BACKGROUND

In a contamination scene, a good or positive event or state becomes bad or negative. That which was good or acceptable becomes contaminated, ruined, undermined, undone, or spoiled. Positive affect gives way to negative affect, so that the negativity overpowers, destroys, or erases the effects of the preceding positivity. For some narrators who describe very difficult lives, scenes may begin with an acceptable or mildly positive state, but the typical pattern of spoiling or contamination with negative affect follows. One woman describes a rare moment of pleasure when her sister organizes a birthday surprise for her, but spoils the positive memory with the observation that “To me, good things just don’t happen.” Another woman summarizes her entire life story with the comment, “Good things happen, but they are always canceled out by an even worse thing happening next.” In contamination sequences, things may go from very good to bad or from barely acceptable to worse.

The concept of a contamination scene is similar to what Tomkins (1987) termed a “nuclear scene,” wherein an episode of positive affect is quickly transformed into one of strong negative affect, leaving a legacy of ambivalence that may build into a full-blown nuclear life script (see also Carlson, 1988). Tomkins argues that such scenes are most influential when they occur in childhood and are experienced as extremely intensive and confusing. May (1980) describes episodes of enhancement/deprivation in dreams and fantasies, wherein the hero first rises to great prominence (good) and then comes crashing down to earth (bad), as literally depicted in the myth of Icarus. Such a fantasy pattern is noticeable in Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) stories told by men, May suggests, while the opposite pattern of deprivation/enhancement (bad leads to good) is more characteristic of women’s fantasies. The heroic strivings of Icarus are followed by tragic consequences. But the “mistake” of flying too close to the sun offers possible positive interpretations, and might be explained as the impetuousness of youth, or even the endeavor to reach an exalted goal. This kind of optimistic spin, however, does not prevail in the autobiographical reconstruction of contamination scenes. Instead, in contamination sequences the consequences are so negative that sometimes it may have been preferable to forego the preceding positive event. The spoiling or contamination often seems to cling persistently, like rotting food that rains all it touches, or heavy baggage that cannot be left behind and affects everything one experiences.

In some ways, a contamination scene is the opposite of a “redemption scene,” in which bad turns to good (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). However, the opposition is not exact. In redemption scenes, the initial bad state or event leads to a good state or event, but the good does not typically undo or erase the bad. For example, a narrator describes the death of her mother, a bad event, followed by her family becoming closer, a good event. Her mother is still dead, and death is bad, even though the family becomes emotionally closer as a result of the death. Mother’s death leads to, or even causes, the closeness to occur, but the closeness does not erase or undermine her death. By contrast, in contamination scenes, the subsequent bad event often does undermine the preceding good one. The good event is ruined or spoiled. It cannot be recalled without pairing it with the bad outcome. Even its original goodness may be lost. For example, (retelling the events out of chronological sequence) a narrator recalls having been beaten by
her spouse, and now states that her previously good marriage was never actually as good as she originally thought it was. The whole marriage is retroactively spoiled.

Thus, in some contamination sequences, the initial positive event or state is spoiled. Its positivity is partially or completely erased. As a result, the account of the initial state is often affectively flattened. In coding, it may be difficult to determine how positive the initial state actually was. The essential component is that it deteriorates. Things get worse. The following state or event is less desired, more negative, more painful, more bleak.

The change from good to bad states requires contiguity and chronological sequencing but may vary in other ways. The events or states described must be contiguous in occurrence, with the good preceding the bad. However, frequently the narrator describes the negative outcome or downturn first and then relates the preceding positive event or preferable state. The order of narration is not important, but in chronological time, the good must have preceded the bad.

Also, the relationship between the initial and following event or state may be one of opposition or one of association. The relationship is not necessarily causal.

Example of good and bad events or affective states as opposites:

Receives a gift → gift is stolen  
Wealth → poverty  
Leading the pack in a race → collapses, finishes last  
Pride at graduation → shame at father’s criticism of her weight  
Feels appreciated by teacher → teacher publicly scolds her  
New house is a joy → repair and bills become a nightmare  
Receives help from someone → receives criticism for needing the help  
Believes marriage is good → partner wants divorce

Examples of states or events associated by their temporal or logical connection:

Is playing happily in a park → cannot find parents  
Enjoys senior class party → class breaks up, loses contact with friends  
Gets a promotion → new job has many hassles  
Describes joy at birth of child → states that next child died  
Looks forward to class trip → is horrified by the poverty she sees  
Finally establishes good relationship with a woman → they become homeless

COMMON THEMES

In a contamination sequence, many of the negative events, states, or affects could be categorized under general headings. The following list is not exhaustive; for example, the contamination sequence of enjoying a stolen watermelon and then suffering punishment does not fit the categories listed.

Victimization: physical or verbal abuse, theft  
Betrayal: affairs, telling secrets  
Loss: of significant others, job, money, property, self-respect, respect for another  
Failure: in school, sports, job, courtship  
Physical or psychological illness or injury
Disappointment: things do not turn out as expected, things go wrong
Disillusionment: correction of a positive misperception, e.g. role model betrays own teachings
Sex: enjoyment turns to guilt, humiliation, etc.

Some common themes overlap (e.g. victimization and betrayal), or a contamination sequence may contain a combination of themes, such as victimization, disillusionment, and loss. To form a sequence, of course, the negative theme must follow a more positive or acceptable state.

CODING

The presence of any contamination sequence in a single scene or critical event (Peak, Nadir, etc.) results in a score of +1. The absence of any contamination sequence in the scene receives the score 0. These are the only scores used.

Multiple contaminations in the same scene still receive the score of +1. Particularly for persons who do not experience much positivity, like the woman who said good things just do not happen for her, one good event may go bad in several ways. For example, one narrator's peak memory is his elation and excitement on the day of his wedding, but, he continues, the civil ceremony was a disappointment, the judge was later convicted of a crime, the video of the wedding turned out blank, and his bride became upset that he had invited old girlfriends. His positive affect is spoiled by four different negative turns, any one of which constitutes a contamination sequence. Alternatively, several different transformations of good to bad may be crammed into a single scene.

In the case of death, a statement such as “my mother died” is not a contamination sequence. There must be some clear statement either:

a) that the death is significant and follows a more positive state; for example, the narrator's aunt is her role model, best friend, and very important in her life → her aunt dies suddenly, or

b) that the death leads to a bad outcome; for example, a mother dies and her daughter drops out of school, has a difficult time, and begins using drugs; it is strongly preceding state implied that the preceding state was more positive. This would not be a contamination sequence if the narrator describes equally negative events preceding the death.

CODING SUMMARY

1. Negative events or affects follow positive ones in chronological time.
2. The order in which events are recalled or narrated is not important.
3. The preceding positive event or affect may range from strongly positive to acceptable.
4. The account of the initial state is often affectively flattened, and the degree of positivity may be subtle.
5. It seems that good events cannot be recalled without being paired with negatives.
6. The subsequent negative event, state, or affect may be a downturn, an undermining, undoing, or spoiling of the previous event, state, or affect.
7. The preceding positivity is partially or completely erased or spoiled.
8. The relationship between positive and negative events, states, or affects may be one of opposites, or of temporal or logical association.
9. The common theses of victimization, betrayal, loss, failure, disappointment, disillusionment, or physical or psychological illness or injury may aid in identifying negative events or states.

10. A contamination sequence is not automatically signaled by mention of a death. However, a contamination does occur when the person who dies was a significant positive influence, role model, or friend, or when the death results in clearly negative outcomes and not a mere continuation of an equally negative previous state.

REFERENCES


