



## Perspectives

# Applications of Blyler and Seligman's (2023) Findings for the Middle East/North Africa.

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**Abstract:** Personal narratives shape individuals' self-perception, behavior, and understanding of their place in the world and to date, such narratives have been exactly as described, personal. Yet, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) like ChatGPT-4, might it be possible to craft personal narrative identities from stream-of-consciousness thoughts and in turn, provide coherent and meaningful stories that offer deep insights into an individual's motivations and beliefs? Two studies (Blyler & Seligman, 2023a, 2023b) doing just that are summarized. The first showed that AI-constructed narratives generated by ChatGPT-4 resonated with 96% of participants. In the second study, ChatGPT-4 generated coaching outlines and therapeutic interventions based on these AI narratives. By providing therapists and coaches with narrative identities rooted in profound understanding, this approach can accelerate therapy's initial stages, which are time-consuming and not oriented to actual therapeutic work but gaining familiarity. Narratives can also accelerate cross-cultural understanding, helping both individuals in a coaching or therapeutic dyad from different backgrounds find common ground, often the case in the Middle East/North Africa where expatriate communities live alongside national populations in large numbers and where cross-cultural understanding is critical.

المخلص: تشكل الروايات الشخصية تصور الأفراد لذاتهم، وسلوكهم، وفهمهم لمكانتهم في العالم، وحتى الآن، كانت هذه الروايات شخصية تمامًا كما تم وصفها. ومع ذلك، مع ظهور الذكاء الاصطناعي (AI)، مثل ChatGPT-4، هل من الممكن صياغة هويات سردية شخصية من أفكار تيار الوعي وبالتالي تقديم قصص متماسكة وذات معنى تقدم رؤى عميقة حول دوافع الفرد والمعتقدات؟ تم تلخيص دراستين (Blyler & Seligman, 2023a, 2023b) في هذه المقالة. أظهر الأول أن الروايات التي تم إنشاؤها بواسطة الذكاء الاصطناعي والتي تم إنشاؤها بواسطة ChatGPT-4 لاقت صدى لدى 96% من المشاركين. في الدراسة الثانية، أنشأ ChatGPT-4 مخططات (كوتشينج) وتدخلات علاجية بناءً على روايات الذكاء الاصطناعي هذه. من خلال تزويد المعالجين والمدربين بهويات سردية متجذرة في الفهم العميق، يمكن لهذا النهج تسريع المراحل الأولية للعلاج، والتي تستغرق وقتًا طويلاً وغير موجهة إلى العمل العلاجي الفعلي بل اكتساب الألفة مع بعضها البعض. يمكن لمثل هذه الروايات أيضًا تسريع التفاهم بين الثقافات، مما يساعد كلا الأفراد في مجال (الكوتشينج) أو العلاج الثنائي من خلفيات مختلفة على إيجاد أرضية مشتركة، غالبًا ما يكون هذا هو الحال في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا (MENA) حيث تعيش المجتمعات المغتربة جنبًا إلى جنب مع السكان الوطنيين بأعداد كبيرة و حيث يكون التفاهم بين الثقافات أكثر أهمية.

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**Human experience in all its complexity is often revealed through the stories** we tell about ourselves and the life we have lived or aim to live. Yet, these vital narratives often remain untold, misunderstood, or simply lie beyond human awareness. More recently, these narratives have been the focus of my (Blyler) recent explorations using artificial intelligence (AI) and illuminate the potential for AI to articulate these often-elusive stories.

But first, what is “the personal narrative”? Personal narratives play a significant role in shaping our identity and behavior. By constructing a narrative, we create a coherent and meaningful story that helps us understand ourselves and our place in the world. Narratives provide frameworks through which to understand who we are, what values and beliefs we hold, and how these fit into a range of social and cultural contexts. They promote self-understanding by allowing us to reflect on our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors long after events and interactions and help us see our motivations and desires and perhaps teach us to respond differently in the future. Accordingly, narratives shape our self-perceptions and guide our actions and, in this manner, are not random stories but a fundamental aspect of human cognition.

How then might we articulate and effectively share these narratives with others so that they too can understand, empathize with, as well as predict and anticipate our motivations? Defining and explaining who we are from random thoughts, phrases, emotions, perceptions, and responses would be easy if only it weren't so difficult. This is where AI might be of help.

Together with Dr. Martin Seligman, I (Blyler) published two new studies in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* using ChatGPT-4 to transform stream-of-consciousness thoughts into tangible “narrative identities” or sketches. In our first study (Blyler & Seligman, 2023a), 96% of participants resonated with these AI-constructed narratives, reporting their “complete” accuracy and the insights they offered. In our second study (Blyler & Seligman, 2023b), we took it a step further and asked ChatGPT-4 to generate coaching outlines and specific therapeutic interventions based on the individual's previously generated AI narrative. This tool did not only render the abstract tangible; it illuminated paths for genuine connection and understanding in the therapeutic context.

### **How can this be useful?**

In regions like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), emblematic of the broader Gulf region, the cultural landscape differs markedly from Western norms. In contexts like these, engaging with a psychologist or coach from a wholly distinct background is often the status quo. Unlike Western settings where a prevailing cultural ethos often guides collective understanding and assimilation, the Gulf presents a tableau where myriad cultures stand side by side. The Middle East region brings forth diverse cultures and different identities from both international expatriates and country nationals. While there is an increasing awareness of mental health and an openness towards seeking professional support through coaching and therapy, it remains the case that clients tend to share more generic views and idealist scenarios about themselves. There is a perceived gap between much-needed vulnerability and the tendency to mask one's true self and personal identity. Some clients



discontinue the coaching or therapeutic journey to avoid digging deeper into traumatic or sensitive topics, as well as any that might put family names or social identities into jeopardy.

However, the values, social norms, beliefs and other aspects that constitute culture tend to be of a kind that is so obvious to a person of the culture that they do not need explaining or mentioning (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). This may explain why coaches from a different cultural background may perceive for there to be gaps in a narrative when to the client there is a coherent story. It could also explain why coaching is discontinued in cases where the coachee feels that the coach does not understand a coachee's context without first receiving an explanation (King & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020).

This distinct cultural interplay demands novel approaches in both therapy and coaching. Where concerns about privacy may prevent clients from seeking coaching or therapy, the use of AI-based coaching platforms (chatbots) could offer some clients access to treatment in a manner that may feel more private. AI and human coaching can offer similar goal attainment at the start and increase confidence in the process to eventually engage a human coach (Terblanche et al., 2022). Using Blyler and Seligman's (2023b) approach, therapists can be provided with strategies that are grounded in a more profound understanding from the start. Particularly for clients who might be hesitant to recount traumatic experiences, this approach provides an alternative. A relevant example includes Grief Coaching sessions, topics that vary significantly based on the client's country of origin, level of emotional awareness and religious beliefs. Utilizing AI to generate narratives for grieving clients can add tremendous value to the therapeutic intervention. They can begin their therapeutic journey by sharing a generated "narrative identity," sidestepping the often painful need to rehash traumatic details. Such an approach not only accelerates the initial stages of therapy but offers a more informed, empathetic, and mutually rewarding trajectory for both the therapist and client.

While the constructed personal narratives may resonate well with clients, the question is how well the coach or therapist grasp the cultural information contained in the language used by clients. Generative AI "lacks the combined effects of enculturation and lived experience and thus cannot relate to and contextualize the factual information it collates" (Spennemann, 2023, p. 498), hence the narrative generated by ChatGPT may not contextualise inherent cultural information for a reader from a different culture. Thus, practitioners may benefit from the factual description of the narrative, yet still need to make sense of the narrative from the perspective of the client from an ethnorelative perspective with intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2017).

Thinking further afield to other Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region countries, such an approach can also be useful with internally displaced persons (IDPs), war and trauma survivors, or merely aid in cross-cultural understanding where clients differ widely in their worldview from that of the professional assisting them. Examples of contrary worldviews may also include interpretations on arranged marriage, parental control in Arab families, sexual-life therapy for Arab spouses, or other commonly discrepant topics that are commonly known, but rarely directly addressed or fully appreciated. The potential benefits of using AI in therapy and coaching extend far and wide psychologically and geographically.

By generating AI narratives that reflect the experiences and perspectives of individuals from various cultural backgrounds, therapists and coaches can gain insights into the range of personal, societal, geographic, religious, political and cultural factors that shape personal narratives and



identity. Such knowledge can help them broaden their own cultural awareness and sensitivity, as well as develop greater cultural competence in real time, skills that otherwise take time to develop and create misunderstandings, costs most often borne by clients alone and rarely made explicit to therapists and coaches. Providing such personal and accurate narratives may also serve to remind therapists and coaches of the diversity of each and every client, no matter what cultural or other demographic characteristics they represent.

It is possible that this AI-driven approach to making the personal narrative explicit may prove useful in other relational contexts when shared. Whether between coach/therapist and client, managers and their teams, teachers and their students, as well as between members of the same family, or perhaps even between strangers, having and understanding one's own personal narrative, as well as those of others, can foster relationships that are based on insights that emerge from clarity rather than misunderstandings, preconceptions, or worse yet, unintended harmful stereotypes. Applications within education, healthcare, workplaces, and other settings are only a matter of time. This supports calls in the coaching industry to integrate mastery of AI and other digital tools and platforms into coaching education (Passmore & Woodward, 2023).

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