about one's own memory and therefore must consist of first-person accounts written or told from the perspective of the narrator.

Narrator as a Character

For the purposes of scoring, the narrator is functionally identical to any other character capable of interaction. However, when the narrator is discussing a past event from a present-time perspective, the narrator behaves as a character only within memories or past tense statements; thus, *commentary regarding the narrator's current thoughts or actions towards others in the past (e.g., present reflections on past events) are not scored.* When defining interaction units, excluding the present-time portion of the commentary will help to clarify the scoring.

"[My mother and I went to the site of the accident.]" (1)
"Looking back, I think [he never really loved me.]" (2)
However, when the *entire* interaction unit takes place in present time *or* past time, it should be scored as usual.
"[I still miss him and *continue to tell myself that I need him*.]" (9)

Perspective of Non-Narrator Characters

Although personal narratives rely upon the narrator's perspective, interactions presented from the viewpoint of other characters are possible. Score these interactions normally, and apply the scoring criteria to the active character (performing the action or internalization) even if the narrator is the character receiving the action.

"[The only reason why she was doing it was because she thought I would be better off.]" (9).

Present Time versus Narrated Memory Time

In place of the principle of *distance from the card* necessary to score third-person TAT stories, first-person narratives account for psychological distance by requiring separation between the narrator as a character within the memory and the narrator at the time of writing/telling. The existence of a *present time* related to but removed from the narrative is an artifact of the way in which the narrative data is collected, and this requires a distinction not needed when scoring TAT stories. Personal narratives are divided into two levels: the present-time level as represented by the current narrating process, and the narrated memory level which depends upon and occurs within the present-time level. References to memories using present-tense phrases such as "I remember" or "I think" cross these levels and show no evidence of internalization processes due to the narrator's lack of psychological distance from his or her current state given the present task of narrating. Because this method of storytelling prompts the narrator to discuss past events, *present-tense words that suggest internalization of a memory do not necessarily indicate internalization processes*. In such cases, only the narrated

memory level is scored. Thus, present-tense phrases such as the above should be *excluded from interaction units.*

"I remember that [after he told me that, I didn't want to talk any more]." (3)
"I think maybe he didn't know about it." (not scored)
"I think maybe [he didn't know I was there]." (7)

Psychological Distance: Content of the Narrative

When rendered in present tense, internalization words describe the narrator's present-time perspective. Even though these words suggest reflective thought processes, these statements are not scored as if the narrator is presently internalizing because they are an artifact of the instructions to narrate a memory in present time. Instead, score only the content of the narrator's memory that is under present contemplation.

"I don't know why [she began to tell me the things she did but she wouldn't stop.]" (2)
"I remember the call saying he was in the hospital." (not scored)

Psychological Distance: Present Self versus Narrator as Character

In order for the narrator to behave as a scoreable character, the narrator must demonstrate psychological distance between his or her present self at the time of narrating and himself or herself at the time of the event being narrated. Score the narrator's remembered interactions only if they occur "inside" the story (i.e., at the time of the event, or at least prior to beginning the narration). It is critical to note whether the narrator is interacting as a character within the memory or merely commenting on it at the present time (i.e., while actually writing the narrative).

Scoreable: "[There was a girl who I had had a crush on for most of the school year] (2), and [I decided to sit next to her. I was a very shy kid, so for me to attempt a conversation with my crush was nerve-racking for me.] (9)" (The narrator is writing from his perspective in a past situation as a character within the story.)
Not Scoreable: "I really don't see how he made it out alive. His car was totaled." (The narrator is commenting on the event from her present perspective. Regardless of whether she actually witnessed the event, her "seeing how he made it out alive" is not scored as a directed action.)

Another way of achieving the necessary distancing from self is to pose a hypothetical situation. Because these involve description of an abstract, nonexistent circumstance, they will usually require internalization.

"If it were not for her, [I do not think we would ever talk to each other again.]" (6)

Similarly, anticipations of future behavior require distancing sufficient to form an opinion or prediction, and thus internalization.

"[I don't think that we will talk for the next few months.]" (6)

Psychological Distance: Self-Internalization within Present Time versus Narrative Time

As stated above, the narrator's thoughts and actions are scored only if they occur within the memory. Furthermore, self-internalization that is strong enough to indicate a score of 9 must occur entirely within the timeframe of the past event. For example, a statement such as "**[**I wished that there was something I could do to help them.**]**" (9) meets these criteria, whereas "Now, I wish that there was something I could have done to help them." is only scoreable for the interactions that occurred (or could have occurred) within the memory. Isolating the present "wish" leaves the interaction "**[**there was something I could have done to help them.**]**" (2).

Scoring Interactions in Present Time: Second and Third Parties

As an exception to the rules above, present-time statements may be scored for interactions involving second and third parties that do not include the narrator as a character. Because the narrator is clearly separated from these interactions, they are scored using standard decentering rules without distinguishing between present time and narrated memory time for the interactors. While these interactions are often stated as if the narrator is internalizing the other characters, this internalization is still disregarded to control for the lack of distance indicated by present statements. Score only the content of the narrator's would-be internalization.

"It's not like [no one ever tries to help him.]" (2)
"I think [he is probably dating someone else.]" (2)

Scoring Interactions in Present Time: Internalization by Others

Present-time statements also may be scored if the narrator describes an internalization in which he or she is not the active character. This follows the same procedure used to score interactions between second and third parties. Because present statements regarding planning or contemplation by the narrator reflect his or her current intentions, the narrator is only counted as a scoreable interactor if he or she is the object of another's present internalization.

"I wonder if [she thinks my life wasn't as bad as hers.]" (6)

"What if [he doesn't need me as much as I need him and that's what he realized?]" (9).

Intermittent Timeframes and Relationship Interaction Units
(Ignore for Oral SOC)

The storytelling structure in personal narratives often deemphasizes chronological order. Due to the greater flexibility of memory narration, personal narratives shift focus between groups of interactors, times, and locations more frequently than TAT stories. Intermittent timeframes commonly result from interjecting a memory of a tangential situation into a larger situation that serves as the primary focus of the narrative. To account for the increased complexity of personal narratives, interaction units involving the same characters, time, and place (but which might be separated and scattered among units involving other characters, times, and places) are grouped into *relationship interaction units* so that they may be scored together as one unit despite their separation in the text. In scoring each relationship interaction unit, record only the highest scoring interaction as usual for each distinct combination of interactors, time, and location.

Scoring Procedure for Intermittent Timeframes

Because unconnected interactions may be scored together as a group, begin by separating the entire story into interaction units according to standard scoring rules. Next, mark relationship units by assigning a letter (A, B, etc.) to each unique combination of interactors, and assign a number (1, 2, etc.) to each specific time and location in which that group's interaction takes place. Individual interaction units that share all of these combinations are given the same letter and number, forming a relationship interaction unit (all those designated A1, all those labeled A2, B1, B2, etc.). When all interaction units have been assigned to a relationship interaction unit, determine a single score for each relationship interaction unit by recording the highest score among its individual interaction units as though they were actually contiguous in the narrative. An example of a scored personal narrative using these rules is provided below:

"I was having problems with my relationship at the time; [I really loved and cared for this guy, but we were arguing constantly after I had told him I wanted a break] **A1(2)**. The reason behind the break, I have no idea; I was confused. Anyways, [I figured by the time the break came for the holidays I would be fine because I would be at home with my family] **B1(9)**. [Not too long into the break, my Mom and I were constantly getting into arguments] **C1(1)**. [Our family had planned a trip to Disney World for Christmas, but I didn't want to go this year. I would have rather stayed and spent time fixing my relationship] **B1(1)**; [I did not mind getting away from my mother at the time too] **C1(2)**. [Well I decided to go with the family since I did not want to disappoint my siblings] **D1(9)**, but [on the way to the airport, my Mom and I were constantly screaming at each other. I burst into tears yelling at my Mom trying to get her to understand how I was feeling; my Mom can be stubborn] **C2(7)** and [I

ended up getting to the airport with my family and telling them to have fun without me cause I could not stand the thought of being any closer to my Mom for any longer.] [B2](2)

A1: narrator + boyfriend, initial time & location   **B1**: narrator + family, initial   **B2**: narrator + family, time & location change at airport

C1: narrator + mother, at break   **C2**: narrator + mother, time & location change at airport   **D1**: narrator +family+ siblings, at break

NSF Oral Stream of Consciousness Breakup Narratives

The NSF oral stream of consciousness breakup narratives have distinctive features that affect Decentering scoring. First, they are elicited by a series of auditory prompts given at one-minute intervals that structure the participant's narrative:

1.   When did you realize that you and your former partner were going to break up?
2.   What do you remember about the separation itself: the actual time that you and your former partner actually separated?
3.   How much contact do you have with your former partner?
4.   How has the breakup affected your thoughts and feelings regarding romantic relationships?

The first two prompts elicit memories of the relationship, and should be scored as a unit. The third elicits primarily present-time information, though some accounts include past information as well. The fourth prompt elicits broad, often abstract generalizations about relationships, gender, and gender stereotypes that may overrepresent the narrator's capacity for internalization. Thus, the first step in scoring is to delineate the boundaries between the first section (the first two prompts taken together because they are difficult to distinguish) and the second, and between the second and the third, by drawing lines that separate them. When scoring is completed, *scores are to be recorded separately for these three blocks of text*. The first section narrative is nearly always a memory in past tense, in contrast to the less structured written Pennebaker expressive essays, which are often chaotic as to timeframe. Because the second and third sections respond to present-time prompts, these tend to show less psychological distance, but may still contain evidence of internalized reflective thought. Thus, *in these two sections only, present reflections on past events should be scored as in TAT stories*.

The second feature, a consequence of the use of prompts, is that narrators often restate the first prompt or portions thereof as they begin their narrative. Doing so for the first prompt in particular tends to induce internalization. Therefore, *use of the word "realize[d]" in the first sentence should not be scored as internalization*. Phrases that contain it should be ignored. Likewise, statements that "I have had some contact with my partner" as the first sentence of the second section should not be scored."

"I first realized that my partner and I were heading towards a break-up when I left for college." (not scored)

One occasional reaction to the prompts is for the person to restate or react to the prompt in the midst of the narrative. These intrusions should be ignored.

"[We had fights before, and—I'll just keep talking—and when we had our fights . . .]" (1)

A third feature, resulting from the use of oral narratives transcribed from audiotape, is the occasional missing or possibly mistranscribed word. Sometimes these are outright omissions, "verbal typos" or informal ways of speaking that are rare in written English. If the intended meaning is clear from context, you may infer the missing or misfit word. However, be more cautious about doing so with impersonal phrases where possible 9s are concerned if the original phrasing does not show the necessary psychological distance.

"[I felt it was harder to trust guys.]" (5), *not* "I felt it was harder {for me} to trust guys." (9) ("Guys" are an internalized abstraction here.)

There must be enough evidence of psychological distance to allow for reflective self-evaluation. Statements of reflective self-evaluation will usually be 9s, assuming they follow the rule about present reflection on past events.

"[I couldn't be close to even my best friends that were guys.]" (9)
"[I feel like I need to have contact with him to make sure he is okay.]" (9)
"[I still miss him and continue to tell myself that I need him.]" (9)
"[It was hard for me to keep continuing to see him.]" (9)
"[I'm not as open to meeting new guys.]" (9)

The fourth prompt tends to elicit generalized abstractions and sometimes second-person phrasings. These will usually be phrased in present tense and will often but not always be scored as internalized.

"[People have to have a certain set of values that are similar.]" (6)
"[Some guys just don't understand that.]" (7)
"[You got to find the right person, someone you can trust.]" (9)
"[It has made me (very) distrust(ing of) men.]" (2 due to impersonal phrasing)
"[I am not for hooking up with random people." (2)

Conventions for SOC Breakup Narratives: Commonly Used Words and Phrases

Do not score "invisible partner" statements as interactions:
"He wanted to get married." (not scored)

"I wanted to break up." (not scored)

Do not score simple transformations of the collectivity (these are status changes, not interactions), unless they are clearly directed actions or internalizations. Note that this is a difference from the statement on p. 4 of the Addendum for fictional stories: "[She wishes they could get married.]" (6). In the SOC narratives about breakups, status change statements are very frequent, and because they will tend to receive lower scores, scoring them will create a source of error variance due to the person's rhetorical style that underrepresents their actual inclinations to decenter at a more mature level. Thus, do not score the following:

"He wanted us to get married." (not scored)
"He wanted us to get married and I was glad." (not scored)
"I wanted us to break up." (not scored)
"He thinks maybe we would get back together in a couple years." (not scored)

Score "marrying" or "breaking up with" as a directed action, even if there is some modest evidence of internalization:

"[He wanted to marry me.]" (2)
"[He wanted to marry me and I was glad.]" (3)
"[I wanted to break up with him.]" (2)
"[I needed him]" = directed action (2)
"[I needed that comfort from him]" = he is internalized as comforting (6)
"[I didn't expect her to break up with me.]" (6)
"I thought that we were going to get married." (not scored)

"Going with" and "being with" will usually be scored 1.

Don't score "relationship" as an interaction if partners are invisible:

"Without trust, the relationship can't last." (not scored)
"I am not opposed to getting into another relationship." (not scored)

However, possible partners in a hypothetical relationship can be scored as internalized:

"[I am not opposed to getting into another relationship with someone else.]" (5)