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## **Meaning and the Mediation of Emotional Experience: Placing Mediational Meaning at the Center of Psychological Processes**

Marc Clarà

University of Lleida

### **Abstract**

This paper outlines a framework to understand and further study how meaning mediates psychological processes. Central to this paper is the concept of mediational meaning: a representation of “me in the world,” socially distributed as a cultural artifact, that “encodes” emotion and motivates social activity. It is suggested that the emotional encoding of mediational meaning can be understood through the study of its structure, which is conceptualized on two levels: a conceptual level, called the “view,” and a narrative level, called the “narrative structure.” This paper proposes an operationalization of both structural levels and hypothesizes specific relationships between certain structural aspects of mediational meaning and certain dimensions of emotional experience: valence, action readiness, and some aspects of the quale.

## Introduction

Researchers of all psychological traditions have constructed their contributions based on two basic units of analysis. The first is binary and, albeit with many variants, can be summarized as the relationship between subject and object (Catania, 2013; Chemero, 2013; Gibson, 1979; Watson, 1913). The second is triadic and assumes that meaning *mediates* in the subject-object relationship (Figure 1).

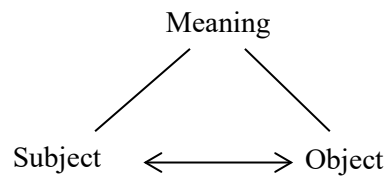


Figure 1. Triadic unit of analysis for a psychological process

It can be argued that recognition of the mediational function of meaning dates back to Wundt's "Völkerpsychologie," if not earlier (Ellis & Stam, 2015). However, according to Zittoun et al. (2007), three key sources have profoundly influenced the study of this mediational function in the current traditions of psychological research: Freud, Vygotsky, and Piaget. The different traditions grounded on these three sources have evolved very much in isolation one from another and this has resulted into an excessively fragmented understanding of the structure and role of mediational meaning in psychological processes (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012).

This paper aims to set an arena for dialogue between the different approaches to mediational meaning and to outline a comprehensive account of the structure and function of mediational meaning in psychological processes. The paper is organized into three parts. In the first part, I will develop the concept of mediational meaning as a phenomenon shared by different traditions of psychological thought. In the second, I

will propose an analytical apparatus to study mediational meaning structurally. In the third, I will present a hypothesis about how specific structural aspects of mediational meaning impact different aspects of emotional experience. Finally, I will discuss some implications of this proposal for further research.

### **A Meta-theoretical Delimitation of Mediational Meaning**

In this section, I will adopt a meta-theoretical approach heavily based on Vygotsky's epistemology of science and, in particular, of psychology (Vygotsky, 1997). Under this approach, the development of psychological science is understood to be caused by the dialectical relationship, or dialogue, between different views. This generative dialogue has several characteristics. First, the purpose of the dialogue is not to conquer the field, i.e., the generative plurality of views must be maintained. Vygotsky (1997) argues that when one idea, generated from one specific view, is overgeneralized and seeks to become the explanatory principle of the whole view, this idea ceases to explain anything (pp. 245-246). Second, the product of a generative dialogue between views is not an eclectic fusion of the views involved (p. 249). On the contrary, generative dialogue leads to the development of each separate view as a consequence of looking at the other views' findings and considering them from one's own view (pp. 266-267). Third, generative dialogue between views is articulated around shared phenomena, facts that are recognized as such (even if they are conceptualized differently) by the different views involved in the dialogue (p. 280).

In this paper I argue that mediational meaning is a phenomenon that can be recognized as shared by all approaches based on any version of the triadic unit of analysis.

However, the progressive distancing of the different traditions has led to mutual

isolation and a lack of generative dialogue between them; this reproduces the path described by Vygotsky:

Any fact which is expressed in each of these three systems will, in turn, acquire three completely different forms. To be more precise, there will be three different forms of a single fact. To be even more precise, there will be three different facts. And as the science moves forward and gathers facts, we will successively get three different generalizations, three different laws, three different classifications, three different systems –three individual sciences which, the more successfully they develop, the more remote they will be from each other and from the common fact that unites them. (Vygotsky, 1997, p.238)

The aim of this section is to delimit and define mediational meaning as a phenomenon that can be seen as common to various traditions of thought, thereby enabling the articulation of generative dialogue among them. I propose that mediational meaning can be delimited in this way by means of five main ideas. First, mediational meaning is both narrative and conceptual. Second, it consists of a representation of me-in-the-world. Third, it is a socially distributed material cultural artifact. Fourth, it motivates social activity via emotion. And fifth, emotion is closely related to specific structural aspects of mediational meaning.

The idea that mediational meaning is both narrative and conceptual is, I think, a reasonable conclusion based on the large amount of research about the “self.” Research in this field has built on two opposite assumptions: some have assumed that the self is conceptual, others that it is narrative. The debate over these two positions is hard to solve because both groups have found convincing evidence to support their respective assumptions. On the one hand, such important proposals as those by Rogers (1951),

Allport (1955), Epstein (1973), or Bandura (2001) are based on the assumption that the self is basically conceptual. To cite just one example, the “self-efficacy” belief plays an undeniably important role in psychological functioning: research has consistently shown that self-efficacy is strongly related to well-being, anxiety, depression, motivation, performance, and intellectual development (Bandura, 1993, 2012; Chesnut & Burley, 2015; Huang, 2016; Shoji et al., 2016). On the other hand, the idea that the self is narrative has proliferated since the 1980s (Bruner, 2004/1997). In this tradition, the idea of “autobiographical meaning” or “self-story” is crucial. For example, McAdams (2001, p. 101) proposes that identity takes the form of an “evolving self-story, an integrative narrative of self,” by means of which people “reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future,” looking for unity of purpose of life. There is clear evidence of the central role of autobiographical meaning in psychology: for example, the coherence and integration (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Waters & Fivush, 2015) and level of specificity (Liu et al., 2013; Stange et al., 2013) of the self-story have been found to be related to psychological well-being.

In fact, several researchers of “the self” have assumed it is both narrative and conceptual. The recent work by McAdams (2013) is an example of a proposal that is rooted in the narrative approach to the self but incorporates a conceptual stratum. He identifies three layers of the self: actor, agent, and author. The self as actor corresponds to conceptual meaning, the self as agent introduces goals and motivation, and the self as author is fully narrative. An opposite – but convergent – example is the proposal by Hermans (1996), which, although mainly about conceptual meaning, includes a narrative stance. That proposal focuses on how the “me” is conceptually positioned in relation to others and to the world. Hermans argues that the “me” can be positioned in multiple ways when one is accounting for a given reality. Each of these possible

positions of the “me,” which Hermans calls “I-positions,” implies a particular *view* of the relationship with the world and with others. Importantly, each view, each I-position, involves a different system of conceptual meaning, e.g., I-as-friend, I-as-son, I-as-feminist. Furthermore, these different views (I-positions) co-exist and establish dialogic relationships among themselves.

This relational approach to the self (as a relationship between the “me” and the world), which is, of course, evident in all narrative approaches, but also in conceptual ones such as Hermans’s, leads to a second basic idea about mediational meaning, namely, that it is a representation of me-in-the-world. For many years, the “me” has been studied in isolation by the approaches to the “self.” This is probably because this research is grounded in William James’s (1890) seminal work on the “self,” where he drew a sharp distinction between the “me” (self)<sup>1</sup> and the “world” (not-self). This introduced a dualism between “meaning about the me” (self) and “meaning about the world” as two different psychological phenomena. The relational approach to the self eliminates this dualism: any account of the world involves a certain positioning of the “me” and an attached particular conceptual view; any account of the “me” also includes the world, since positioning (and, in fact, the very existence of the “me”) is not possible without the “other.” Thus, there are not two types of mediational meaning – one about the “me,” another about the world: mediational meaning always involves both the “me” and the world. This idea has been assumed by appraisal theories in the study of emotion causation. Arnold (1960), one of the pioneers of these kinds of theories, insisted that appraising involves not just perceiving an object, but making meaning of it *in relation to me*, of how it affects me: “to arouse an emotion, the object must be appraised as affecting me in some way, affecting me personally as an individual with my particular

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<sup>1</sup> According to James, the “me” also extends to “mine”: my house, my family, my clothes, etc., are also “me.”

experience and my particular aims” (Arnold, 1960, p. 171). The study of the representation of the “me-world” relationship in the appraisal has been the core of this line of research; the evidence has been abundant and consistent in showing its profound influence on the subject’s emotional experience (Buhle et al., 2014; Denson, Spanovic, & Miller, 2009; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012).

The representations of “me-in-the-world” have also been the focus in some Vygotskian approaches to narrative. They argue that the “me-in-the-world” narrations that mediate psychological functioning are in fact socially distributed narratives – this is the third basic idea to delimiting the concept of mediational meaning. The idea that mediational meaning is a cultural (material) artifact that exists in the environment (and not only in the subject) is crucial in Vygotsky’s writings and has been further emphasized and developed by post-Vygotskian scholars such as Engeström (1987), Wertch (1991), and Cole (1996), among others. However, in these developments, mediational meaning is mainly considered to be conceptual (as it was by Vygotsky in most of his work).

Several approaches have recently assumed Vygotskian main principles, while at the same time assuming that mediational meaning is narrative. This has led to important work that shows how narratives are socially distributed, how they may become dominant and normative, and how they are internalized (in one way or another), thereby mediating the psychological functioning of individuals. Fivush et al. (2011), for example, review evidence that shows how what they call “intergenerational narratives” are socially distributed and internalized in everyday family interactions, such as conversations during meals, and how adults scaffold this internalization process.

McLean & Syed (2015) focus on “master narratives,” which they define as “culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture, and provide guidance for how to be a ‘good’ member of a culture” (p. 320). McLean & Syed (2015) focus especially on how



master narratives are internalized as personal narratives and on the dynamic of acceptance or resistance to master narratives and negotiation with alternative narratives. To account for this dynamic, Hammack (2011) uses the concept of “engagement” with (master) narratives. This concept highlights the idea that personal and master narratives are not two different independent entities (one existing in the environment and the other in the mind), but rather that a master narrative *becomes* personal through a process of “narrative engagement” (Hammack, 2011; Hammack & Toolis, 2015). This approach assumes that “individuals navigate a *polyphonic* context in which multiple storylines circulate and compete for dominance and primacy in individual appropriation” (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012, p. 79). In “narrative engagement,” the individual uses one or another competing narrative, assuming some (or certain aspects thereof) and rejecting others. Therefore, narrative engagement is a dynamic, active process, in which socially distributed narratives are somewhat transformed; it does not work as a static, linear, passive reproduction of narratives.

One important point in Hammack & Pilecki’s (2012) approach is that narrative, in its mediational role, motivates certain types of social practice (and not others). Importantly, the authors suggest that this motivation comes mainly from the emotional aspects of the narrative:

Narratives thus involve not only a shared set of *beliefs* but a larger common *repertoire* [...] that consolidates memory and affect in such a way as to motivate particular social practices, such as participation in the political violence that maintains conflict. Emotions like anger and hatred are encoded into the collective storylines that individuals encounter in conflict settings [...]. And the personal narratives individuals then construct to make meaning of the lived experience of conflict subsume these affective qualities. (p. 94)

But how are emotions “encoded” in these (collective) narratives? The last basic idea of this section is that the answer to this question can be found in specific structural aspects of mediational meaning. The large body of research on appraisal theories points in that direction. Especially interesting is the later work by Lazarus (1999), who abandoned the systems model approach to appraisal (Somerfield, 1997), which he and Folkman had once championed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and began to develop a narrative approach to appraisal. Basically, he proposed that the quality of each emotion is defined by a core narrative structure in the appraisal, which Lazarus calls the “relational theme.” For example, according to Lazarus’s analysis, the relational theme of “anger” is “a demeaning offense against me and mine,” while the relational theme of “guilt” is “having transgressed a moral imperative.” Lazarus identifies the relational themes of 15 emotions, which are listed in Table 1 (next section). Lazarus’s account of the narrative structure of mediational meaning is an excellent starting point, but more precision is needed to understand how exactly this narrative structure impacts emotional experience (and other psychological functions as well). In the next section, I will propose an analytical apparatus that, I will argue, will enable the formulation of very precise hypotheses about how meaning mediates in psychological processes and, thus, the empirical investigation of those hypotheses.

### **The Structure of Mediational Meaning: An Analytical Apparatus**

In this section, I will present an analytical apparatus, mainly a “language,” to make the study of how the structure of meaning mediates psychological processes more precise. Since, as seen in the previous section, research suggests that mediational meaning is both narrative and conceptual, this analytical apparatus needs to consider the structure

of mediational meaning to be twofold, comprising a narrative level and a conceptual one. The narrative level consists of the narrative structure of the mediational meaning; the conceptual level consists of the view, understood as a system of concepts, that the narrative structure enacts. I should emphasize that both levels form a single whole, and the distinction is only for analytical purposes. In mediational meaning, the narrative structure always enacts a particular view, and the conceptual system always takes the form of narrative events. In the remainder of this section, I will propose a “language,” first, for the narrative structure and, then, for the “view,” while showing how these two levels are interconnected.

### *The Narrative Structure*

Many linguists have argued that all possible stories can be seen as variants of a relatively small, finite number of stories (Greimas, 1983; Propp, 2010); in other words, that different stories can be seen as essentially the same. If this is true, the seemingly different stories must have something in common, something that defines the core of the essential story. This is what I call the “narrative structure” and what Lazarus called the “relational theme.” The challenge is to find a language that can express this core narrative structure beyond the non-essential variants and details of the story. Lazarus (1999) made an initial attempt, using common language to describe the narrative structures (relational themes) mediating several emotions (Table 1). I argue that expressing these narrative structures in a more precise notation system would make the study of their mediating role much more powerful. To construct such a notation system, Greimas’s theoretical and methodological contributions are especially useful (Greimas, 1983, 1989; Greimas & Fontanille, 1992; Greimas & Rastier, 1968).

According to Greimas, the minimal narrative utterance involves two relationships: a relationship of *conjunction* and a relationship of *transformation* (or function). It can be said that any narrative utterance implies making a conjunction (or disjunction) happen. The transformation is typically a function by an actor, and this function conjoins or disjoins one actor and one object (or two actors). This can be expressed as:

$$F(a) \rightarrow (a \wedge O)$$

where “F” means function, “a” means actor, “→” means transformation, “^” means conjunction, and “v” means disjunction. For example, if we consider the relational theme of “anger,” described by Lazarus as “a demeaning offense against me and mine,” it could be formulated as  $F(\text{other}) \rightarrow (\text{Me} \wedge \text{offense})$ .

Now, the transformation relationship in a function may have different modalities. Greimas distinguishes between performance (doing), desire (wanting to do), duty (having to do), possibility (being able to do), and capability (knowing how to do). The modalities of desire (wanting to do) and duty (having to do) are especially important, because they define not only a function, but a trajectory or a direction for the actor in the narrative; they provide the impulse for the actor to act. This direction or trajectory is called the narrative program (NP). For example, the relational theme of “envy” is described by Lazarus as “wanting what someone else has.” This could be formulated as  $NP(\text{me}) \rightarrow (\text{wants to do}) \rightarrow (\text{me} \wedge O[\text{of someone else}])$ .

But a narrative structure implies, at least, a relationship between two different functions. This relationship can be one of congruence (=) or of contradiction (vs.). This applies, of course, to the two narrative structures seen above (mediating anger and envy). For example, Lazarus’s description of the relational theme of envy includes a “wanting to do” of “me,” a “doing” (having the object) of someone else, and a contradiction

between these two functions (if someone has the object then I do not). Thus, the complete formulation of this narrative structure would be: NP(me)-(wants to do)->(me ^ O) vs. F(other)-(does)->(other ^ O). Similarly, Lazarus’s description of the relational theme of “anger” includes the idea of “offense,” consisting of something that is undesired by the “me,” as well as a contradiction between this desire (of me) and a function of someone else, which conjoins the undesired thing with me (or disjoins the desired thing from me). Therefore, the complete formulation of the narrative structure mediating anger would be: NP(me)-(wants to do)->(me v O) vs. F(other)-(does)->(me ^ O). A relationship (of congruence or contradiction) between an NP and another function is what I call a “narrative nucleus.” The simplest narrative structure consists of one narrative nucleus; however, a more complicated narrative structure can include relationships of other functions with the narrative nucleus, as well as relationships between several narrative nuclei (and their related functions). Table 1 shows the relational themes identified by Lazarus (1999) and how they would be expressed in terms of narrative nuclei.

Table 1. Lazarus’s relational themes for 15 emotions and their expression in terms of narrative nuclei

Emotion	Lazarus’ account of the relational theme	Expression in terms of narrative nuclei
Anger	A demeaning offense against me and mine	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me v O) vs F(other)-(does)->(me ^ O)
Envy	Wanting what someone else has	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me ^ O) vs F(other)-(does)->(other ^ O)

Jealousy	Resenting a third party for the loss or threat of loss of another's bounty or affection	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me ^ other) vs F(other)-(can/do)->(other ^ other)
Anxiety	Facing an uncertain, existential threat	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me v O) vs F(undetermined)-(can)->(me ^ O)
Fright	Facing a sudden and overwhelming concrete physical danger	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me v O) vs F(other)-(can)->(me ^ O)
Guilt	Having transgressed a moral imperative	NP(me)-(has to)->(me/other v O) vs F(me)-(does)->(me/other ^ O)
Shame	Failure to live up to an ego ideal	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me ^ O) vs F(me)-(does)->(me v O)
Relief	A negative condition, an important threat, has either not materialized or has changed for the better	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me v O) = F(other)-(does)->(me v O)
Hope	A positive outcome has not yet occurred but is sought, most often in an unfavorable situation	NP(me)-(wants to)->(me ^ O) = F(other)-(can)->(me ^ O)
Sadness	Experiencing an irrevocable loss	F(other)-(does)->(me v O) vs NP(me)-(wants to)->(me ^ O) vs F(me)-(cannot)->(me ^ O)

Gratitude	Appreciating an altruistic gift that provides personal benefit	$F(\text{other})-(\text{does})-\rightarrow(\text{me} \wedge \text{O})$ $=$ $NP(\text{me})-(\text{wants to})-\rightarrow(\text{me} \wedge \text{O})$ $\text{vs}$ $F(\text{other})-(\text{can})-\rightarrow(\text{me} \vee \text{O})$
Compassion	Being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help	$NP(\text{me})-(\text{wants to})-\rightarrow(\text{other} \vee \text{O})$ $=$ $NP(\text{other})-(\text{wants to})-\rightarrow(\text{other} \vee \text{O})$ $\text{vs}$ $F(\text{undetermined})-(\text{does})-\rightarrow(\text{other} \wedge \text{O})$
Happiness	Making reasonable progress toward the realization of a goal	$NP(\text{me})-(\text{wants to})-\rightarrow(\text{me} \wedge \text{O})$ $=$ $F(\text{me})-(\text{does})-\rightarrow(\text{me} \wedge \text{O})$
Pride	Enhancing one's self or ego identity by taking credit for a valued object or achievement	$NP(\text{me})-(\text{wants to})-\rightarrow(\text{other} \wedge \text{me})$ $=$ $F(\text{me})-(\text{does})-\rightarrow(\text{other} \wedge [\text{me} \wedge \text{O}])$
Love	Desiring or participating in affection, usually but not necessarily reciprocated	$NP(\text{me})-(\text{wants to})-\rightarrow(\text{me} \wedge \text{other})$ $=$ $NP(\text{other})-(\text{wants to})-\rightarrow(\text{me} \wedge \text{other})$

### *The View*

A view is a single system of meaning. Greimas argues that any system of meaning necessarily involves a relationship between four concepts. Consider, for example, the meaning of "death." This meaning is not really defined except in opposition to another concept. Probably, the reader has made meaning of "death" by opposing it to "life," but

it is important to note that “death” only gains its meaning through this opposition. For example, take the Brahms *lied* “O Tod, wie bitter bist du” (Op. 121, No. 3). It says:

O death, how bitter is the remembrance of thee  
to a man that is at peace in his possessions,  
unto the man that hath nothing to distract him, and hath prosperity  
in all things, and that still hath strength to receive meat!

Oh death, how bitter is the remembrance of thee.

O death, how acceptable is thy sentence unto a man  
that is needy and that faileth in strength,  
that is in extreme old age, and is distracted in all things,  
and that looks for no better lot, nor waiteth on better days!

O death, how acceptable is thy sentence.

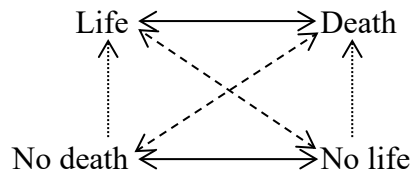
In the first verse, death is opposed to life; in this opposition, life is desirable (has a euphoric connotation) and death is not desirable (has a dysphoric connotation).

However, in the second verse, death is opposed to suffering and hopelessness, and its meaning completely changes. Now, death has a euphoric connotation in opposition to suffering and hopelessness, which has a dysphoric one.

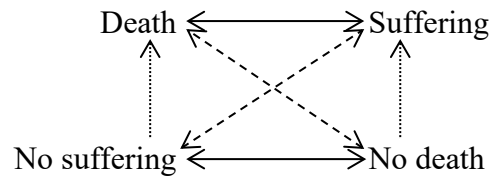
But this is not all, because the opposition of two concepts generates two additional concepts. For example, the opposition of life and death gives rise to the concept of “no death (but not entirely life),” which has a euphoric connotation, as well as the concept of “no life (but not entirely death),” which has a dysphoric connotation. A full simple system of meaning, including four concepts, can be represented through what Greimas



calls a “semiotic square.” For example, the view in the first verse of Brahms’s *lied* could be represented as:



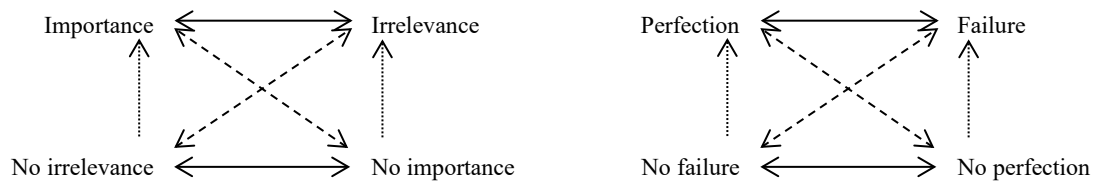
In contrast, the second verse could be represented as:



In a semiotic square, the continuous two-way arrows mean *opposition*, the dashed two-way arrows mean *contrariety*, and the dotted one-way arrows mean *implication*. The two concepts on the left vertical axis are euphoric, and the two concepts on the right vertical axis are dysphoric. Now, the views of the first and second verses of Brahms’s *lied* can be compared. Note that, while in the view of the first verse /death/ is related to /no life/ (implication) and located on the dysphoric axis (in opposition to life), in the second verse’s view /death/ is related to /no suffering/ (implication) and located on the euphoric axis, in opposition to /suffering/.

In mediational meaning, these systems of meaning that we call “views” are enacted by the functions involved in the narrative structure. For example, in a narrative nucleus, the narrative program (NP) establishes what the actor is pursuing, what her duty or desire is; thus, an NP always enacts (and is invested by) concepts from the *euphoric axis* of a particular view. In addition to an NP, a narrative nucleus also includes, at least, one

function (F), which is congruent or contradictory with the NP: it is congruent when it enacts a concept from the euphoric axis of the view; it is contradictory when it enacts a concept from its dysphoric axis. Additionally, as noted by Hermans, the functions in a narrative structure can enact concepts from multiple views at the same time, and these views can be dialogically related. For example, it is possible for two views to be related in such a way that when a function enacts a euphoric concept in one view, it automatically also enacts a dysphoric concept in the other. Consider, for example, the case presented by Hermans (2014), involving a conflict between I-as-dreamer and I-as-perfectionist. The dreamer's view can be thought of in terms of the opposition between importance and irrelevance, while the perfectionist's view can be thought of in terms of the opposition between perfection and failure:



In this case, the two views are related in such a way that when a function enacts importance (euphoric), it inevitably also enacts failure (dysphoric); when a function enacts no failure (euphoric), it automatically also enacts irrelevance (dysphoric).

Therefore, when facing the structure of mediational meaning we face an extremely complex set of relationships at the narrative structure level, at the view level, and also in terms of the interaction between the narrative structure and the views. The analytical apparatus I have just proposed can enable the detailed study of all this complexity. As an illustration, in the following section, I will present a hypothesis about how certain characteristics of the narrative nuclei impact specific aspects of emotional experience.

## **Emotion and the Structure of Mediational Meaning: A Working Hypothesis**

In the previous section, I proposed an analytical apparatus that, I argued, can enable very detailed investigation of the mediational function of meaning in psychological processes. To show the kind of precision and detail this approach might enable, in this section, I will present a hypothesis about one important issue regarding the mediation of meaning. I have already argued that research in narrative psychology and appraisal theories suggests that emotion is encoded into certain structural aspects of mediational meaning. But what exactly are these structural aspects? What dimensions of the emotional experience are encoded in each one? How exactly does the manifestation of each aspect impact these emotional dimensions? In this section, I will use the narrative nucleus as a unit of analysis to propose a hypothesis for these questions. However, before presenting this hypothesis, I will consider some issues related to emotional experience.

### ***Defining Emotional Experience***

The definition and characterization of emotional experience is an extremely difficult endeavor that remains unresolved. Currently, there are two main approaches to this problem: the discrete emotions approach and the dimensional approach. In my understanding, the differences between the two approaches stem from two distinct issues: a different theory about the nature and cause of emotion, and the problem of reliability in defining and characterizing emotional experience. On the one hand, the discrete emotions approach tries to define and distinguish different emotions, such as anger, sadness, guilt, etc. This approach usually assumes that there are some innate emotions that humans, as a species, have inherited phylogenetically and that are shared

by other animals, at least by many mammals. These inherited emotions are usually called basic emotions. It is assumed that each basic emotion has a specific and non-learnable quale and that they are the building blocks of all emotional experience. Thus, from this view, the basic emotions would be analogous to the four basic tastes (Izard, 2007), each with its distinctive, non-learnable, and irreducible quale. However, most researchers assume that pure basic emotions are rare in adult humans, because culture and cognition transform them into myriad nuanced emotional experiences that exhibit new emergent properties (Izard, 2011, 2007; Panksepp & Watt, 2011). In this regard, most researchers propose that basic emotions, especially in humans, should be thought of as different families, each including some variations but sharing central characteristics (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Levenson, 2011; Cowen et al., 2019). There is no consensus regarding how many basic emotions there are and what they might be. In general, it is agreed that they include anger, fear, sadness, and happiness, while there is some discrepancy regarding the inclusion of disgust and interest (Tracy, 2011). The terms used to refer to each basic emotion also differ from one proposal to another (e.g., happiness or enjoyment or play; anger or rage).

On the other hand, the dimensional approach notes that it is difficult to reliably distinguish one discrete emotion from another and argues that this happens because basic emotions do not really exist (Barrett, 2006). This approach suggests that emotional qualia can be reduced to pleasant-unpleasant, and that the illusion of experiencing different discrete emotions can be explained by the conceptualization of this pleasant-unpleasant quale. Other dimensions have been added in the same line, notably arousal or activation, which refers to the urge felt to take action (Barrett, 2006; Russell, Weiss & Mendelsohn, 1989; Scherer & Moors, 2019). More recently, this dimension has also been called “action readiness” or “motivational intensity” (Frijda &

Parrott, 2011; Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010). These two dimensions – valence and readiness/arousal – make up an “affective space” in which a given emotional experience can be reliably located and mapped; this two-dimensional space has been called the “circumplex model of affect” (Russell, 1980).

A detailed discussion of the differences between the discrete emotion and dimensional approaches falls beyond the scope of this paper. Without addressing the issues at the core of that debate – especially, those of the nature and cause of emotion – I will take a combined approach, as suggested by some authors (Izard, 2007; Panksepp & Watt, 2011). On the one hand, I agree that a dimensional approach is simpler and more reliable for identifying, characterizing, and communicating emotional experience; on the other hand, I also agree that dimensional approaches, at least as they currently exist, miss certain valuable information about emotional experience, especially aspects of qualia, which can be better gathered with discrete emotion approaches.

### ***How Mediational Meaning Mediates Emotional Experience***

To articulate a hypothesis about how meaning mediates emotional experience, I will take the narrative nucleus as a unit of analysis. The hypothesis is built upon two pillars: first, the relational themes identified by Lazarus (1999), expressed in the notation system discussed above; second, the available evidence on discrete emotion families, regarding both their mapping into the circumplex model (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Bliss-Moreau, Williams & Santistevan, 2019; Fontaine et al., 2007; Gillioz et al., 2017; Russell, 1980; Scherer, 2005) and the study of their qualia characteristics (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Frijda & Parrott, 2011; Lazarus, 1999; Panksepp & Watt, 2011; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). According to this hypothesis, there are two aspects of narrative nuclei

that are crucial in the mediation of valence and arousal in emotional experience. The first is whether the NP-F relationship in the narrative nucleus is one of congruence or contradiction. That will define the valence of the emotional experience: when the tension is one of congruence, the emotional experience is pleasant; when it is one of contradiction, the emotional experience is unpleasant. This is consistent with the available mappings of emotions in the circumplex model: emotions mediated by narrative nuclei of contradiction (such as anger, anxiety, envy, jealousy, guilt, shame, and fright) are consistently mapped as unpleasant, while emotions mediated by narrative nuclei of congruence (such as happiness, hope, pride, compassion, love, and relief) are systematically mapped as pleasant (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Bliss-Moreau, Williams & Santistevan, 2019; Fontaine et al., 2007; Gillioz et al., 2017; Russell, 1980; Scherer, 2005).

The second key structural aspect is whether the function in the narrative nucleus is a function of “me” or a function of “other.” This aspect defines the level of action readiness of the emotional experience, but it works differently in contradictory narrative nuclei than in congruent ones. When the function of the nucleus is of “other,” and the nucleus is of contradiction, readiness is high; when the function is of “other,” but the nucleus is of congruence, readiness is medium-low. On the other hand, when the function of the nucleus is of “me,” and the nucleus is of contradiction, the readiness is medium-low; when the function is of “me,” and the nucleus is of congruence, the readiness is medium-high. In other words, in contradictory nuclei, the actor of the F strongly impacts the readiness level, which is higher when the F is of “other.” In contrast, in congruent nuclei, the actor of the F only slightly impacts the readiness level, which is higher when the F is of “me.” This relationship is graphed in Figure 2:

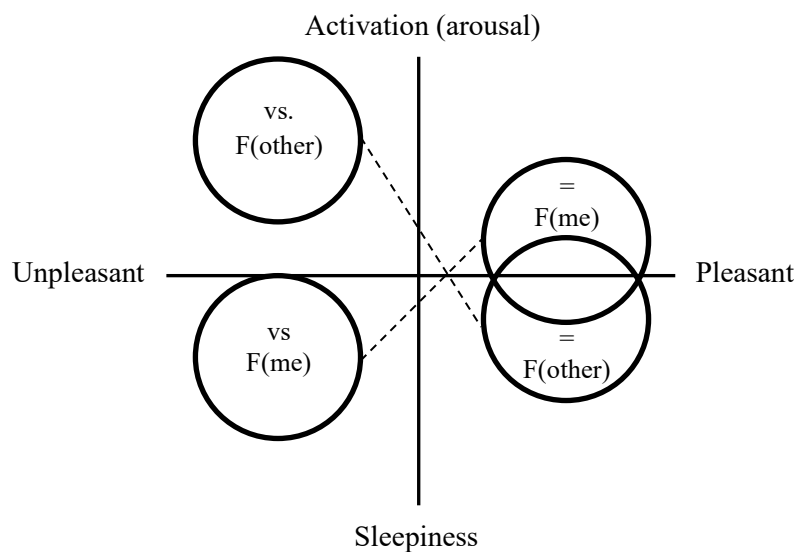


Figure 2. Schematized relationship between the affective space (valence and arousal) and two aspects of the mediating narrative nuclei: the congruent (=) or contradictory (vs.) relationship between the NP and F; and the actor of the F (other/me).

This is quite consistent with the evidence. Emotions such as anger, fright, envy, jealousy, and anxiety (contradiction structures in which the F is of “other”) are mapped by most models as high readiness, while emotions such as hope, compassion, love, and relief (congruence structure in which the F is of “other”) are mostly mapped as medium-low readiness. On the other hand, emotions such as guilt or shame (contradiction structures in which the F is of “me”) are mostly mapped as medium-low readiness, while emotions such as happiness and pride (congruent structures in which the F is of “me”) are consistently mapped as medium-high readiness (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Bliss-Moreau, Williams & Santistevan, 2019; Fontaine et al., 2007; Gillioz et al., 2017; Russell, 1980; Scherer, 2005). Note that this means that single and precise changes in the narrative nuclei may have very specific impacts on valence and arousal (if the hypothesis is correct). Take, for example, anger and guilt. The narrative nucleus of meaning mediating an emotional experience of anger can be represented as NP(me)-

>(me v O) vs F(other)->(me ^ O). With guilt, the mediating narrative nucleus basically has the same structure, but the function is of “me”: NP(me)->(me v O) vs F(me)->(me ^ O). This single structural modification in the narrative nucleus has an important impact on readiness, which is much higher with anger than with guilt. Take, as another example, shame and happiness. The narrative nucleus mediating shame is NP(me)-(want to)->(me ^ O) vs F(me)-(does)->(me v O); the narrative nucleus mediating happiness is basically the same, but with a relationship of congruence instead of contradiction: NP(me)-(want to)>(me ^ O) = F(me)-(does)->(me ^ O). This modification impacts both valence, which changes from unpleasant to pleasant, and readiness, which is higher with happiness than with shame.

In addition to the NP-F relationship and the actor of the F, which impact valence and arousal, two other aspects are also especially important in the narrative nuclei because they impact the qualia of the emotional experience. According to the present hypothesis, these aspects are the modality of the NP and the modality of the function.

In a narrative nucleus, there are two possible modalities for the NP: “want-to” (desire) and “have-to” (duty). The modification of this aspect of the narrative nucleus introduces moral connotations (have-to) or “ego ideal” connotations (want-to) in the qualia of the emotional experience. This is the difference, for example, between guilt and shame. The narrative nucleus mediating guilt is: NP(me)-(has to)->(me/other v O) vs F(me)-(does)->(me/other ^ O). The narrative nucleus mediating shame is basically the same, with the sole difference that the modality of the NP is “want-to” instead of “has-to”: NP(me)-(wants to)->(me ^ O) vs F(me)-(does)->(me v O). According to Lazarus (1999), guilt involves a failure with regard to the introjected expectations or norms of a higher authoritative other (e.g., society or God). With shame, the failure is of oneself; it is a failure to be who one wants to be. In this sense, with guilt, one can ask the higher



authoritative other for forgiveness, often by paying penance, but with shame, nobody can grant such forgiveness. It is thus harder to cope with shame than guilt (and, according to Lazarus, shame-ridden persons are more prone to suicide).

The modality of the F in the narrative nucleus also has an important impact on the quale of the emotional experience. The F can have five modalities: do, can, know-how, have-to, and want-to. When the modality of the F is “can” or “know-how,” it introduces a connotation of virtualization in the quale; an F with the modality of “do” introduces a connotation of actualization, of reality. Consider, for example, fright and anger. The narrative nuclei mediating both are basically the same, with the sole difference of the modality of the F, which is “can” in fright and “do” in anger. Both nuclei are contradictory, and in both the actor of the F is “other.” However, with fright, the contradiction is not yet consummated; it is a virtual contradiction. In contrast, with anger, the contradiction is already real, something that has already happened. The same kind of quale difference, but in congruent nuclei, can be found with hope and relief. Again, the mediating nuclei have the same structure, except for the modality of the F, which is “can” with hope and “do” with relief. With hope, the congruence is potential, virtualized; with relief, it has been accomplished, actualized.

The narrative nucleus of sadness is especially interesting with regard to the quale connotations introduced by the F modalities “can” and “do.” In fact, sadness cannot be reduced to a single narrative nucleus; it involves one NP and two Fs. Both Fs have a contradictory relationship with the NP, but one has a modality of “do” (the loss, as expressed in Lazarus’s relational theme), while the other has a modality of “can” (the irrevocable nature of this loss, in Lazarus’s account). In other words, with sadness, two contradictions are articulated in the mediating narrative structure at the same time, one of which is actualizing and the other, virtualizing: F(other)-(do)->(me v O) vs NP(me)-

(wants to)->(me ^ O) vs F(me)-(cannot)->(me ^ O). If the virtualizing function were to be removed from the narrative structure, the quale of the emotional experience would begin to resemble that of anger; if the actualizing function were to be removed, the quale of the emotional experience would be transformed into something similar to what Frijda and Parrott (2011) call “helplessness,” which they define as “desiring to act but not knowing how.”

The F of a narrative nucleus may also have the modalities of “have-to” or “want-to” and, therefore, may constitute an NP on its own. This impacts the quale of the emotional experience by introducing a connotation of alignment (or misalignment). This is the case, for example, of love, which is mediated by a narrative nucleus formed by two NPs: NP(me)-(wants to)->(me ^ other) = NP(other)-(wants to)->(other ^ me). It is also, partially, the case of compassion, whose mediating narrative nucleus can be formulated as: NP(me)-(wants to)->(other v O) = NP(other)-(wants to)->(other v O) vs F(undetermined)-(does)->(other ^ O). With both love and compassion, a connotation of alignment is introduced by the congruence between an NP(me) and an NP(other) in their mediating narrative nuclei – although the nucleus mediating compassion also includes an actualized contradiction between an F and the NP(other).

In short, according to this hypothesis, in narrative nuclei, there are four structural aspects that define emotional experience in terms of valence, readiness and quale: the type of tension between the NP and the function; the actor enacting the function; the modality of the NP, and the modality of the F. These structural aspects are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Structural aspects of mediational meaning impacting emotional experience

Structural aspect of the narrative nucleus		Impact on emotional experience
Type of tension between NP and F	Congruence	Pleasant valence
	Contradiction	Unpleasant valence
Actor enacting the F	Me	In contradictory structures, medium-low readiness  In congruent structures, medium-high readiness
	Other	In contradictory structures, high readiness  In congruent structures, medium-low readiness
Modality of the NP	Have-to	Introduces moral connotations in qualia
	Want-to	Introduces ego-ideal connotations in qualia
Modality of the F	Can/Know-how	Introduces virtualization connotations in qualia
	Do	Introduces actualization connotations in qualia
	Want-to/Have-to	Introduces alignment connotations in qualia

## Discussion

The proposal presented in this paper seeks to potentially advance research on mediational meaning in three different ways. First, I have proposed that the concept of mediational meaning can be used to articulate a generative dialogue between different traditions of psychological thought because it refers to a phenomenon that is common to all of them. The concept of mediational meaning as a shared phenomenon has been delimited through five main ideas: it is both narrative and conceptual; it is a representation of me-in-the-world; it is socially distributed as a material cultural artifact; it encodes emotion through specific structural aspects; and emotion encoded in mediational meaning motivates social activity.

Second, this paper has provided an analytical apparatus to deepen the structural study of mediational meaning. This apparatus has three important characteristics: a) it enables an interrelated approach to both the narrative and conceptual aspects of mediational meaning; b) it allows for a description of the structure of mediational meaning that is both precise and abstract; and c) it provides a holistic-molecular (i.e., the narrative nuclei) approach to mediational meaning that simultaneously enables an atomistic approach (i.e., the four structural aspects of the nuclei).

Finally, this paper has presented a hypothesis about how specific structural aspects of the narrative nuclei in mediational meaning encode emotion. The hypothesis suggests that: 1) the congruence-contradiction relationship between the NP and the F in the narrative nuclei impacts emotional valence; 2) the actor of the F in the nuclei impacts action readiness; and 3) the modality of the NP and the modality of the F in the narrative nuclei impact the emotional quale.

These contributions have several implications for research on mediational meaning. Perhaps the most direct implications, considering the presented hypothesis, are for appraisal theories and narrative psychology. In both approaches, the issue of how emotion is encoded in mediational meaning is a concern.

Appraisal theories have traditionally adopted a systems model approach (Lazarus, 1999; Sommerfield, 1997). As noted, the rationale for this approach consists of identifying (dimension-like) components of the appraisal that relate to different aspects of emotional experience. For example, Scherer & Moors (2019) consider novelty, valence, agency, control, and fairness to be the main appraisal components explaining emotional experience. This kind of approach can be considered atomistic: it looks for the components (atoms) without looking at the “whole” (molecules), i.e., the meaning. This

is Lazarus's (1999, 2006) main critique of such approaches, and it is what gave rise to his proposal of "relational themes." However, approaching relational themes using common language, as Lazarus does, leads to the opposite problem: Lazarus's approach looks at the molecules (relational themes), but does not enable the study of how the atoms work within them. In response to this problem, Smith and Lazarus (1993) propose that molecules (relational themes) and atoms (dimensional components of appraisal) can be studied together. The problem, however, is that these two systems of analysis are not built upon one another; they remain, at best, two independent systems for which some relations can be sought. Consequently, moving from the molecules to the atoms and vice versa requires jumping between different systems, and much is lost in the gap in between (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). The analytical apparatus presented in this paper solves this problem. It permits a molecular understanding of mediational meaning (the narrative nuclei), as well as an atomistic understanding of the molecules (the NP-F relationship, the actor of the F, and the modalities of the NP and the F). This opens the door to addressing several of the main challenges currently faced by appraisal theories research. One of these challenges is the atomistic study and prediction of the mediation of the qualia in emotional experience (Scherer & Moors, 2019). In general, in appraisal theories research, the use of emotion labels (such as anger, fear, etc.) has been abandoned due to the important problems these labels pose. For example, in common emotional experience, the emotions felt by the subject are mixed, the emotional experience is blended. This makes it difficult to use discrete emotion labels for the characterization of this experience. Additionally, the emotion labels seem to be assigned by the subject at the end of the emotional process, resulting in important reliability problems. These difficulties in using emotion labels, and their consequent abandonment, have made the study of the relationship between appraisal

and emotional qualia a very hard endeavor. By abandoning the emotion labels, appraisal theories lose the molecular level of analysis, which is essential to gather and predict qualia aspects. However, any molecular approach that does not enable atomistic analysis will not solve the problem either. For example, using relational themes, as Lazarus suggests, could only work if it were possible to deal with “pure” discrete emotions; however, when dealing with blended emotional experience, it poses the same problem as using emotion labels. Nevertheless, a molecular approach that is atomistically specified, such as the one proposed here, might solve this problem. First, it enables the atomistic study of the impact of the molecule on the quale, not in absolute terms (e.g. sadness, fear), but in relation to specific connotations (virtualization, actualization, morality, ego-ideals, alignment). Second, it allows for the combination of molecules in complex mediational meaning (or appraisal), so that the quale of blended emotional experience can be studied and predicted. Additionally, the incorporation of the “view” level makes it possible to greatly enrich the study of emotional qualia, as well as to explain types of emotional experience that fall beyond the scope of appraisal theories. An example of this is some types of humor, which can only be approached by studying the relationship between contrasting views articulated by a single narrative structure (parody, for example) (Bakhtin, 1984; D’Errico & Poggi, 2016).

The challenge of qualia, especially in relation to the challenge of blended emotional experience, is part of a broader challenge: the study of appraisal in ecologically valid conditions (Scherer and Moors, 2019). Outside of the laboratory it is difficult to apply the componential approach to appraisal because, while the components can more or less be controlled in an artificially administered appraisal in the laboratory, they are difficult to measure in spontaneously formed real-life appraisals. The approach outlined in this paper makes it possible to address this issue by analyzing people’s narratives. In these

narratives, how a person appraises a given situation can be analyzed in terms of narrative nuclei and their mutual relationships, and these nuclei can be analyzed at the atomistic scale. Additionally, the views articulated by these nuclei can be identified and studied. Such an analysis makes it possible to plan very specific – atomistic – modifications in natural appraisals to study their impact on emotional experience. This opens up new possibilities, not only for appraisal theories research, but also for other approaches that usually deal with spontaneously formed mediational meaning, such as narrative psychology. In these approaches, the structure of narratives has not traditionally been studied on an atomistic or a molecular scale, but by identifying general characteristics of the narrative as a whole, such as coherence, complexity, or generality, or by identifying general story plots, such as the redemption script (from bad to good) or contamination script (from good to bad) (Adler et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013). As argued, the use of an atomistic analysis such as the one used by appraisal theories was hardly possible with these approaches, due to the difficulties of applying such an analysis to natural appraisals (narratives). Lazarus's molecular approach was likewise inviable with natural appraisals due to the aforementioned problems with blended emotional experience. By overcoming these problems, the approach presented here opens the door to the use of atomistic and molecular analysis, as two additional levels of analysis, in narrative psychology.

This is an example of how the delimitation of mediational meaning as a shared phenomenon could facilitate dialogue between different traditions and approaches. How does an atomistic analysis (first used by appraisal theories) of narratives contribute to the research program of narrative psychology? How does the study of natural appraisals (narratives) contribute to the research program of appraisal theories? How do appraisal theories conceptualize and explain the observation by some narrative psychology

approaches regarding the social distribution of narratives (appraisals)? How does narrative psychology conceptualize appraisal theories' findings on reappraisal in relation to its observations about narrative engagement? This is the kind of generative dialogue that is possible when different views are reminded that they are working around a common phenomenon and the conditions are set for them to consider that phenomenon to be common. This, ultimately, is the main aim of this paper.

However, it is perhaps necessary to note that this generative dialogue around mediational meaning as a shared phenomenon is possible among approaches that, notwithstanding important differences, share some ontological assumptions: particularly, the objective existence of meaning. This issue has split psychology to such an extent that some authors talk of two different psychologies, that is, two different sciences (Vygotsky, 1997; Ellis & Stam, 2015), working from different units of analysis. Those who assume the objective existence of meaning use versions of the triadic unit of analysis; those who assume that meaning is purely subjective, an epiphenomenon, something that does not really exist in itself as an objective phenomenon, use versions of the dyadic unit of analysis (in which meaning is left aside). This gives rise to an ontological discussion that falls well beyond the scope of this paper (Jovanović, 2019; Mammen & Mironenko, 2015; Roth & Jornet, 2019; Vygotsky, 1997), but it is important to note that the proposals presented here imply the adoption of some version of a triadic unit of analysis and, therefore, the assumption of the ontological existence of meaning.



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