Common themes in stories: A content analysis of prosocial narratives regarding marginalized groups

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January 2025

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Abstract

This study examined the most common content characteristics of prosocial narratives about marginalized groups. A content analysis was performed on a corpus of 32 narrative stimuli used by previous researchers, focussing on three different aspects: setting, character and event. Findings revealed that prosocial narratives often took place in an urban setting, happened in the past or present, and spanned over one or more days. Furthermore, narratives often only contained a small cast of active characters, who tended to be adults mostly facing situational or relational challenges with a prevalence of power imbalance. A chi-square analysis revealed a significant relation between type of event and valence of event, implying a strong connection between the two variables. This implied that type of event and valence of event influence one another, meaning that certain events are likely to relate to certain outcomes. These findings provide an overview of which content characteristics are commonly used to create narratives effective for evoking prosocial behaviour. However, the scope of this research is rather limited, as the dataset was relatively small and only contained text-based narratives. It is suggested that future research analyses a broader dataset that covers different forms of prosocial narratives as well, in order to gain even more insight into the field of prosocial narratives.

Keywords: prosocial narratives, content characteristics, setting, character, event

Introduction

The world we live in is becoming increasingly more connected via media and storytelling. Storytelling is used to exchange information or to evoke change in people's behaviours or attitudes (McCall et al., 2021), using strong narratives to do so. However, what can be considered a narrative?

A narrative can have different definitions based on the context it finds itself in. In linguistics, for example, a narrative is defined as structured sequence of events involving a narrator, characters, events and a plot (Burling & Labov, 1975). However, in psychology, a narrative is defined as a tool that humans use to make sense of reality and provide structure in their lives (Bruner, 1991). These are two vastly different definitions of what a narrative is, making it difficult to settle on one clear cut definition. While many different interpretations of narratives exist, it is generally agreed upon that a narrative involves at least one character that experiences at least one event (De Graaf et al., 2016). Narratives can have different purposes, such as narratives created for entertainment or narratives created for informing others. This research will focus specifically on prosocial narratives regarding marginalized groups.

The term prosocial has different meanings depending on the context. However, a generally agreed upon definition has been reported by Eisenberg and Miller (1987) stating that prosocial behaviour refers to actions intended to benefit others. Furthermore, narratives can have an impact on the behaviour and attitudes of people. Alam and So (2020) reported that messages that were designed to have an emotional impact tend to be more persuasive than messages that were not designed to do so. This aligns with the definition of prosocial, as messages with an emotional impact appear to persuade receivers of the message to do something, potentially in a way that benefits others.

Marginalized groups consist of people who experience the same systematic disadvantages or exclusion (Young, 2002). Examples of marginalized groups are immigrants or disabled people. It is important that people learn to understand the challenges that marginalized groups face and how we can improve their situations. Andrews et al. (2022) found that people were susceptible to changing beliefs and behavioural intentions after being presented with narratives about prisoners or people working at the frontlines of healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a model outlined by Batson et al. (1997) stated that there are two stages to this process. The first stage allows the reader to assume the perspective of marginalized people, evoking feelings of compassion. This is then followed up

by the second stage, which brings out more favourable attitudes from the reader for those people. Thus, narratives can be useful tools to help people understand the struggles of marginalized groups and perhaps push them into assisting those groups, potentially diminishing the barriers between marginalized and non-marginalized people.

The focus on the content characteristics of prosocial narratives regarding marginalized groups will help determine which elements are the most common within these narratives. Moore et al. (2021) reported that the way a narrative is presented can have different effects on the readers. Their research showed that an inspirational story about someone acting in a prosocial manner for a marginalized person had a bigger impact on the prosocial behaviour and attitudes of the readers, compared to a story that put the emphasis on a general need to improve conditions for certain marginalized groups. While it was reported that both stories had a positive impact on the readers' behaviour towards the issue at hand, those who read the inspirational story showed more willingness to help. Additionally, Moore et al. (2021) stated that only looking at one story, presented in two different manners, may not be enough to draw strong conclusions. Therefore, taking a look at the content characteristics of multiple prosocial narrative stimuli regarding marginalized groups can help create a better understanding of which elements are commonly used to provoke prosocial behaviour. Additionally, De Graaf et al. (2016) suggested that interactions between narrative characteristics should be tested in order to gain further insight in their effects.

This research will focus on the different content characteristics of narratives, specifically in prosocial contexts regarding marginalized groups. Three different content characteristics will be analysed: setting, characters, and events. According to Hones (2011) geographical settings in narratives are not static backdrops, but rather active components in storytelling. Baynham (2003) took this idea even further, suggesting that settings themselves can also be considered as characters within a narrative. These views suggest that settings can have a significant impact on prosocial narratives, as settings provide a space for characters to interact both with each other and with the setting itself.

Next, characters also are an important part of narrative content characteristics. A character is an agent who acts with intentions to achieve something (De Graaf et al., 2016). Different types of characters can have an impact on how the receivers of a

narrative identify with a character. Oatley et al. (1999) found that the gender of the character can have a significant impact on the receiver's perception of the character, as well as the identification with that character. Additionally, Oatley et al. (1999) stated that it is important to create likeable characters in suspense stories. Furthermore, Koopman (2015) found that having experience with certain subjects can lead to a higher emotional involvement, and also can cause the reader to sympathize with the character and relate to the narrative more. This could imply that a character with well-defined traits is important to the success of a prosocial narrative.

Finally, events need to be discussed. An event can be defined as a transition from one state to another, which is connected via time and cause (De Graaf et al., 2016). Berman and Slobin (1994) described events as dynamic interactions, over time, between animate beings in physical settings. Time can be considered as a necessary part of events, which would indicate that events are necessary in narratives in order to create progress. This is in line with the definition mentioned by De Graaf et al. (2016), making events an indispensable part of content characteristics. Additionally, characters can react to events, meaning that they have impact on a character's growth. Connecting that with the relatability of a character, events can impact the reader's behaviour.

These three content characteristics can be linked to the narrative transportation theory as defined by Green (2008), which states that familiarity allows readers to feel more transported into a story. For example, when keeping the setting in mind, a story set in an office building is more likely to transport a reader who works in a similar building, as opposed to a reader who works on construction sites. Moreover, readers might feel more familiar with characters they share certain elements or character traits with, adding to the effectiveness of the narrative transportation theory. Green (2008) also stated that persuasion of stories may be stronger when it is not simply stated, but rather suggested between the lines, and that transportation is better when stories "show, not tell". This could imply that events don't need to be described explicitly, but rather should rely on the reader's interpretation. Additionally, Kaczorowska et al. (2023) found that narrative transportation is linked to a reader's engagement with the story, where a well-constructed story had a higher likelihood of transportation. This could imply that a story's content characteristics are key to a good narrative.

Based on previous studies, such as the one by De Graaf et al. (2016), who suggested that interactions between narrative characteristics should be tested, or the one by Moore et al.

(2021), who suggested that taking a look at multiple different narratives could provide more insight, it is clear that narrative characteristics still provide opportunities for more exploration. A content analysis could assist in gaining a deeper understanding of prosocial narratives. The research question is: What are the most common content characteristics appearing in prosocial narratives regarding marginalized groups? To answer this question, narratives used as stimuli in previous studies are used. These stimuli may be different than 'real world' prosocial narratives, as they may have been created for the purpose of their respective studies. However, these artificial narratives still allow for a valid content analysis that assists in a deeper understanding of prosocial narratives.

Methods

Materials

The materials used for this research were stimuli from other studies regarding prosocial narratives that were provided by Nele Kadastik. Kadastik is a PhD student at Radboud University specializing in research on prosocial narratives. Over 1000 studies were screened by Kadastik in order to compile a collection of studies that could provide a more comprehensive view of the research on prosocial narratives.

Multiple criteria were established that were necessary for a paper to be considered useful. First of all, only empirical studies using experimental or quasi-experimental designs that have been peer-reviewed and published in journals were chosen. Furthermore, the study had to include some type of narrative stimulus, focus on a prosocial context, assess some types of persuasive outcomes, and focus on adult populations. Additionally, studies that focused on specific diagnoses were excluded. Kadastik established a collection of 756 studies, of which 57 studies provided accessible stimuli. These studies were categorized by a preliminary set of categories: bystander intervention, social issues, health promotion, marginalized groups, crisis communication, willingness to donate and charitable giving, environment and sustainability, and other.

An additional sampling method was created in order to establish the collection that was analysed in the current study. In order for a narrative stimulus to be included in this research, it had to adhere to certain criteria. First of all, this research only examined the narratives with a prosocial context collected in the category of marginalized groups, as that is the main focus of this paper. Furthermore, only text-based narrative stimuli from articles published after 2010 were analysed. It was determined that analysing different types of media would lead to inconsistencies during the analysis process. Additionally, the year 2010 was chosen in order for the narrative stimuli to be more recent. Moreover, it is important to understand that not all stimuli are real prosocial narratives, as some might have been artificially created narratives by researchers that were made to fit their research goals. After this sampling process, the total number of studies came down to 10 studies containing 43 narrative stimuli in total. Out of the 43 stimuli, only 32 were coded as some stimuli overlapped too much with one another. Additionally, the average word count of the analysed

narratives was 565 words, with the lowest word count being 168 words, and the highest being 1504 words.

Procedure

This research focused on the content characteristics of prosocial narratives. These characteristics were: setting, characters, and events. Setting had three variables, characters had five variables, and events had four variables. Thus, a total of twelve variables were evaluated.

For the Setting subcategory, three variables were evaluated: narrative time, duration of the narrative, and location of setting. Narrative time was defined as the time where the story took place. There were three possible options for this variable: past, present, or future. If the narrative was described to have happened in the past (for example via use of past tense), then the variable was coded as past. If the narrative was described to take place in the present (for example via use of present tense), then the variable was coded as present. If the narrative was described as taking place in the future (for example via use of future tense), then variable was coded as future. These variables were defined by Narmin (2017) in an article that presented a model for setting in narrative fiction. While prosocial narratives are not per definition fictious, the model presented still offered a clear overview on how to create a setting within a story.

Next, the duration of the narrative was defined as the time spent in a setting, measured in minutes, hours, or days. If the narrative took less than an hour, then the duration was coded as minutes. If the narrative took between one and 23 hours, then the duration was coded as hours. If the narrative took one or more days, then the duration was coded as days. This was similar to the definition by Feller et al. (2019), who categorized duration as either short or long. Feller et al. (2019) defined a short duration as minutes to an hour, and a long duration as several hours to months. While not all narratives explicitly stated their duration, assumptions could be made. For example, if a narrative talked about ‘one evening’, then the variable would be hours, as an evening is less than a day, but most likely more than an hour. Another example would be a narrative that talked about someone going through their day. In that case, the variable would be days, because the story played out throughout the entire day.

Location of setting was defined as the key aspects of a setting. The options for this variable were defined as rural or urban. If a setting had clear indications of a rural setting (for example the narrative taking place on a farm), then the variable was coded as rural. If a setting had clear indications of an urban setting (for example an office building), then the variable was coded as urban. Nairn et al. (2003) reported a difference between rural and urban as locations for young people to grow up. They reported that rural environments were more open and welcoming, emphasising the importance of community, whereas urban environments were more alienating and therefore less ideal for young people to grow up in. While Nairn et al. (2003) only focused on young people, the notion that urban environments could be alienating, might be true for other groups as well, including marginalized groups.

For the characters subcategory, five variables were evaluated: number of characters, who is the prosocial character, gender of the prosocial character, age range of the prosocial character, and hero trait of the prosocial character. The number of characters concerned the total number of active characters in the story. A character was considered active in the story if they performed any actions, or interacted with the setting or other characters. If a character was not active in the story and only mentioned, this character would not be considered an active character, as they were more of a prop for the active character(s) in the narrative. The number of characters was measured as 1, 2-4, or 5 or more. This measurement allowed for distinction between a single active character, a small group of characters (who do not have to be on the same side), and a larger group of characters.

The prosocial character was described as the character in the narrative who evoked the prosocial aspect. The prosocial character could be defined as a main character, a side character or a background character. These were, according to Lee et al. (2021), the three different types of characters. Lee et al. (2021) also established a difference between main character and protagonist, with a protagonist being the most centralized character. For example, the main character of a story told in first person would be the narrator, but the protagonist might be their best friend, whose actions and adventures were closely followed throughout the story. Using the difference Lee et al. (2021) provided, this research would categorise the friend as the main prosocial character and code them as a side character. Furthermore, it was important to clarify the difference between a side and a background character. Sharma and Narayanan (2022) defined background characters as characters who did not vocally participate in any scene throughout a movie. Using their definition, background characters could be described as one dimensional characters who did not have a strong impact

on the story. Background characters could arguably be described more as props to a narrative than active characters who had an impact or were impacted throughout the narrative.

The gender of the prosocial character was defined as either male, female, diverse or unknown. If the prosocial character was man, then the variable was coded as male. If the prosocial character was woman, then this variable was coded as female. If the prosocial character was anything other than male or female (for example transgender), then the variable was coded diverse. If the gender of the prosocial character was not clearly identifiable, then the variable was coded as unknown.

The age range of the prosocial character was defined as child (0-12), teenager (13-19), young adult (20-30), adult (31-64), elderly (65+) or unknown. A distinction between adult and young adult was made, because the age range for adults would be too large. Furthermore, there could be significant differences between young adults who were still studying or recently graduated and 'older' adults who already had a more established life (for example having a full time job, or a family). Even if the age was not explicitly stated, there could be indications of the age group the prosocial character belonged to. For example, if the prosocial character was driving at some point in the narrative, it could be assumed that they were at least 18 years old, which is the legal driving age in most of the world. This would imply that the prosocial character would most likely fit within the group young adult or adult, unless there was an indication to believe they would fit in the teenager group (for example a character recently got their driver's license). Another indication of age could be the occupation of the prosocial character. For example, if (part of) the narrative took place in a high school where they were a student, it could be assumed that the prosocial character was a teenager. Similarly, if a narrative took place on an elementary school where the prosocial character was a student, it could be assumed that they were a child. Another example could be that the main prosocial character had children or grandchildren. In this case, the prosocial character could be classified as adult if they had children, or as elderly if they had grandchildren.

Both gender and age range were standard demographic variables that could be useful for this research. As mentioned earlier, readers of narratives were more prone to relate to characters if they could find similarities between themselves and the character (Koopman, 2015). For example, if the main character was a man in his twenties, then

young male adults might have related more the character and therefore related more to the narrative.

Finally, the variable hero traits of the prosocial character referred to the hero traits defined by Allison et al. (2011). The hero traits listed were the following: smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring. Closely related traits to these eight main traits were provided. The variable smart referred to the intelligence or wisdom of the prosocial character. If the prosocial character came off as smart, intelligent, or wise, then the variable was coded as smart. Smart characters were usually perceptive and used their brain in difficult situations. The variable strong referred to both physical strength, as well as the ability to step up and/or lead others. If the prosocial character came off as strong, dominant, a leader, courageous, or gallant, then the variable was coded as strong. Strong characters were often seen as very competent characters. The variable selfless referred to the humbleness and morals of the character. If the prosocial character came off as moral, honest, selfless, humble, or altruistic, then the variable was coded as selfless. Selfless characters tended to put others before themselves. The variable caring referred to the kindness of the character. If the prosocial character came off as compassionate, emphatic, caring, or kind, then the variable was coded as caring. Characters within this category tended to be very emphatic for others. The variable charismatic referred to the passion of a character. If the prosocial character came off as eloquent, charismatic, dedicated, or passionate, then the variable was coded as charismatic. Charismatic characters tended to be very dedicated and excited about their cause. The variable resilient referred to the determination of a character. If the prosocial character came off as determined, persevering, resilient, or accomplished, then the variable was coded as resilient. Resilient characters tended to show great perseverance to reach their goals. The variable reliable referred to how dependent others could be on the character. If the prosocial character came off as loyal, true, or reliable, then the variable was coded as reliable. Reliable people were often seen as very trustworthy people. Finally, the variable inspiring had to do with the influence of the character. If the prosocial character came off as admirable, amazing, great, or inspirational, then the variable was coded as inspiring. Inspiring characters tended to make for good role models. Allison et al. (2011) often reported multiple hero traits for the different characters they examined. In cases where more than one hero trait was applicable to the prosocial character, then the most dominant one was coded.

There were four variables for the subcategory event: type of event, valence of event, power dynamic imbalance, and emotional response of the prosocial character to the event.

Since narratives could have more than one event, only the main prosocial event was analysed. The main prosocial event was defined as the event that provoked prosocial behaviour. In cases where it was difficult to determine that event, then the most climactic event was analysed.

The type of event was a classification of the main event in the story that provokes prosociality. The type of event was measured using the Life Event Scale (LES) as described by Van Den Heuvel et al. (2019). This scale described three different event types: loss (of a loved one), health risk, and relational/situational challenges. If the event covered some form of loss (for example the death of a family member), then the variable was coded as loss. If the event covered some form of health risk (for example dealing with a contagious virus), then the variable was coded as health. Finally, if the event covered some form of relational or situational challenges (for example making new friends, or getting a promotion at work), then the variable was coded as relational/situational challenges.

Next, the valence of the event was identified. The valence of the event was defined as the perceived outcome of the event. This was either positive, negative, or neutral. If the outcome of the event was positive (for example a fugitive found a new home), then this variable was reported as positive. If the outcome of the event was negative (for example a fugitive was sent back to his old home), then this variable was reported as negative. If the outcome of the event was unclear, or if the event was deemed to be unfinished, then this variable was coded as neutral.

The variable power dynamic imbalance took a deeper look at potential power imbalances that might take place in the narrative. A power dynamic imbalance was considered present when the main prosocial character was at a clear advantage or disadvantage in relation to an opposing force in the narrative. If there was no such indication, a power dynamic imbalance could be considered absent. Leavit et al. (2023) determined that the presence of a power dynamic imbalance could lead to feelings of inadequacy or empowerment. If power imbalance was present in an event, the prosocial character might process different emotions.

Finally, the variable emotional response of the prosocial character to the event was measured. Murphy et al. (2021) identified 27 distinct emotional responses, which were gathered after analysing self-reports of participants who watched short videos.

These responses were categorized in the emotional categorization table. This table consists of 12 different categories. These categories were: love, joy/happiness/relief, surprise, anger, sadness, fear, physical experience, negative other, positive other, mixed, neutral, and same. For the sake of simplicity, this research only used six categories listed on the emotion categorization table. These categories were: love, joy/happiness/relief, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear. The category joy/happiness/relief was simplified to joy. The leftover categories (physical experience, negative other, positive other, mixed, neutral, and same) would cause too much ambiguity. Physical experience could not be coded for when looking at emotional response of characters, negative other and positive other referred to combinations of two or more emotional responses that could be labelled negative (for example anger and sadness) or positive (for example love and joy). Furthermore, mixed, neutral, and same were essentially combined in an added seventh option 'multiple'. If a character expressed emotions of love as categorized in the emotional categorization table, then the variable was coded as love. If a character expressed emotions of joy as categorized in the emotional categorization table, then the variable was coded as joy. If a character expressed emotions of surprise as categorized in the emotional categorization table, then the variable was coded as surprise. If a character expressed emotions of anger as categorized in the emotional categorization table, then the variable was coded as anger. If a character expressed emotions of sadness as categorized in the emotional categorization table, then the variable was coded as sadness. Finally, if a character expressed emotions of fear as categorized in the emotional categorization table, then the variable was coded as fear. In general, if there were more than one of the six emotional responses applicable, the most dominant emotional response was coded. However, if there were multiple emotional responses applicable and it was unclear which one was the most dominant, then the variable was coded as multiple.

The coding process was done by three people, who each acted as the primary coder for a third of the data. Furthermore, they also acted as the secondary coder for another third of the data. This means that each person coded two thirds of the data in total. Additionally, each coder also acted as the third coder for the variables where the first two coders did not reach the same conclusion, acting as a tiebreaker. In the case that the third coder did not agree with either of the first two coders, the variable would be discussed between all three coders in order to come to a conclusion.

Cohen's kappa was used for the intercoder reliability. A kappa of more than 0.70 was considered to be sufficient. However, very few variables (4 out of 12) had a sufficient kappa.

This might have been caused by the small dataset or variables with only a few options. For some variables with an insufficient kappa, the agreement rate was still high. Thus, it was decided that an agreement rate of at least 80% would suffice as a replacement for Cohen's kappa in case it was unsatisfactory.

The intercoder reliability of the variable narrative time was satisfactory: $\kappa = 0.75$, $p < 0.001$. The intercoder reliability of the variable duration of the narrative was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = 0.32$, $p = 0.011$. However, the agreement rate for this variable was satisfactory (84.375%). The intercoder reliability of the variable location of setting was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = -0.04$, $p = 0.793$. However, the agreement rate for this variable was satisfactory (90.625%).

The intercoder reliability of the variable number of characters was satisfactory: $\kappa = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$. The intercoder reliability of the variable who is the prosocial character was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = 0.14$, $p = 0.264$. Additionally, the agreement rate for this variable was unsatisfactory as well (78.125%). Therefore, this variable was excluded. The intercoder reliability of the variable gender of prosocial character was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$. Additionally, the agreement rate for this variable was unsatisfactory as well (71.875%). Therefore, this variable was excluded. The intercoder reliability of age of prosocial character was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$. However, the agreement rate for this variable was satisfactory (81.25%). The intercoder reliability of the variable hero trait was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = 0.26$, $p = 0.005$. Additionally, the agreement rate for this variable was unsatisfactory as well (53%). Therefore, this variable was excluded.

The intercoder reliability of the variable type of event was satisfactory: $\kappa = 0.94$, $p < 0.001$. The intercoder reliability of the variable valence of event was satisfactory: $\kappa = 0.788$, $p < 0.001$. The intercoder reliability of the variable power dynamic imbalance was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = 0.529$, $p = 0.002$. However, the agreement rate for this variable was satisfactory (87,5%). The intercoder reliability of the variable emotional response of prosocial character to the event was unsatisfactory: $\kappa = 0.652$, $p < 0.001$. Additionally, the agreement rate for this variable was unsatisfactory as well (74.2%). Therefore, this variable was excluded.

Statistical treatment

In order to answer the research question, a frequency analysis was performed. Furthermore, a chi-square analysis was performed between type of event and valence of event in order to examine the relation between the two variables. This assisted in understanding certain patterns. For example, events coded as loss could be more often associated with negative outcomes, whereas events coded as situational/relational challenges could be more often associated with positive outcomes. Additionally, type of event and valence of event had the strongest intercoder reliability of all the variables, making the results of the chi-square test between these variables very valid.

Results

First of all, a frequency analysis was done on the eight remaining variables, meaning that who is the prosocial character, gender of the prosocial character, hero trait of the prosocial character, and emotional response of the prosocial character to the event were not analysed, as they did not meet the requirements to be coded reliably.

Table 1

Frequencies of the variables from the category setting

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Narrative Time	past	14	43.8
	present	18	56.3
	future	0	0
Duration of Narrative	minutes	2	6.3
	hours	1	3.1
	days	29	90.6
Location of Narrative	rural	0	0
	urban	32	100

Table 1 shows the number of narratives that were coded for each possibility per variable for the setting category, as well as the percentages corresponding with those amounts. It is evident that none of the narratives took place in the future, and that all of the narratives took place in an urban environment. Furthermore, the narratives seem to be about equally divided between past and present in terms of narrative time, and nearly all narratives had a duration of more than an hour.

Table 2

Frequencies of the variables from the category character

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Number of Prosocial character	one character	20	62.5
	two to four characters	10	31.3
	five or more characters	2	6.3
Age of Marginalized character	child	0	0
	teenager	1	3.1
	young adult	1	3.1
	adult	22	68.8
	elderly	0	0
	unknown	8	25.0

Table 2 shows the amount of narratives that were coded for each possibility per variable for the character category, as well as the percentages corresponding with those amounts. It is evident that most of the narratives had one active character in the story. However, there was still a decent number of narratives with two to four active characters in the story, whereas five or more characters barely ever was the case. Furthermore, the age range of the characters was never coded to be as child or elderly, and the majority of the age ranges were coded as adult. Additionally, it was unclear to which age range the character belonged in a quarter of the analysed data.

Table 3

Frequencies of the variables from the category event

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Type of Dominant event	loss	2	6.3
	health risk	12	37.5
	situational/relational challenges	18	56.3
Valence of event	positive	11	34.4
	negative	21	65.6
Power Dynamics Imbalance	present	28	87.5
	absent	4	12.5

Table 3 shows the amount of narratives that were coded for each possibility per variable for the event category, as well as the percentages corresponding with those amounts. It is evident that the majority of narratives were about situational or relational challenges. Nevertheless, a decent amount of narratives covered health issues as well, whereas loss was barely covered in any narrative. Furthermore, the valence of the event was more often negative than positive, and a power dynamic imbalance was almost always present.

Table 4

Crosstabulation of the variables type of event and valence of event

		Valence of event					
		Positive		Negative		Total	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Type of event	Loss	2	18.2	0	0	2	6.3
	Health Risk	0	0	12	57.1	12	37.5
	Situational /relational challenges	9	81.8	9	42.9	18	56.3
	Total	11	100	21	100	32	100

Finally, a chi-square test between the variables type of event and valence of event was performed. The aim of this analysis was to discover potential patterns between the two variables and gain more insight in their correlation. The chi-square test showed a significant relation between type of event and valence of event (χ^2 (2) = 12.05, p = 0.002). This relation was very strong (Cramer's V = 0.61).

Table 4 shows a crosstabulation of the variables type of event and valence of event. It is evident that all variables coded as loss resulted in a positive valence. Similarly, all variables coded as health risk resulted in a negative valence. Furthermore, situational/relational challenges saw an equal distribution for positive and negative valence. Additionally, all variables in the test were considered to be significant, adding to the validity of this test.

Conclusion

In order to answer the research question “what are the most common content characteristics in prosocial narratives regarding marginalized groups?” a frequency analysis was performed. Furthermore, a chi-square test was performed for the variables type of event and valence of event in order to find out if there is a significant relation between the two variables.

From the frequency analyses it can be concluded that prosocial narratives about marginalized groups are often being told in the past or in the present and often have a duration of more than one hour. This makes sense in the context of marginalised groups, as they were defined by Young (2002) as groups that are facing systematic disadvantages or exclusion. Something cannot be systematic if it occurs only once or twice. Additionally, the fact that none of these narratives took place in the future, but rather in the present or in the past, could imply that these are issues have been present in society for a while. Additionally, it could mean that prosocial narratives that are based in the future are not considered to be effective.

All narratives seemed to have taken place in an urban setting. Nairn et al. (2003) explained that people in rural settings are more welcoming, whereas people in urban settings are more alienating. Taking this idea into account, as well as the focus on marginalized groups, it makes sense that all narratives took place in an urban setting. The alienating nature of urban settings, according to Nairn et al. (2003), could be seen as an effective tool for highlighting the disadvantages of marginalized groups, as such groups are systematically oppressed or disadvantaged. The findings support the view of Hones (2011), who stated that settings are not static backgrounds, but rather dynamic components of storytelling. Additionally, one could argue that the findings of Baynham (2003), who claimed that settings are active characters in storytelling, are somewhat in line with the findings of this research. While settings were not viewed the same as characters, they were equally important, implying that settings have a similar value in narratives as characters.

The frequency analyses for the category character showed us that most narratives have only one active character or a small group of active characters. It can be argued for that this has to do with the length of the narratives analysed. Since they are relatively short, and not a full-fledged story from a novel for example, the amount

of characters one can present in a story is quite limited. Furthermore, having a small number of characters makes it easier for the audience to identify with a character. This is in line with the findings of Oatley et al. (1999), who stated that it is important to create a likeable protagonist in suspense stories. While suspense stories could be very different from prosocial narratives, it can be argued for that the presence of a likeable protagonist leaves readers with a stronger impression, which would be quite beneficial for stories designed to promote behaviour that benefits others.

Furthermore, the characters were often identified as adults. An explanation for this could be that the adult age range was the largest presented age range in the model. Additionally, adults can be considered as the group that relates the most to the struggles of marginalized groups. Younger age groups (children and teenagers) may not fully understand the disadvantages marginalized groups face, and older groups (elderly) may not care enough to speak up about them. It could also be the case that the adult group is the most relatable group, because it is the biggest.

The majority of the events were coded as relational/situational challenges. This makes sense in the context of marginalized groups, who tend to be systematically disadvantaged or excluded. However, a substantial amount of narratives were about health risk. This could be due to the data included from Andrews et al. (2022), whose stimuli covered events during the COVID-19 pandemic. Loss was barely coded for. This could be because marginalized groups are not the only groups that deal with loss. In other words, loss is not necessarily an event that occurs more to marginalized groups than to non-marginalized groups.

The majority of the events coded had a negative valence. It could be the case that stimuli with negative outcomes, and thus a negative valence, were chosen because they might have a stronger impact on the reader as opposed to positive outcomes. Furthermore, it may be the case that readers of the narratives consider positive outcomes as a sign that there is no need to do something for the marginalized people described in the narrative. This would mean that the narratives fail to evoke prosocial behaviour, which was defined as actions that benefit others (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987).

Finally, nearly all narratives seemed to have an imbalance in power dynamics. This, again, makes sense in the context of marginalized groups, as being systematically oppressed can often indicate a lack of power compared to non-marginalized groups.

The chi-square analysis revealed that there is a significant relation between the variables type of event and valence of event. The two variables have a strong influence on each other. All events coded as loss had a positive valence. While a more expected pattern would be that loss returns a negative valence, one could argue that the reason for loss events having a positive outcome has to do with overcoming it. However, it is difficult to come to a general conclusion, given that only two narratives were coded as loss.

The narratives coded with health risk all returned a negative valence. It could be argued for that health risk inherently holds some concerns, and that narratives may have a stronger impact if the outcome of a health risk event is negative. This would explain the negative outcomes of health risk narratives. Furthermore, the majority of the narratives coded with health risk concerned the COVID-19 pandemic. This could also be a reason for the negative outcomes, as the pandemic caused lots of concern when it came to peoples' health.

The narratives that concerned situational or relational challenges had an equal distribution for the valence of the event, returning nine narratives with a positive valence, and nine narratives with a negative valence. A reason for this could be that relational or situational challenges can have very different outcomes. Situational challenges can be related to for example fugitives escaping their poor living conditions in their home country to live in a more prosperous country. Generally speaking, it could be assumed that this would lead to a positive outcome. However, it may also lead to a negative outcome, as fugitives may not feel welcomed in a new country. Furthermore, relational challenges could either imply newfound friendships, or broken bonds, depending on the characters, setting, and events in the narrative. Additionally, while it could be argued for that they should have been coded separately, situational and relational challenges were coded as one type of event, as determined by the LES that was established by Van Den Heuvel et al. (2019). All in all, it can be concluded that narratives coded as situational/relational challenges do not appear to have a strong preference for a positive or negative outcome.

The chi-square analysis revealed that all variables were statistically significant, adding to the robustness of this test. However, the lack of narratives coded as loss with negative outcomes, as well as the lack of narratives coded as health risk with positive outcomes and the divided distribution of narratives coded as relational/situational challenges open doors for future investigation. First of all, while the positive outcomes

of loss narratives could be related to overcoming said loss, an investigation on loss narratives with a negative outcome would allow for a more comprehensive view of loss events. Similarly, while the negative outcomes of health risk narratives could be related to the inherent concern regarding health risks, an investigation on health risk narratives with positive outcomes would allow for a more comprehensive view of health risk events. Furthermore, the divided results of situational/relational challenges can be used as a base for future research. For example, future research could look into the possibility of separating situational challenges from relational challenges.

There are some limitations that need to be addressed. First of all, the corpus only contained text based narratives. Thus, any narratives using visual material, such as images or videos, were excluded. Furthermore, the corpus was relatively limited. The corpus only included 10 studies and a total of 43 stimuli, of which only 32 were coded. While part of the reason is because of the lack of available stimuli, future research should attempt to create a bigger corpus and consider the inclusion of other types of narratives besides text based narratives. It can be expected that a bigger corpus could uncover more consistent findings. It is possible that such findings are different from the findings of this research, as the smaller corpus could imply that certain outcomes only occurred per chance. Furthermore, the addition of narrative stimuli in other forms, such as images or videos, could create a broader overview of prosocial narratives, as well as uncover similarities and differences between different types of media.

Another limitation is that only the content characteristics were analysed. Narratives consist of different characteristics and this research only focused on the content characteristics. Future research should consider focusing on multiple different characteristics in order to create a more complete overview of the different characteristics of narratives. Nele Kadastik identified three other categories for narrative stimuli: form, stimuli origin, and affective level, each with their own subcategories. The category form, for example, looks at things such as medium or order of events. Future research could use this to look at effects of event sequence or the differences between different media. Furthermore, stimuli origin concerns the origin of different stimuli. Potential origins could be from existing campaigns, suggesting the use of real life experiences, or researcher created stimuli, suggesting the use of artificially designed narratives. Future research could take a look at the differences between real life experiences and artificially designed narratives. Moreover, the affective level category concerns things such as valence shifts or affective tone. Future research could look

into the effects of such shifts or different tones. All in all, future investigation in any of the other categories relating to narrative stimuli could potentially lead to more comprehensive overview of prosocial narratives as a whole.

It can be concluded that the findings of this study contribute to the field of prosocial narratives. The findings of this research could be viewed as suggestions for shaping the content of prosocial narratives. For example, the finding that none of the narratives took place in a future setting could suggest that creating such narratives does not evoke prosocial behaviour, thus meaning that one should not create a narrative in a future setting when it comes to prosocial narratives. Similarly, focusing on only one character, or a small group of characters could be deemed beneficial for the goals of prosocial narratives, as a smaller cast makes it easier for readers to find a character in a story that they relate to or sympathise with.

To summarize, the most common content characteristics in prosocial narratives regarding marginalized groups are an urban setting of a story that takes place in either the present or the past and covers multiple days, often contain one active character or a small group of active characters, most of which are presented as adults, and cover events regarding situational and/or relational challenges, often with a power dynamic imbalance present and predominantly have negative outcomes. Furthermore, it can be concluded that type of event has a significant relation with valence of event, as one influences the other.

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Appendix

Bachelor Thesis Prosocial Narratives

Codebook and procedure

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Variables

Setting

A setting refers to the time and place in which the narrative takes place.

5. Narrative time (NT)

5.1 past (NTp)

A narrative time will be coded for “past”, if the event has already occurred and is being told in a past tense.

eg. yesterday i walked across the street

5.2 present (NTpr)

The narrative time will be coded as “present” if the event is currently happening.

eg. Im driving to school

5.3 future (NTf)

“Future” will be the coding for events that are yet to take place, events that will take place in the future.

eg. tomorrow i will go on holiday

6. Duration of the narrative (DN)

6.1 minutes(DNm)

The coders will categorize the duration of a narrative into either a short duration (minutes)

eg.doing the dishes

6.2 hours (DNh)

A medium-sized duration (hours) or an extensively long duration (days).

eg.having a spa day

6.3 days (DNd)

The category of "days" furthermore entails every extension of the duration of one day, such as weeks, months or years.

eg.backpacking in Asia

7. Narrative space (NS)

7.1 rural (NSr)

A narrative space will be coded as "rural" when the narrative provides one or more associations to nature, for example forests, lakes, trees, waterfalls or wide landscapes.

eg.camping with friends

7.2 urban (NSu)

A narrative space will be coded as "urban" when nature is absent in the narrative, for example metropolitan surroundings, streets, skyscrapers or noisy traffic.

eg.commute to work

Character

8. Number of prosocial characters (NPC)

The sum of characters can be categorized in "one character", "two to four characters" or "five or more characters". A character will be counted as one if the character actively performs an

action that may evoke prosociality. A passive character that is only named and does not act in the narrative will not be counted as one character.

8.1 one character (NPCo)

There is only one active character who evokes prosociality in the narrative
eg. a character that states that they will help refugees

8.2 two to four characters (NPCtf)

There are two, three or four active characters who evoke prosociality in the narrative
eg. a character asks another character to help refugees and the other happily agrees

8.3 five or more characters (NPCfm)

There are five or more active characters who evoke prosociality in the narrative
eg. A group of friends decide to help out an organization that helps refugees

9. Type of prosocial character (TPC)

The character in the narrative who evokes the prosocial aspect. The categories will be “main-character”, “side-character” and “background character”.

9.1 main (TPCm)

The majority of the narrative focuses on this character

eg. the “I” character in a first person narrative

9.2 side (TPCs)

The character that interacts the most with the main character

eg. the best friend of the main character

9.3 background (TPCb)

A character that is not very fleshed out

eg. A character that only reacts to the actions of the main character

10. Gender of marginalized character (GMC)

The gender of the central marginalized character will be categorized in “male”, “female”, “diverse” or “unknown”. A character’s gender will be classified as “male”, when the name is predominantly male or when the character openly identifies as a male, the same applies to female characters. If the character’s name is genderless or the character identifies as a diverse gender, the character will be coded as “diverse”. If there is no gender identifier present, the gender of the character will be coded as “unknown”.

10.1 male (GMCm)

The marginalized character is clearly identifiable as a male
eg. the character is referred to as a him

10.2 female (GMCf)

The marginalized character is clearly identifiable as a female
eg. the character is referred to as a her

10.3 diverse (GMCd)

The marginalized character is not clearly identified as a male or female, but something in between.
eg. the character is openly referred to as a transgender person

10.4 unknown (GMCu)

The gender of the marginalized character is unclear
eg. the character has a gender neutral name and there are no pointer to either male, female, or any other gender identifiers

11. Age of marginalized character (AMC)

The age of the marginalized character will be classified in one of five categories. The five age-classifications range from “child” (0-12 years old), “teenager” (13-19 years old), “young adult” (20-30 years old), “adult” (30-64 years old) to “elderly” (65 years old and older).

Additionally, the age of the character may be classified as “unknown” if an age identification is impossible.

11.1 child (AMCc)

The character is identified as a child
eg. the character is identified to be in elementary school

11.2 teenager (AMCt)

The character is identified as a teenager
eg. the character is identified to be in middle/high school

11.3 young adult (AMCya)

The character is identified as a young adult
eg. the character just got out of college

11.4 adult (AMCa)

The character is identified as an adult
eg. the character has an already established job or family

11.5 elderly (AMCe)

The character is identified as an elderly person
eg. the character has grandchildren

11.6 unknown (AMCu)

The age range of the character is not identifiable
eg. the narrative talks about a man, but there is nothing that signals if the man is a young adult, adult or elderly

12. Most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character (HT)

A smart character displays intelligence and can make good decisions, a strong character presents physical or mental strength in overcoming obstacles and a caring character demonstrates concerns about the well-being of others. Selfless is a character, when the

character acts for the benefit of others, without concerning the personal (potentially negative) outcome, a charismatic character on the other hand inspires loyalty or experiences admiration of others. A resilient character persists despite adversity, a reliable character acts consistently, gaining the trust of others and an inspiring character motivates others to do their best.

12.1 smart (HTsma)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is smart
eg. the character thought of a clever plan to improve his situation

12.2 strong (HTstr)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is strong
eg. the character fought a lion to save his family

12.3 caring (HTcar)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is caring
eg. the character rescued an abandoned cat

12.4 selfless (HTsel)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is selfless
eg. the character took the time on their day off to help their friend with moving into a new appartment

12.5 charismatic (HTcha)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is charismatic
eg. the character always stayed positive throughout the narrative

12.6 resilient (HTres)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is resilient
eg. the character overcame a major injury and improved their life

12.7 reliable (HTrel)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is reliable
eg. the character was able to help someone who was in a difficult situation

12.8 inspiring (HTins)

The most dominant hero trait of the prosocial character is inspiring
eg. the character inspired someone else to do something positive for others

Event

The event refers to the most significant occurrence or action in the narrative.

13 Type of dominant event (TDE)

The type of most dominant event in the narratives of this research will be coded using the Life Event Scale, The Life Event Scale divides life events into multiple categories, such as the three classifications of loss, health risk or relational or situational challenges

13.1 loss (TDEl)

An event will be coded as “loss” when a loss of any form is experienced, such as the loss of a loved one, the loss of a home or the loss of a belonging.

e.g. Timothy lost all his toys in the storm.

13.2 health risk (TDEhr)

Physical or mental harm will be coded as “health threat”

e.g. Timothy could not breathe due to his covid infection.

13.3 situational or relational challenges (TDErc)

Breakups, divorces or interpersonal differences will be coded as “relational or situational challenges”.

e.g. Timothy struggled after getting a divorce from his wife.

14 Valence of event (VOE)

The overall valence of the consequences for the character provoked by the event can be categorized in either “positive” or “negative”.

14.1 positive (VOEp)

The valence of the event will be coded as positive when the emotional charge or tone of the event is rather positive.

e.g. Timothy and Cassandra are getting married, they could not be happier.

14.2 negative (VOEn)

The valence of the event will be negative if the atmosphere is rather dark and pessimistic.

e.g. Timothy and Cassandra drove off a cliff and died in their car.

15 Power Dynamics Imbalance (PDI*)*

Power dynamics describe the perceived difference of levels of influence.

15.1 present (PDIp)

The power dynamic imbalance will be coded as “present”, when a sign of inequality between two parties is found.

eg.: police officer giving out a ticket to a driver

15.2 absent (PDIa)

The power dynamic imbalance will be coded as “absent”, when no sign of inequality between two parties is found.

eg.: two friends with same education and racial background interacting

16 Dominant emotional response of the prosocial character to the event (DER)

Based on an adjusted version of the emotion categorization table used by Murphy et. al. (2021), the most dominant emotional reactions of the narratives character will be classified as one of the 6 basic emotions. These six emotions are “love”, “joy”, “surprise”, “anger”, “sadness” and “fear”.

16.1 love (DERl)

eg. love: Adoration, affection, love

16.2 joy (DERj)

eg. joy: Amusement, bliss, cheerfulness

16.3 surprise (DERsu)

eg. : Amazement, surprise, astonishment

16.4 anger (DERa)

eg.: Aggravation, irritation, agitation

16.5 sadness (DERsa)

eg.: Agony, suffering, hurt

16.6 fear (DERf)

eg. : Alarm, shock, fright