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Weeseman, Yvonne; van Laarhoven, Hanneke; Scherer-Rath, Michael

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Modes of Narrative Integration of Experiences of Contingency in Highly Sensitive Children: a Qualitative Pilot Study

*Yvonne Weeseman**

Radboud University, Nijmegen

Paradisekids Therapeutic Child Centre, Texel

info@paradisekids.nl

Hanneke van Laarhoven

Amsterdam UMC, University of Amsterdam

Michael Scherer-Rath

Radboud University, Nijmegen

Abstract

Narrative integration of experiences of contingency describes the ways (modes) in which people assimilate the uncontrollability—or contingency—of life, while accepting, acknowledging and tolerating the existential fears accompanying these experiences, thus keeping contingency open. Contingency is defined as events being ‘possible (or not impossible) and also not necessary at the same time’. Experiences of contingency, caused by the interplay between life events, one’s worldview and ultimate life goals, disrupt one’s life story, challenging one’s basic needs for understanding, coherence and meaning.

The different modes of narrative integration are studied in six highly sensitive Dutch children, aged between 6 and 12 years old. A practice-based model by Kruizinga et al. (2017) is compared to a theoretical construct of religious philosophical contingency constructed by Wuchterl (2011; 2019). Practical and theoretical differences are discussed. This study confirms the findings by Kruizinga et al. (2017).

Four modes of dealing with contingency are identified: Denial, Acknowledging, Accepting and Receiving. In mode four, Receiving, people transcend themselves

* Corresponding author.

(self-transcendence). Contrary to Wuchterl's theory, vertical transcendence is not a prerequisite for narrative integration of contingency, or for keeping contingency open. We conclude that the model of narrative integration of experiences of contingency by Kruizinga et al. is a valid tool for further research. Possible applications in the field of spiritual care are discussed.

Keywords

experience of contingency – narrative integration – life event – high sensitivity – qualitative – interview study – children

Introduction

Through narrative processes children are able to deduce logic and meaning from their worlds. It has been assumed that the fundamental units of one's personality are formed by so-called scripts, story-like representations of real or virtual life experiences encountered. A critical period for the formation of these scripts would be the pre-school years, during which the autobiographic memory system evolves, followed by the primary school years and then adolescence, after which this script develops further from this foundational base onwards (see Mulvaney (2011) for an overview, 1153–1157).

After infancy, the autobiographical memory system develops to such a degree that it enables children between two and four years old to use their autobiographical memories of life events to begin constructing narratives about themselves that include logic, sequence, cause and effect, contributing to an individual sense of self (see Mulvaney (2011) for an overview, 1155). It is supposed that—starting in early adolescence, and throughout adolescence—an overall life story and adult personality is formed (see Mulvaney (2011) for an overview, 1159).

Life events are often described as changes in someone's life that increase stress through unwanted demands and threats induced by the change itself. They may include conflicts between parents, divorce, moving house, being bullied, the death of a loved one, and illness (Vanaelst et al. 2012, 3–5). Cross-sectional, retrospective, and longitudinal studies show consistent associations between life events and psychopathology, problem behaviour and illness in children and adolescents (Vanaelst et al. 2012, 3). From a narrative integration view, life events challenge one's basic needs for understanding, coherence and meaning.

Throughout their lifespan, people are confronted by unexpected life events that may challenge the meaning-making aspect of their life story. The experiences of these unexpected life events can be seen as experiences of contingency. Contingency means that these events were neither necessary nor impossible; so they could have happened differently (Van den Brand et al. 2013; Wuchterl 2011; 2019). Contingency, representing the uncertainty of life, challenges one's life story and life goals (Kruizinga et al. 2017, 1-3). The integration of life events into the life story influences one's worldview, ultimate life goals, and meaning-making, with possible consequences for experienced quality of life (Hartog et al. 2017, 1-4, 11-12; Kruizinga et al. 2017, 1-3).

In this article, following on from Kruizinga et al. (2017; 2018), we aim to present different ways in which highly sensitive children relate to their experiences of contingency.

1 Theoretical Framework

1.1 *Narrative Integration of Experiences of Contingency*

A model representing narrative meaning-making of life events was developed by Scherer-Rath et al. (2012), and further elaborated by Kruizinga et al. (2017; 2018), Scherer-Rath (2013), Van Dalen (2019) and Van den Brand et al. (2013; 2016). This model combines both contingency theory and narrative theory into a model of narrative integration of life events and the attribution of meaning in life (see Hartog et al. (2017) for an overview). It is supposed that life events, in combination with ultimate life goals and worldview, create experiences of contingency. Experiences of contingency are integrated into the life story through two narrative integration processes: narrative meaning-giving, which can also be seen as the process of interpretation of the experience; and subsequently, narrative integration, which can be seen as 'fitting the experience into the existing life story'.

The narrative integration model can also be seen as a further elaboration of the stages of mimesis described by Ricoeur (1984), which Hartog et al. (2017) summarised as "... people 'read' their own life story, integrating their life events and experiences in a way they understand themselves". It is supposed that the "randomness of life" (Hartog et al. 2017) can create experiences of contingency if the life event sufficiently challenges one's fundamental human need for understanding, coherence, and meaning—leading to a crisis of meaning, also called an interpretation crisis. Narrative integration can be viewed as a human capacity to acknowledge contingency and to integrate experiences of contingency, in order to reduce a crisis of meaning (experience of

contingency) to a level at which one's basic needs for understanding, coherence and meaning are no longer too strongly challenged (see Hartog et al. (2017) for an overview).

Ultimately, the narrative integration processes either yield meaning in life (of the contingency experience) and self-transcendence, affecting one's worldview and ultimate life goals, or do not yield meaning in life, leaving the experience of contingency unintegrated, potentially disrupting one's life story (Hartog et al. 2017, 3, 7-11). So in order to understand the world and to make meaning of one's own life, life events are incorporated into one's personal life story by means of narrative meaning-giving and narrative integration (Hartog et al., 2017, 1-4).

It is important to mention that the narrative integration process can only be successful when the contingent character of the life event is acknowledged. Thus the contingency is kept open, which introduces the challenge of facing the smaller or larger amount of existential fear caused by realising the uncertainty of life. As such, narrative integration of experiences of contingency describes the successful or unsuccessful ways in which people are able to experience and tolerate this uncertainty. In a case in which someone simply denies the uncontrollability of life, the contingency is closed, and the uncertainty of life is not experienced. This process can be seen in stress-reduction or coping processes—albeit that these processes do not exclude and are part of the process of narrative integration.

To summarise: narrative integration provides a model in which experiences of contingency, caused by the interplay between life events, one's worldview and ultimate lifegoals, are integrated in such a way that as they experience and tolerate the uncertainties of life, people transcend themselves (self-transcendence) to such an extent that these experiences no longer challenge their basic need for understanding, coherence and meaning too intensely, and can therefore align with their ultimate life goals, provide meaning in life and contributing to well-being.

1.2 Modes of Narrative Integration of Experiences of Contingency

The model of narrative integration of experiences of contingency (Kruizinga et al. 2017; Scherer-Rath 2013; Van Dalen 2019; Van den Brand et al. 2013; 2016) combines both narrative theory (Ricoeur 1985; Straub 2005) and a theoretical concept of religious philosophical contingency (Wuchterl 2011), including all forms of contingency, and does not further differentiate between theoretical subdivisions of experiences of contingency, as it aims to deepen understanding of how people relate to contingency as a whole; to build a bridge

between religious studies, spiritual care and other humanity approaches, and to strengthen the applicability of spiritual care in real life.

Kruizinga et al. (2017; 2018) tested the validity of this model in a practical setting, which revealed four different ways in which people deal with contingency. The first mode is described as 'Denial', indicating that the contingency is 'closed'; no existential fear is acknowledged, no process of narrative integration is begun. The process of narrative integration starts with 'Acknowledging', in which the impact of the event is recognised. 'Accepting' follows, in which a person begins to integrate the event into his or her life story. In the final stage of narrative integration, 'Receiving', the experience becomes transformed, creating new insights; people transcend themselves (self-transcendence), and may be open to meeting that which transcends themselves, experiencing vertical transcendence. People may move back and forth between these four modes. In the last three modes people are open to contingency, looking for and finding ways to integrate, accept, and tolerate existential fear within their life stories. We accentuate that in mode four, Receiving, people understand and accept the contingency of life, transcend themselves (self-transcendence), and are possibly—but not necessarily—open to meeting that which transcends beyond the earthly realm, as even atheists can recognise the uncertainty of life (contingency), develop new insights, transform their experiences (transcend themselves) and integrate these into their life story. Furthermore, we accentuate that, based on the research by Kruizinga et al., vertical transcendence is not a prerequisite for integrating contingency into one's life story.

Even though the concept of religious philosophical contingency construed by Wuchterl was initially used in the construction of the model of narrative integration, the research by Kruizinga et al. shows that the construct of contingency used in their model of narrative integration of contingency differs fundamentally from Wuchterl's religious-philosophical construct of contingency. Also, as the terms used to describe different modes of dealing with (or integration of) contingency resemble each other closely, this can easily cause confusion, prompting the need for further clarification.

According to Wuchterl (2011; 2019), contingency is often not recognised; as people deny the factor of chance in their lives, putting forward arguments of all-encompassing reason, laws of nature or the will of a higher power. Wuchterl calls the denial or closing of contingency the 'coping' or 'mastering' of contingency (*'Kontingenzbewältigung'*). He subsequently describes a special case of contingency, which he names 'religious-philosophical contingency', as a religious philosophical way in which people can relate to, or deal with the necessities of life. Religious philosophical contingency applies if and only if the

subject experiencing the experience of contingency does do so in the context of ‘the other’, “a code word for the realm of the religious” (Wuchterl 2019, 9), in other words vertical transcendence as described by Weiher (2014). Weiher (2014) recognises three forms of transcendence; subject transcendence, humanity transcendence and vertical transcendence. In vertical transcendence, one transcends the earthly or ‘horizontal’ dimensions of subject and humanity transcendence, also described as ‘the other’, an ‘other’ reality, God or the divine. According to Wuchterl, religious philosophical contingency can not be closed as it exceeds the realm of reason. Wuchterl theorises that without acknowledging the existence of vertical transcendence or experiencing vertical transcendence, people always and only perform ‘mastering’ or ‘coping’ with contingency, thus closing the contingency without the possibility of integrating the experience of contingency into their life story.

Contrary to this, the research by Kruizinga et al. shows that people are able to integrate contingency into their life story without the presence of vertical transcendence—thus providing practice-based evidence disputing Wuchterl’s theoretical construct. In the current research we aim to investigate this further. The research by Kruizinga et al. investigated existential (ontological) contingency where there is no defined dividing line between reason and vertical transcendence. Furthermore, Wuchterl theorises that contrary to ‘religious agnostics’, who acknowledge vertical transcendence, ‘immanent agnostics’—who do not so much acknowledge vertical transcendence, as merely leave it open as a possibility they cannot know to be true or not-true—cannot experience contingency and will close the contingency, thus perform coping or mastering (Wuchterl 2019) of contingency in order to eliminate the contingency. As the research of Kruizinga et al. provides no clear information regarding this, in the current study we will test Wuchterl’s hypothesis.

Wuchterl describes two ways in which people can relate to religious philosophical contingency (all other cases are called ‘mastering’ or ‘coping’). Firstly, ‘Acknowledgement’, which he describes as acknowledgement of the possibility of ‘the other’, thus acknowledgement of vertical transcendence. And secondly, by ‘Encountering’, which means encountering ‘the other’, thus experiencing vertical transcendence. Wuchterl describes that mastering, or coping with contingency, thus the closing of contingency, also means one does not acknowledge the existence of ‘the other’, or vertical transcendence. According to Wuchterl (2019), contingency can only be seen as religious philosophical contingency if it contains four characteristics: 1. The subject cannot explain the occurrence of the event sufficiently. 2. The event cannot be undone by the subject. 3. The event is viewed as being of existential importance. 4. The event triggers an existential interpretation process. Wuchterl has clearly described

TABLE 1 Modes of dealing with contingency according to Kruizinga and Wuchterl

Kruizinga Modes of dealing with existential contingency		Wuchterl Modes of dealing with religious philosophical contingency	
Receiving	Self transcendence	Vertical transcendence	Encountering
		No Vertical transcendence	Acknowledgement
Accepting	No Self transcendence		Mastering or Coping (contingency closed)
Acknowledging			
Denial (contingency closed)			

the need for acknowledgement or encountering of vertical transcendence in all cases of religious philosophical contingency. As vertical transcendence is not explicitly named in the four prerequisites for religious philosophical contingency, this implies vertical transcendence is inherent to at least one of the four named prerequisites. Thus, according to Wuchterl, once a subject views an event of existential importance, or once an existential interpretation process is started, there will always be vertical transcendence.

The research by Kruizinga et al. shows evidence disputing this theoretical construct; they documented many cases in which the process of narrative integration proceeded without vertical transcendence. In the current research, we will investigate further whether vertical transcendence is a prerequisite for narrative integration of experiences of contingency.

Summarising the above, and illustrated in Table 1 above, Kruizinga et al. distinguish four modes in which people deal with experiences of contingency. Denial: the contingent nature of the life event is denied, and the contingency is closed. Acknowledging: the contingent nature of the life event is acknowledged, and the process of narrative integration begins, contingency is open. Accepting: the contingent nature of the life event is accepted, and becomes integrated into the life story, contingency is open. Receiving: new insights are created, and people transcend themselves (self-transcendence), and can also

be open to (or even experience) vertical transcendence, contingency is open. Only in the fourth mode is vertical transcendence possibly present.

In contrast, Wuchterl distinguishes three very different stages. Mastering or Coping: the existence of vertical transcendence is not acknowledged; and thus, according to Wuchterl, contingency is closed. Acknowledgement: the existence of vertical transcendence is acknowledged, contingency is open. Encountering: the vertical transcendence is encountered and experienced, contingency is open.

The first three stages of Kruizinga et al. fall into Wuchterl's Mastering or Coping category, as no vertical transcendence is present. If people acknowledge or experience vertical transcendence in Kruizinga et al.'s fourth mode, this is included in two categories recognised by Wuchterl (Acknowledgement and Encountering). When people do not acknowledge or experience vertical transcendence in mode four by Kruizinga et al. this would be listed by Wuchterl as Mastering or Coping, thus closing contingency, as no vertical transcendence is acknowledged or present.

We presume that the model of narrative integration by Kruizinga et al., as described above, encompasses the construct of religious philosophical contingency, as the model of Kruizinga et al. includes all forms of contingency. Thus, people will also narratively integrate experiences of religious philosophical contingency into their life story.

1.3 *Contingency in Narrative Integration, Coping and Meaning-Centred Approaches*

Although beyond the scope of this research, it seems important to elaborate briefly on the differences between narrative integration of experiences of contingency, contemporary models of coping, and meaning-centred approaches commonly utilised in psychology. Although all three describe human functioning and touch on similar processes, there are some important theoretical differences—with practical consequences.

Coping models describe human behaviour when a subject is confronted by adversity, and view stress reduction as effective, using interventions focusing on changing behaviour in order to reduce (immediate) stress. Coping strategies can (but do not always) include the denial of the unpredictability of life, thus closing contingency. Such strategies can be seen as successful when they reduce immediate stress.

Meaning-centred approaches include the construct of 'meaning'; they acknowledge the importance of meaning in one's life, and specifically its importance when dealing with crises, i.e. life events. As such they deepen our understanding of human behaviour, and thus expand the potential for

successful interventions. Meaning-centred approaches, as described by Vos (2018), start from a phenomenological viewpoint; and as an intervention, they stimulate clients to turn inward and become aware of their innermost drives and values, leading to awareness of their deepest meanings in life. Meaning-centred approaches deepen our understanding of meaning—for instance with the five domains of meaning, as described by Vos (2018). The potential negative consequences of denial of the reality of life (and thus contingency) are acknowledged (Vos 2018, 36-54). Yet closing contingency is seen as effective, as it is stressed that people only “stay within the hot flow of meaning because the context of our lives feels stable [...] We believe life is predictable, we are in control of what happens, we are invulnerable [...] We stay in the flow as long as we believe such positive assumptions” (Vos 2018, 82-83), thus eliminating contingency. Furthermore, Vos points out that confronted with contingency, “people adjust the meanings they were hoping to realise” (Vos 2018, 83) in order to restore the feeling that they are still in control or can achieve, albeit on a smaller scale, thus closing contingency.

Narrative integration of experiences of contingency takes the context of a person's whole life story, and describes the various ways in which that person integrates experiences of contingency into their life story. Successful integration of these experiences into one's life story includes accepting, acknowledging and tolerating the existential fear accompanying contingency. Denial of contingency blocks the process of narrative integration and could lead to disruptions in one's life story, with possible adverse consequences for one's experienced quality of life.

A pitfall of coping and meaning-centred approaches (but not of narrative integration) is that denial of contingency, or closing contingency, can be viewed as an effective way of coping with contingency, whereas narrative integration of experiences of contingency views these denials (or closing of contingency) as disruptions of one's life story, with potential adverse consequences. If a person's capacity for resilience or bearing is overwhelmed by a life event, denial of contingency probably gives him or her time to build more resilience or bearing capacity, to successfully go through the process of narrative integration of the experience of contingency. As such, it seems important to view denial as a temporarily solution only.

As a contingency-based approach, narrative integration of experiences of contingency views contingency as an essential and omnipresent aspect of life, and supports people who acknowledge the uncertainty of life and at the same time find meaning in life while living with this uncertainty. As such, narrative integration of experiences of contingency supports people in learning to tolerate the uncertainty of life, thus leaving contingency open. This eliminates the

internal conflict people experience when on one hand they believe they are in control, and at the same time they know life is unpredictable, as seen in coping and meaning-centred approaches.

During the process of narrative integration of experiences of contingency, people come to new answers, while knowing that these answers are not necessarily true or eternal. The only certainty is that of contingency; in other words, the only thing that will ever stay the same in their lives is change itself. The awareness that contingency is always open is called contingent certainty. Human beings seem to need answers to be able to continue on their life path with a coherent life story, even when they know these answers are limited, i.e. while aware of contingent certainty.

The narrative integration of experiences of contingency model includes and acknowledges the certainty of contingency and the effect this has on one's life, offering a more encompassing model to study, understand and support people in their struggles in life. Furthermore, experiences of contingency can be viewed as a prerequisite for the development of one's creativity in synthesising one's worldview, ultimate life goals and meaning in life, propelling people towards a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them, and possibly enhancing spirituality.

1.4 *Research Question and Rationale*

Although the model of narrative integration of life events was developed primarily for adults, in this study we explore whether narrative processes in children age 6 to 12 years old could follow a similar pattern of narrative integration. As children who are highly sensitive (see Aron (2003) for an overview) exhibit traits considered to be either spiritual or enhancing the likelihood of spiritual awareness (Aron 2003), highly sensitive children have been selected for this study.

The research questions are:

Which modes of narrative integration of experiences of contingency are utilised by highly sensitive children (aged 6-12 years)?

Is it true that without vertical transcendence all experiences of contingency are closed, thus removing the contingency by denial?

This study may provide a theoretical contribution to the field of narrative integration and religious philosophy, and possibly support the development of more broad conceptual theories on child development, as argued by Mulvaney (2011, 1157), and so create new opportunities for the field of spiritual care. In

that respect, this study also aims to investigate the practical usability of the model by Kruizinga et al. and the theoretical construct by Wuchterl.

2 Set-Up and Research Method

The study was performed as a qualitative survey (Boeije 2014, 27-34; Jansen 2010, 1-3); data were collected by semi-structured interviews, and further analysed by the continuous comparing analyses method, which is also used as an analysis method in Grounded Theory (Bryman 2008; Strauss & Corbin 1997).

To answer the research questions, 16 highly sensitive Dutch children of age 6-12 years were interviewed in September and October 2016. Interviews were conducted at the children's homes and lasted 1 to 1.5 hours each, partly depending on the concentration and focus of the child in question. Children were collected by use of the snowball method, aiming for a spread in age and gender. The topic list—which accessed identity, worldview, life goals and life events specifically—was compiled by combining questionnaires used in three different lines of research, by Schnell (2003), Hay & Nye (1996, 2006), and Hart (2003), which accessed life events while investigating spirituality. Subsequently, some topic questions based on the clinical experience of the researchers were added. To establish whether children were highly sensitive, Aron's 23-item Highly Sensitive Scale was used, with a threshold of 15 (Aron 2003). The mean score was 18.5, and the range was 15-21. The children—6 boys and 10 girls—were between 6 and 12 years old. Their denominations were mostly secular (9× both parents), Chinese-secular (one of both parents), Moroccan-secular (one of both parents), previously Catholic (1× both parents), New Age (1× both parents), New Age (one of both parents) and Christian Orthodox (one of both parents).

Data were analysed using the Atlas Ti coding programme (Fries 2012), a constant comparative method of content analysis. With the use of deductive analyses, Kruizinga's four modes and Wuchterl's three modes were established in the research material. Although modes of narrative integration of contingency were found in all sixteen children, due to limited space only six examples are presented here.

In an attempt to limit possible interpretation bias by any one of the three researchers, all three were involved in controlling and checking the interpretations of the different modes and vertical transcendence in the interview fragments used in this article.

3 Results

Modes of narrative integration of experiences of contingency

This study found evidence for all four modes of narrative integration of experiences of contingency described by Kruizinga et al., and also for both modes of religious philosophical contingency described by Wuchterl. First, two cases are presented in which 'Receiving' (Kruizinga et al.) is evident. Subsequently, four cases—including a transition from 'Denial' to 'Acknowledging' (Kruizinga et al.)—are presented, also highlighting the differences between the former and latter cases.

Receiving

Case 1. This 12-year-old boy had been bullied for several years, and had just switched to another school.

Interviewer: What have you concluded?

Child: Well, I think it may have been good that I was bullied, because now I know what it is like to be bullied.

I: Why is that a good thing?

C: Because you can now help others that have been bullied much better, for example, because you know what is going through their minds. And you know what is okay and what isn't.

I: How do you view your life so far? Do you have a good feeling about it, or do you find it quite tough?

C: I find it quite tough.

I: What makes it tough?

C: That it doesn't go really smoothly.

I: What do you mean?

C: Well, yes ... When I was bullied, that wasn't great. And I have often struggled with myself.

I: You say "I find my life tough". What helps you to keep going, to say "I will just continue"?

C: Nothing is without a purpose; all experiences will turn out to be helpful one day. Maybe in a later lifetime, or maybe even in this lifetime. But I know it is true.

He happens to arrive in situations in which he is bullied, and what he tries to do against it is not making it stop. He wonders why he must undergo this experience, and concludes that his experience can serve to help others. Alongside this conclusion, he also leaves future possibilities or events open to unfold. This resonates

with the Receiving mode of Kruizinga et al. According to Wuchterl, this would be Encountering (vertical transcendence).

Case 2. This 12-year-old girl was severely bullied, switched to another school, and then decided to make friends with a girl who was one of the people who had bullied her.

C: I just thought to myself that I would start anew at my next school, and I would say to myself that because of that terrible period in my past school, I have grown to be more self-confident now. And I would really start doing my best to just be me. And now I feel I am much more 'myself' than I was last year.

I: How have you grown more self-confident?

C: I feel they were very strong; and because I am at a new school now, I have started to feel strong too. I think that maybe they feel a bit ... they feel a bit small now. They might feel the same as I did. And they look up to a person like me now. They were actually not self-confident.

I: That sounds very special. You mentioned a recent friend who was once really unkind to you. How did you let this new friend get close to you? Because you remembered that she had bullied you severely ...

C: I felt, when she bullied me, that something was not right with her. She had divorced parents. Then, after a while, she let me help her with that issue. And now she is feeling better. And because I have helped her with some life issues ... her father had abused her mentally and emotionally, he said bad things to her. And that's why she subsequently bullied me. When I wanted to help her, she thought that was very weird. But now she appreciates it.

Although she has been severely bullied she finds a way to build more self-confidence from this experience. And furthermore, a way to come to a position in which she understands one of the bullies and even helps this person to overcome her own issues. This shows a resemblance to Kruizinga et al.'s Receiving, as she transcends herself (self-transcendence) and comes to a new place of understanding, even reaching out to a former bully. As no vertical transcendence is evident, according to Wuchterl this would be Mastering or Coping falling outside of his theoretical concept of religious philosophical contingency, thus closing contingency.

Denial—Acknowledging and Accepting

Case 3. This case is about a 12-year-old boy who lost his favourite teddy bear in a fire. It was of significant importance to him, since he had owned it since early childhood.

I: In your life so far, have you ever experienced difficult times?

C: When my teddy bear was burned in my bed, because my computer somehow caught fire. Yes, that was very difficult for me.

I: What was difficult for you about this situation?

C: I felt I had lost my foundation, just like that.

I: You are talking about your teddy bear, that was burned ... what was that like for you?

C: It was very painful, because he really was my only support, and I was very careful with him. Yes, it felt like part of me had died ... no other teddy bear could replace him, because he was my teddy bear.

Here we see an existential concern. He feels the teddy bear is a significant part of himself. And now he has lost this part of himself.

I: How did you relate to this—I mean, is there anything that you tell yourself when difficult things happen?

C: Well, no ... I don't really know of anything that I can do against it.

I: It could also be something that your parents normally say, which helps you to keep going?

C: No, I don't really have a motto to deal with life, I never thought about this question. Normally I just see what happens.

I: You just think "At the moment it actually happens, I will see what I can do about it"?

C: Yes. I mean, what in life can be so terrible that you need a motto to deal with it? Life will just go however it goes, and there is nothing you can do about it.

I: Have you ever felt bogged down by life, like you felt that it wasn't worth living anymore? You have said previously that you think that life is a great adventure—but have you ever felt like you didn't want to go on any longer?

C: That I think to myself "This life is just too much"? Yes, I have felt that way; and then I would like to get out of this life. But still, there are things that help me to keep going—for example the fact that I have my parents, and a really nice family, and a really good school. And then I just have to pull myself through the difficulties.

He feels that what has happened cannot be reversed by any of his own actions; he tries to place it into a framework to understand how life works, but struggles with it. This would be categorised as Accepting mode (Kruizinga et al.). Still, according to Wuchterl—as no acknowledgment of an 'other' reality (vertical transcendence) is visible—this would be Mastering or Coping, thus closing contingency.

I: Is this what you tell yourself?

C: Well, normally my mum tells me things like: "OK, now we are going to work through it, we are going to handle this." And I have learned this by now, so this is what I tell myself.

I: And do you succeed in telling this to yourself?

C: Yes, sometimes you just have to work harder, just fight on; eventually you will stay alive, what can go wrong?

He feels that it is his own responsibility to make something positive of his life. It reveals an immanent agnostic worldview.

C: My law about life is: "Everything will be okay, everything will be okay."

I: 'Everything will be okay.' How do you know? Who takes care of this?

C: Well, it just gives me the feeling that I don't have to be afraid. Look, the worst thing that can happen is that you die; but then again, you will arrive at a very peaceful destination. So simultaneously with this disadvantage, an advantage happens.

He is rationalising himself out of the problem. It is questionable whether he is acknowledging contingency, as he is not allowing himself to feel any uncertainty about the future. The statement 'you will arrive at a very peaceful destination' seems a possible opening towards vertical transcendence. Yet the word 'will' implies there is no uncertainty, thus closing contingency as seen in religious coping ('it is the will of God'). Therefore this statement could be Denial (Kruizinga et al.), or Mastering or Coping (Wuchterl), both closing contingency.

Interestingly, after briefly engaging in denial, the same boy later seems to adapt to a different mode of relating to contingency when he talks about being scared of the dark when he is lying in his bed at night.

I: These moments, when you are really afraid—do you succeed in letting go of the fear, or do you just fall asleep?

C: Normally, when I have survived through the night, I am less scared, and I think to myself that I am safe again.

I: 'When I have survived through the night' ... does the fact that you know that you survived the night help you for the next night to come?

C: Yes it helps me for the following night. Because when I have survived one night, it means that I will also survive the next night; and then when the sun rises, I am liberated.

He feels that he cannot change the recurring event of having to be in his own bed at night; he fears that he might not survive the night, because something terrible could happen. This could be categorised as an existential threat. He tries to make meaning out of the association between the fear and the way it weakens when the sun rises. He does not close the experience of contingency. The final part of case 3, as shown above, is an example of an immanent agnostic who leaves contingency open. His attempts to recognise the uncontrollability of the fear at night, and the uncertainty of his future with regard to the recurring of the threat, point to Acknowledging contingency (Kruizinga et al.). As there seems to be no openness to 'the other', no acknowledgment of vertical transcendence, this would be Mastering or Coping for Wuchterl, contingency closed.

Case 4. This 10-year-old girl lost her cat, which was run down by a truck.

C: Because when it is really someone you love, then it is just not okay. Like what I experienced with Duvel. No one has killed him directly ... well, that truck ... that truck did kill him. And this is what I don't like, so I am angry with that person. So yes, Duvel is actually a very good example.

I: So that's exactly it, that truck did not have the right to kill him.

C: No, and the stupid thing is that he could have just stopped and waited, to say sorry. But he just drove on.

I: So that makes it even worse? What is it that makes it even worse?

C: Look, now I can be angry at him for years. And maybe the truck driver also feels bad about it. It just isn't fun like this. Because when he would have apologised, I might have been able to forgive him. But now I am far from forgiving him, really. He has killed Duvel and just drove on. This I don't like, now I am not forgiving him.

I: What is forgiveness? Why would you have forgiven him?

C: Well, I don't like it that he killed Duvel, but I really don't like it that he just drove on, when he would have been able to say 'sorry'. Then I wouldn't mind so much, now. I would have still felt sad about it, but I wouldn't have to still be angry with him.

I: So you don't want to forgive him, because he did not stop. What is difficult about forgiving?

C: When you ever meet that person, and you have not forgiven, he might get angry immediately, while you don't like that. So it is much nicer.

I: Much nicer when?

C: When you forgive someone.

I: Because?

C: Because it is much nicer for the other person. When I meet him again and I would be angry with him, he would not like that. So when I would forgive him, he doesn't have to carry that burden.

She is acknowledging the fact that her cat was killed. She is also acknowledging the contingency of the truck driver not stopping; but she seems not to have succeeded in integrating it into her life, and thus has failed to solve her problem with the situation. She wrestles with the possibilities: to forgive, or withhold forgiveness. She seems to be an immanent agnostic, and at the same time she leaves both options open and remains at a crossroads on what to decide for herself. She does keep the contingency open. This could be seen as Acknowledging, and then struggling to make the next step towards Accepting (Kruizinga et al.). As there seems to be no acknowledgment of vertical transcendence, Wuchterl would categorise this as Mastering or Coping, thus closing contingency.

Case 5. This 12-year-old girl speaks about her sensitivity to injustice, which often leads to severe anger outbursts.

I: Have you ever wondered why you arrived in this world, why you are here on this earth?

C: Not very clearly, but I did wonder—not why I am here on earth, but—"Why me, why should this anger be this way within me?" More like that.

I: And do you think "Why should I have this anger within me" or is it more like "Why should I experience this anger in such a way?"

C: More like "Why should I experience this ..." Yes, that can go quite far.

I: What happens when you think: "Why me, why should I experience this?"

C: Well, I don't really know, but I think "I would really want this to not happen, because then I might feel much better." On the other hand, I also think "Maybe it is a good thing that this happens to me."

I: What would be good about it?

C: You can always learn something out of it, that anyway ... And, yes ... so you can learn something from it. Also, when it happens again, you know how to handle it. Although that doesn't work well on every occasion.

She is trying to close the experience of contingency by telling herself that she may have to learn a lesson, but she doesn't believe herself completely. Her management strategy remains open to further thought, and possibly to receiving insight. She could be seen as an immanent agnostic who leaves contingency open. This illustrates Acknowledging (Kruizinga et al.). For Wuchterl, this would be Mastering

or Coping, as no acknowledgment of ‘the other’ (vertical transcendence) is involved, thus closing contingency.

Case 6. This eight-year-old girl had to change schools, as she was highly intelligent and needed another type of tuition. When she subsequently changed to the new school she experienced a strong dislike for her new teacher, who was quite harsh with her, and wanted to change back to her old school. This was almost made impossible, but eventually she changed back to her old school.

C: When I was in this new school, I often said to myself that everything would turn out okay in the end, and that I would eventually be placed in a school that would really fit my needs. And this did happen ... when I was at that new school, I just thought to myself every day that within a few hours, this would be over and I would be free again.

I: But how did you manage to persevere in your wish to move back to your old school, as there were people that did not take you seriously? How did you do that?

C: Well, lots of hoping; but not too much, because then it might not happen. And to talk to people who did take me seriously, like mum and grandma.

I: You are saying that you were hoping for it to happen, but not too much?

C: If you hope too much for something to happen, it might not happen. It doesn't feel right for me, because I might have asked too much.

At first there is no openness to contingency, she denies the possibility she would have to stay at the new school: Denial (Kruizinga et al.). Then she moves on to thinking that too much hoping might have a negative effect. Thus, moving to Acknowledging (Kruizinga et al.), contingency is open. Subsequently she closed this movement towards acknowledging of contingency by declaring that it is in her own hands whether it happens or not, thus returning to Denial (Kruizinga et al.). All of these stages would be considered Mastering or Coping by Wuchterl, thus closing contingency.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the four modes described by Kruizinga et al., including self-transcendence in mode four, Receiving. Also, the study confirms narrative integration of experiences of contingency to describe various ways in which people keep contingency open, while integrating these experiences into their life story. Our conclusion is that vertical transcendence is not a

prerequisite for either narrative integration or for acknowledging the uncertainty of life, i.e. keeping contingency open.

In our study—as described in cases 2, 3, 4, 5 for immanent agnostics, and in case 6—it is shown that contingency can be open without vertical transcendence; and as such, is outside the modes described by Wuchterl. As described in case 2, the process of narrative integration can be completed (self-transcendence) without vertical transcendence. Kruizinga et al. and this study show that it is possible for people to acknowledge contingency (the event was neither necessary to happen, nor impossible, so it could have been different), thus keeping contingency open, without the need for acknowledging the existence of a vertical transcendent realm. We conclude that it is possible for immanent agnostics to leave contingency open.

In addition to this, and in opposition to Wuchterl, it becomes clear that some people are also able to understand the world without a vertical transcendental preposition. Possibly Wuchterl mistakenly views narrative integration as a way to close contingency. Also, both studies confirm that some people deal with experiences of contingency by denying the contingent nature of these experiences.

The four modes described by Kruizinga et al. are present in this study. According to Kruizinga et al., people may switch between the four modes of narrative integration of experiences of contingency. We also found this in our study, as described in cases 3, 4, 5 and 6. Possibly this illustrates the iterative nature of the process of narrative integration of experiences of contingency.

For future research, we recommend investigating the validity of the model of narrative integration of experiences of contingency, and the four modes described by Kruizinga et al., in larger and more generalisable samples, as the studies described only cancer patients and highly sensitive children. Further research could also begin to investigate how people are able to tolerate the uncertainty of life and stay open to contingency, thus integrating the experience of contingency certainty into their lives.

Finally, we would like to address the question of which approach would be most useful and promising in the field of spiritual care. We conclude that closing out the valid experiences of part of the population is probably not a fruitful approach, however theoretically correct it may be. As the results of the current study support and further validate the findings of Kruizinga et al., there are compelling reasons to use their model of narrative integration of experiences of contingency, including all four modes, for further research into the various ways spiritual care can offer support to people dealing with any form of contingency.

Possibly the strongest support options lie in helping people to tolerate the uncertainty of life (contingent certainty) without closing down the accompanying feelings or shutting contingency down, in combination with finding (new) meaning in their lives after experiencing contingency (triggered by life events). This would strengthen two traditional focus points of spiritual care: finding meaning and (inner) peace in one's life—only this time, not with the use of religious coping ('it is the will of God'), but by supporting people in finding their own innermost values. It is probable that with this new approach, the field of spiritual care would be able to reconnect with a larger part of modern society.

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