Narrative Identity

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Abstract

Narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life. The story is a selective reconstruction of the autobiographical past and a narrative anticipation of the imagined future that serves to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be and where his or her life may be going. People begin to put their lives together into narrative identities in their late-adolescent and young-adult years, but the process of narrative identity development continues across the life course. In constructing self-defining life stories, people draw heavily on prevailing cultural norms and the images, metaphors, and themes that run through the many narratives they encounter in social life. Conceptions of narrative identity began to emerge in the social sciences in the 1980s with the writings of philosopher, psychologists, and social theorists. McAdams (1985) proposed the first full theoretical model of narrative identity and outlined a research agenda for examining content and structural features of life stories. Since then, conceptions of narrative identity have evolved to encompass themes from a number of different approaches and viewpoints. The chapter traces the interdisciplinary history of the concept of narrative identity, recent research on the forms and functions of narrative identity, the role of narrative identity in contemporary conceptions of human personality, the development of narrative identity across the human life course, and the cultural manifestations and meanings of life stories.

Around the age of 20, we begin to work on the stories of our lives. In order to address what Erik Erikson (1963) first described as the challenge of ego identity, emerging adults living in modern societies construct integrative narratives to explain how they came to be, where their lives

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S.J. Schwartz et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*,
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_5, © Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

are going, and how they hope to fit into the adult world that awaits them. *Narrative identity* is an internalized and evolving story of the self that provides a person's life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning. Complete with setting, scenes, characters, plots, and themes, narrative identity combines a person's reconstruction of his or her personal past with an imagined future in order to provide a subjective historical account of one's own development, an instrumental explanation of a person's most important commitments in the realms of work and love, and a moral justification of who a person was, is, and will be. People begin to work on their narrative identities in the late-adolescent and emerging-adult years, but the work never really finishes. Stories are never set in stone. Instead, narrative identity continues to present a psychosocial challenge for much of the rest of the adult life course. People continue to make sense of their own lives, and the lives of others, through narrative.

This chapter begins with an historical account of the concept of narrative identity. The ideas may be traced back to the 1980s with the emergence of narrative approaches to the self in the behavioral and social sciences and in the humanities. Building on Erikson's (1963) concept of ego identity and Murray's (1938) personological approach to the study of lives, McAdams (1985) provided the first full conception of narrative identity for empirical psychologists, focusing mainly on the content and structural dimensions of life stories. Over the past 25 years, the concept of narrative identity has evolved in many different directions, encompassing perspectives from cognitive science, life-course developmental studies, cultural psychology, sociology, and personality and social psychology. The concept of narrative identity, moreover, is now a central component of a full, multi-level theory of personality (Hooker & McAdams, 2003; McAdams, 1996; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Singer, 2005) and a new integrative theory of human selfhood across the life course (McAdams & Cox, 2010).

Next, the chapter traces the developmental origins of narrative identity in childhood and adolescence and it reviews what recent research has to say regarding the development of narrative identity in the adult years. Finally, the chapter examines the intricate interplay between culture and narrative. Recent understandings of narrative identity suggest that a person's life story says as much about the culture wherein a person's life finds its constituent meanings as it does about the person's life itself.

History of the Concept

Poets, novelists, biographers, and everyday folk have long been fascinated by life stories. But behavioral and social scientists did not develop systematic procedures and frameworks for exploring the meaning and the manifestations of the stories people live by until the 1980s. Around the time that a number of philosophers were writing about the power of narrative to provide human lives with unity in time (Ricoeur, 1984) and moral direction (MacIntyre, 1981), McAdams (1985) proposed that identity itself might be conceived as an internal story, or personal myth, that a person begins to formulate in the late-adolescent years. If one were able to "see" an identity, McAdams (1985) argued, it would look like a story—an internalized and evolving tale with main characters, intersecting plots, key scenes, and an imagined ending, representing how the person reconstructs the personal past (chapters gone by) and anticipates the future (chapters yet to come). As Erikson (1963) argued, a major function of identity is to organize a life in time. What might possibly organize a life in time better than a *story*? In the psychoanalytic literature, Spence (1982) suggested that the stories told in therapy say less about literal historical truth in the client's life and more about how the client conveys a narrative truth regarding who he or she was, is, and may be. Beginning in the 1980s, Bruner (1986), Sarbin (1986), Polkinghorne (1988), and a number of other social scientists began to argue—as did Ricoeur (1984), MacIntyre (1981), and Spence (1982) before them—that people naturally employ stories to make sense of goal-directed human behavior as it evolves over

time. Integrating human lives in time is what stories ideally do.

Although Erikson was never explicit about the fundamental content and deep structure of an identity, his seminal writings on the topic suggest that identity itself might look something like a story that puts a life together in time and in culture. Erikson (1963) conceived of identity as a configuration of the self that integrates a person's talents, identifications, and roles such that a person comes to feel an "accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity *prepared in the past* are matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others" (p. 261, italics added). Identity "arises from the selective repudiation and mutual integration of *childhood identifications*, and their absorption into a *new configuration*, which in turn is dependent on the process by which a society (often through subsocieties) identifies the young individual, recognizing him as somebody who *had to become the way he is*, and who, being the way he is, is taken for granted" (Erikson, 1958, p. 113, italics added). Erikson suggested that the establishment of ego identity confers upon a young person the status of *adulthood*. And to be an adult is to create one's life anew, to make one's life into a dynamic narrative that is set (retrospectively and prospectively) in time and in social context, as Erikson (1958) articulated beautifully in this rich passage from *Young Man Luther*:

> To be adult means among other things to see one's own life in continuous perspective, in both *retrospect and prospect*. By accepting some definition as to who he is, usually on the basis of a function in an economy, a place in the sequence of generations, and a status in the structure of society, the adult is able *to selectively reconstruct his past* in such a way that, step for step, it *seems to have planned him*, or better, he seems to have planned it. In this sense psychologically *we do choose* our parents, our family *history*, and the *history* of our kings, heroes, and gods. By making them our own, we maneuver ourselves into the position of proprietors, of *creators*. (Erikson, 1958, pp. 111–112, italics added)

Whereas Marcia's (1980; Kroger & Marcia, Chapter 2, this volume) classic conception of identity *statuses* focused research attention on the *processes* of exploration and commitment in identity formation, McAdams's (1985) formulation redirected attention toward identity as a *product*. If the product of identity exploration and commitment is a story about the self that the person begins to formulate in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, then how might that narrative product be analyzed? McAdams looked to Murray (1938) and the personological tradition in psychology for analytic frameworks and tools. Murray (1938) conceived of human lives as integrated and evolving wholes whose motivational themes might be exposed by asking people to produce narrative responses, such as autobiographical vignettes and imaginative stories in response to pictures (the Thematic Apperception Test, or TAT). Refining Murray's approach, McClelland (1985) and colleagues developed rigorous content-analytic procedures for coding motivational imagery in TAT stories. McAdams (1985) adapted the same procedures for analyzing narrated scenes obtained from extended life-story interviews. A person's narrative identity, therefore, might be analyzed in terms of the relative salience of motivational themes related to agency (e.g., power, achievement, autonomy) and communion (e.g., love, intimacy, belongingness). The structure of the story might be analyzed in terms of narrative complexity and coherence.

Over the past 20 years, researchers have developed a wide range of analytic systems for assessing the content and structure of life stories, conceived as the narrative products of a person's identity work. Many studies have sought to link content and structural dimensions of narrative identity to other consequential features of a person's psychological make-up, such as personality traits and motives, developmental stages, psychological well-being, depression, and important life outcomes (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; McAdams, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). For example, research shows that people scoring high on the trait of neuroticism tend to construct life stories with negative emotional tones whereas people high in agreeableness express themes of communion in their life narratives (McAdams et al., 2004; Raggatt, 2006a). Psychological health and well-being have been

linked to narrative identities that show high levels of coherence (Baerger & McAdams, 1999) and themes of redemption (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001), emotional closure (Pals, 2006a), and personal growth and integration (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). Depression is associated with constructing life stories that show a preponderance of contamination sequences (scenes wherein good events suddenly go bad) (Adler, Kissel, & McAdams, 2006), whereas successful recovery from depression and other psychological disturbances is associated with constructing life-story scenes that are rich in themes of agency (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008). Among highly religious American Christians, political conservatives tend to privilege life-narrative scenes that highlight strict authority, personal discipline, and the purity of the self whereas politically liberal Christians tend to tell stories of empathic caregiving and self-expansion (McAdams et al., 2008). Life narratives of conservatives suggest an underlying fear of chaos and conflict, whereas life narratives of liberals suggest a parallel fear of emptiness (McAdams & Albaugh, 2008).

Studies that have examined content and structural dimensions of narrative identity work under the implicit assumption that life stories are integrative autobiographical projects with psychological staying power (McAdams, 1985, 2006). In other words, people's internalized life stories are broad enough and stable enough to warrant their being coded for themes that reveal important psychological insights about the storyteller. An alternative perspective on life narratives, however, suggests that personal stories are smaller in scope, less integrative, and more ephemeral (e.g., Gergen, 1991; Thorne, 2000). Often couched in terms of postmodern literary theories, discursive psychology, and social-constructionist approaches, this latter perspective tends to cast a suspicious eye upon the notion of a broad psychological narrative that holds the power to integrate human lives. Instead, people often *perform* narrative identities in particular social situations and with respect to particular demand characteristics and discursive conventions (Bamberg, de Fina, & Schiffrin, Chapter 8, this volume; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Selves are constantly being revised through repeated narrative encounters, as situations change and time passes. People bring forth different stories for different situations, and no single narrative frame can possibly organize the full and shifting gamut of everyday social life. As Gergen (1991) suggests, contemporary selves are "saturated" with the complex and shifting demands of social life. Contemporary selves rarely achieve unity and purpose; instead, fragmentation and multiplicity are the norms.

The idea that narrative identity consists of a multiplicity of stories evolving in a de-centered psychological space is a foundational concept for narrative theories offered by Hermans (1996), Gregg (1991), and Raggatt (2006b), among others. These authors all suggest that narratives function to express disparate features of human identity. For example, Hermans conceives of narrative identity as a polyphonic novel within which different voices of the self (akin to characters in a story) express themselves in their own unique and self-defining ways. The self evolves through an internalized dialogue of voices, each with its own story to tell. Similarly, Raggatt (2006b) rejects the idea that life narratives serve to integrate lives. In his case studies and quantitative analyses, Raggatt suggests that contemporary social life is too complex and inconsistent to afford the kind of neat identity consolidation that Erikson once envisioned. Instead, people construct multiform narrative identities that pit opposing images of the self against one another.

McAdams (1997, 2006) acknowledges that few human beings ever experience full integration and unity in their lives. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what such an idealized psychological state would look and feel like. However, people living in complex, postmodern societies still feel a need to construe some modicum of unity, purpose, and integration amidst the swirl and confusion. People still seek meaning in their lives—a meaning that transcends any particular social performance or situation. Narrative identity need not be *the* grand and totalizing narrative that makes all things make sense for all time in any given person's life. Rather, people seek some

semblance of unity and purpose as they move into and through adulthood. They aim to make some narrative sense of their life as a whole. These efforts, as limited and fallible as they may be, are the stuff out of which narrative identity is made.

McAdams and Pals (2006) conceive of narrative identity as the third of three layers of human personality (see also Hooker & McAdams, 2003). The first layer consists of broad dispositional traits, such as extraversion and neuroticism, which account for consistencies in behavioral style from one situation to the next and over time. The second layer is made up of values, goals, personal projects, defenses, and other characteristic adaptations that capture more socially contextualized and motivational aspects of psychological individuality. If traits provide a dispositional sketch of personality, characteristic motives and goals fill in many of the details. But neither traits nor goals spell out what a person's life means, for the person and for the person's world, in time and culture. Only narrative identity can do that. As it begins to develop in adolescence, narrative identity comes to form a third layer of personality, layered over adaptations and traits. A full accounting of personality requires the examination of broad dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and integrative life stories—a unique design for each person, evolving, multi-layered, and complexly situated in the social ecology of a person's life.

Most recently, McAdams and Cox (2010) positioned narrative identity within a broadly integrative framework for conceptualizing human selfhood. What William James (1892/1963) famously described as the conjoining of "I" and "Me" to comprise the full "self" appears in three qualitatively different guises across the human life course: (1) the self as actor (2) the self as agent, and (3) the self-as-author. Over the life course, the I develops increasingly sophisticated and nuanced understandings of the Me as it develops from an actor to an agent to an author. Reflecting our evolutionary heritage as social animals, human infants begin life as (1) social *actors*. Around one's second birthday, an initial actor-self begins to form, as the I begins reflexively to take note of the basic traits and proclivities that make it (the Me) up. With its collection of fixed traits and essential features, the actor-Me is similar to what Chandler (2001) describes as an *essentialist* rendering of selfhood. With the development of theory of mind (Wellman, 1993) in the fourth and fifth years of life and with the establishment of goals and motives in later childhood, human beings begin to see themselves from the standpoint of (2) motivated *agents*, as well, whose goals, plans, desires, programs, and long-term aims take up residency in the newly expanded Me. In adolescence and young adulthood, the I becomes (3) an *author* too, seeking to fashion the Me into a self-defining story, consistent with what Chandler (2001) describes as a *narrative* rendering of selfhood. That story, or narrative identity, explains what the social actor does, what the motivated agent wants, and what it all means in the context of one's narrative understanding of the self. By providing a story regarding how the Me came to be over time, as well as what the Me may become in the future, the self-as-author extends the Me back into one's personal history and forward into the imagined distant future. Narrative identity, then, is that feature of human selfhood that begins to emerge when the adolescent or young-adult I assumes the guise of a storyteller.

Whereas McAdams (1985) claimed that identity is a story and *only* a story, it is now clear that identity encompasses much more. The I makes room within the Me for many different features of the self as both actor and agent—self-ascribed traits, roles, goals, values (Hitlin, Chapter 20, this volume), possible selves (Oyserman & James, Chapter 6, this volume), gender (Bussey, Chapter 25, this volume), ethnic identifications (Umaña-Taylor, Chapter 33, this volume), etc. As the current volume shows, many of these different meanings of selfhood can be construed in terms of the broad concept of "identity." Thus, narrative identity is but one of many different psychological senses wherein human selves make identity. But psychologically speaking, narrative identity is an especially compelling construction—a psychosocial first among equals—in that it conveys how the author-self constructs a self-defining story that serves to

integrate many other features of the Me in order to provide a life in full with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning in culture and in time.

Over the past 20 years, theorists and researchers have focused a great deal of attention on the developmental and cultural dynamics of narrative identity (e.g., Fivush & Haden, 2003; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1996, 2006; McLean et al., 2007; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne, 2000). What are the developmental origins of narrative identity in childhood and early adolescence? What cognitive skills need to be in place before a person can construct an integrative life story? How do people organize important scenes in their lives into narrative identities? How are narrative identities performed in social relationships and in culture? To what extent is a life story a cultural construction? Whereas McAdams's (1985) original conception viewed life stories as akin to finished products that reveal fundamental tendencies in identity, the concept of narrative identity has evolved substantially over the past two decades to emphasize (1) how life stories are more like works-in-progress that convey multiplicity as well as unity in the self (e.g., Bamberg, de Fina, & Schiffrin, Chapter 8, this volume; Hermans, 1996), (2) how life stories reflect important developmental processes as they change over time (e.g., McLean et al., 2007), and (3) how life stories are exquisitely contextualized in social relationships, communities of discourse, and culture (e.g., McAdams, 2006; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

Narrative Identity and the Life Course

Stories are accounts of the vicissitudes of human *intention* organized in time (Bruner, 1986). In virtually all intelligible stories, humans or human-like characters act to accomplish intentions upon a social landscape, generating a sequence of actions and reactions extended as a plot in time. Human intentionality is at the heart of narrative, and therefore the development of intentionality is of prime importance in establishing the mental conditions necessary for storytelling and story comprehension. Research on imitation and attention suggests that by the end of the first year of life, human infants recognize that other human beings are intentional agents who act in a goal-directed manner (Kuhlmeier, Wynn, & Bloom, 2003). They implicitly understand that a story's characters act in accord with goals.

The second year of life marks the emergence of a storytelling, autobiographical self. By 24 months of age, toddlers have consolidated a sense of themselves as agentic and appropriating subjects in the social world who are, at the same time, the objects of others' observations (as well as their own). As William James (1892/1963) suggested, the 2-year-old self is a reflexive, "duplex," I–Me configuration: A subjective I that observes (and begins to construct) an objective Me. Among those elements of experience that the I begins to attribute to the Me are autobiographical events. Howe and Courage (1997) argue that children begin to encode, collect, and narrate autobiographical memories around the ages 2–3—*my* little stories about what happened to *me*, stories the I constructs and remembers about the Me.

With development and experience in the preschool years, the storytelling, autobiographical self becomes more sophisticated and effective. The burgeoning research literature on children's *theory of mind* (Wellman, 1993) shows that in the third and fourth years of life most children come to understand that intentional human behavior is motivated by internal desires and beliefs. Interpreting the actions of others (and oneself) in terms of their predisposing desires and beliefs is a form of mind reading, according to Baron-Cohen (1995), a competency that is critical for effective social interaction. By the time children enter kindergarten, mind reading seems natural and easy. To most school children, it makes intuitive sense that a girl should eat an ice-cream cone because "she wants to" (desire) or that a boy should look for a cookie in the cookie jar because "he believes the cookies are there." But autistic children often find mind reading to be extraordinarily difficult, as if they never developed this intuitive sense about what aspects

of mind are involved in the making of motivated human behavior. Characterized by what Baron-Cohen (1995) calls *mindblindness*, children with autism do not understand people as intentional characters or do so only to a limited degree. Their lack of understanding applies to the self as well, suggesting that at the heart of severe autism may reside a disturbing dysfunction in "I-ness," and a corresponding inability to formulate and convey sensible narratives of the self (Bruner, 1994).

Autobiographical memory and self-storytelling develop in a social context. Parents typically encourage children to talk about their personal experiences as soon as children are verbally able to do so (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). Early on, parents may take the lead in stimulating the child's recollection and telling of the past by reminding the child of recent events, such as this morning's breakfast or yesterday's visit to the doctor. Taking advantage of this initial conversational scaffolding provided by adults, the young child soon begins to take more initiative in sharing personal events. By the age of 3 years, children are actively engaged in co-constructing their past experience in conversations with adults. By the end of the preschool years, they are able to give a relatively coherent account of their past experiences, independent of adult guidance.

Yet, differences in how parents converse with their children appear to have strong impacts on the development of the storytelling self. For example, mothers tend to encourage daughters, more than sons, to share *emotional* experiences, including especially memories of negative events that produce sadness (Fivush & Kuebli, 1997). Early on, girls use more emotion words than boys in their autobiographical recollections. When mothers consistently engage their children in an elaborative conversational pattern, asking children to reflect and elaborate upon their personal experiences, children develop richer autobiographical memories and tell more detailed stories about themselves. Conversely, a more constricted style of conversation on the part of mothers is associated with less articulated personal narratives in children (Reese & Farrant, 2003).

By the time children are able to generate their own narrative accounts of personal memories, they also exhibit a good understanding of the canonical features of stories themselves, as Mandler (1984) has convincingly shown. Five-year-olds typically know that stories are set in a particular time and place and involve characters who act upon their desires and beliefs over time. They expect stories to evoke suspense and curiosity and will dismiss as "boring" a narrative that fails to live up to these emotional conventions. They expect stories to conform to a conventional *story grammar* or generic script concerning what kinds of events can occur and in what order. In a simple, goal-directed episode, for example, an initiating event may prompt the protagonist to attempt some kind of action, which will result in some kind of consequence, which in turn will be followed by the protagonist's reaction to the consequence. Stories are expected to have definite beginnings, middles, and endings. The ending is supposed to provide a resolution to the plot complications that developed over the course of the story. If a story does not conform to conventions such as these, children may find it confusing and difficult to remember, or they may recall it later with a more canonical structure than it originally had.

As children move through the elementary school years, they come to narrate their own personal experiences in ways that conform to their implicit understandings of how good stories should be structured and what they should include. Importantly, they begin to internalize their culture's norms and expectations concerning what the story of an *entire human life* should contain. As they learn that a telling of a single life typically begins, say, with an account of birth and typically includes, say, early experiences in the family, eventual moves out of the family, getting a job, getting married, etc., they acquire what Habermas and Bluck (2000) term a *cultural concept of biography*. Cultural norms define conventional phases of the life course and suggest what kinds of causal explanations make sense in telling a life. As children learn the culture's biographical conventions, they begin to see how single events in their own lives—remembered

from the past and imagined for the future—might be sequenced and linked together to create their own life story.

Still, it is not until adolescence, according to Habermas and Bluck (2000), that individuals craft causal narratives to explain how different events are linked together in the context of a biography, a point that has been made by a number of theorists (e.g., Chandler, 2001; Hammack, 2008). What Habermas and Bluck (2000) call *causal coherence* in life narratives is exhibited in the increasing effort across the adolescent years to provide narrative accounts of one's life that explain how one event caused, led up to, transformed, or in some way was/is meaningfully related to other events in one's life. An adolescent girl may explain, for example, why she rejects her parents' liberal political values (or why she feels shy around boys, or how it came to be that her junior year in high school represented a turning point in her understanding of herself) in terms of personal experiences from the past that she has selected and reconstrued to make a coherent personal narrative. She will explain how one event led to another, which led to another, and so on. She will likely share her account with others and monitor the feedback she receives in order to determine whether her attempt at causal coherence makes sense (McLean, 2005; Thorne, 2000). Furthermore, she may now identify an overarching theme, value, or principle that integrates many different episodes in her life and conveys the gist of who she is and what her biography is all about—a cognitive operation that Habermas and Bluck (2000) call *thematic coherence*. In their analyses of life-narrative accounts produced between the ages of 8 and 20 years, Habermas and de Silveira (2008) show that causal and thematic coherence are relatively rare in autobiographical accounts from late childhood and early adolescence but increase substantially through the teenage years and into early adulthood.

Cognitive development, then, sets the stage for narrative identity. But as Erikson (1963) emphasized, socio-emotional and cultural factors also play important roles in moving the identity agenda forward in the teens and 20s. In modern societies, teachers, parents, peers, and the media all urge the adolescent to begin thinking about who he or she *really* is and what he or she wants to *become* as an adult. Social and cultural forces tell the young person that it will soon be time to *get a life* (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Of course, even children know vaguely that they will become adults someday, and they may wonder what they will be when they grow up. In early adolescence, these wonderings may begin to take narrative form in fantasies, diaries, web postings, and other self-expressions.

Elkind (1981) described these early drafts of narrative identity as *personal fables*. Often grandiose and breathless, these tales of personal greatness and personal tragedy (I will write the great American novel; I will play shortstop for the New York Yankees; I will save the world or maybe destroy it; I will find the perfect love, and my lover will save me; nobody will ever understand how deep and unique my life has been and will be) may spell out a coherent story of life, but it is typically one that is wildly unrealistic. This is (usually) okay, Elkind suggested, putting grossly paranoid and destructive ideation aside. Narrative identity needs to start somewhere. As they mature into later adolescence and beyond, the authors of personal fables edit, revise, and often start the whole thing over, so as to compose life narratives that are better grounded in reality, reflecting a keener understanding of social constraints and a more astute appraisal of personal skills, values, gifts, and past experiences (Elkind, 1981; McAdams, 1985).

Even though most people ultimately abandon their personal fables, narrative identity never completely descends into literal realism. If they are to inspire and integrate, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we came to be must retain their mythic qualities. Like personal fables, they are acts of imagination that creatively select, embellish, shape, and distort the past so that it connects causally and thematically to an imaginatively rendered and anticipated future, all in the service of making meaning (McLean et al., 2007; Singer, 2005). The task of constructing a narrative identity requires people to assume a role that is more like a novelist than a secretary. The

job is to tell a good story rather than to report exactly what happened at the meeting.

Still, facts are important. A person's narrative identity should be based on the facts of his or her life as they are generally understood in a social community, for credibility is a cardinal criterion of maturity in identity and in social life (McAdams, 1985). Those facts are part of the material—the psycho-literary resources—with which the author works in order to craft a self-defining narrative. But all by themselves, facts are devoid of social and personal meaning. A fact of my life may be that I lost a limb in the Iraq War. What do I make of that fact? Marshalling all the resources at my disposal and working within a social community that privileges some kinds of narratives and discourages others, I decide whether my loss signals tragedy, irony, romance, redemption, a return to God, a recommitment to family, a loss of faith, or whatever. There are many narrative possibilities, but not an infinite number. In narrative identity, the storyteller can work only with the material at hand. Narrative identity draws upon the powers of imagination and integration to shape those materials into a good story, empowered and constrained as the storyteller is by the physical, biological, psychological, ideological, economic, historical, and cultural realities in play (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2006; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

Narrative identity emerges during a period of the life course that will forever retain a special salience in autobiographical memory. One of the most well-documented findings in cognitive psychology is the tendency for older adults (say, over the age of 50) to recall a disproportionate number of life events from the late-adolescent and emerging-adulthood years (roughly age 15–30). What is called the *memory bump* represents a dramatic departure from the linear forgetting curve that one might expect to prevail for autobiographical recollections (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). This is to say, that people tend to recall fewer and fewer events as they go back further and further in time. The research shows that this general trend holds, except for memories of what happened in the emerging-adulthood years. For those years, people usually hold many more memories, especially highly emotional memories, than the linear temporal trend predicts.

Researchers have proposed many different reasons for the memory bump, such as the possibility that this period in the life course simply happens to contain a disproportionate number of objectively momentous life events, such as leaving home, first job, first sexual relationship (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). But the memory bump may also reflect the developmental emergence of narrative identity. As the storytelling I begins to author a narrative of the Me, it invests personal experiences with special meaning and salience. People remember so much about their emerging-adulthood years, in part, because that was when they began to put their lives together into a story.

Narrative identity emerges as a central psychosocial problem in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, corresponding roughly to what Erikson (1963) originally identified as the stage of *identity vs. role confusion*. The problem of constructing a story for one's life, however, should not be expected to fade away quickly once the individual resolves an identity "stage." The common reading of Erikson's (1963) theory to suggest that identity is a well-demarcated stage to be explored and resolved in adolescence and early adulthood is, from the standpoint of narrative theory and recent life-course research in psychology and sociology, an increasingly misleading reading of how modern people live and think about their lives. More accurate, it now appears, is this view: *Once narrative identity enters the developmental scene, it remains a project to be worked on for much of the rest of the life course*. Into and through the midlife years, adults continue to refashion their narrative understandings of themselves, incorporating developmentally on-time and off-time events, expected and unexpected life transitions, gains and losses, and their changing perspectives on who they were, are, and may be into their ongoing, self-defining life stories (Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Shroots, & Svendson, 1996). Adults continue to come to terms with society and social life through narrative. The autobiographical, storytelling self continues to

make narrative sense of life and its efforts may even improve with age.

The lion's share of empirical research on narrative identity in adulthood has examined (a) relations between particular themes and forms in life narratives, on the one hand, and personality variables (such as traits, motives, and defenses), on the other hand, (b) life-narrative predictors of psychological well-being and mental health, (c) variations in the ways that people make narrative sense of suffering and negative events in life, (d) the interpersonal and social functions of and effects on life storytelling, (e) uses of narrative in therapy, and (f) the cultural shaping of narrative identity (McAdams, 2008). To date, there exist few longitudinal studies of life stories and no long-term efforts to trace continuity and change in narrative identity over decades of adult development. Nonetheless, the fact that researchers have tended to collect life-narrative data from adults of many different ages, rather than focusing on the proverbial college student, provides an opportunity to consider a few suggestive developmental trends.

Because a person's life is always a work in progress and because narrative identity, therefore, may incorporate new experiences over time, theorists have typically proposed that life stories should change markedly over time (e.g., Gergen, 1991). Yet, if narrative identity is assumed to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose, then one would expect that life stories should also show some longitudinal continuity. But how might continuity and change be assessed? By determining the extent to which a person "tells the same story" from Time 1 to Time 2? If yes, does "same story" mean identifying the same key events in a life? Showing the same kinds of narrative themes? Exhibiting the same sorts of causal or thematic connections?

In a 3-year longitudinal study that asked college students to recall and describe 10 key scenes in their life stories on three different occasions, McAdams et al. (2006) found that only 28% of the episodic memories described at Time 1 were repeated 3 months later (Time 2), and 22% of the original (Time 1) memories were chosen and described again 3 years after the original assessment (Time 3). Despite change in manifest content of stories, however, McAdams et al. (2006) also documented noteworthy longitudinal consistencies (in the correlation range of 0.35–0.60) in certain emotional and motivational qualities in the stories and in the level of narrative complexity. Furthermore, over the 3-year period, students' life-narrative accounts became more complex, and they incorporated a greater number of themes suggesting personal growth and integration.

Cross-sectional studies suggest that up through middle age, older adults tend to construct more complex and coherent life narratives than do younger adults and adolescents (Baddeley & Singer, 2007). One process through which this developmental difference is shown is *autobiographical reasoning*, which is the tendency to draw summary conclusions about the self from autobiographical episodes (McLean et al., 2007). Autobiographical reasoning tends to give a life narrative greater causal and thematic coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Pasaupathi and Mansour (2006) found that autobiographical reasoning in narrative accounts of life turning points increases with age up to midlife. Middle-aged adults showed a more interpretive and psychologically sophisticated approach to life storytelling, compared to younger people. Bluck and Gluck (2004) asked adolescents (age 15–20), younger adults (age 30–40), and older adults (age 60 and over) to recount personal experiences in which they demonstrated wisdom. Younger and older adults were more likely than adolescents to narrate wisdom scenes in ways that connected the experiences to larger life themes or philosophies, yet another manifestation of autobiographical reasoning.

Singer, Rexhaj, and Baddeley (2007) found that adults over the age of 50 narrated self-defining memories that expressed a more positive narrative tone and greater integrative meaning compared to college students. Findings like these dovetail with Pennebaker and Stone's (2003) demonstration, based on laboratory studies of language use and analyses of published fiction, that adults use more positive and fewer negative affect words, and demonstrate greater

levels of cognitive complexity, as they age. The findings are also consistent with research on autobiographical recollections showing a positivity memory bias among older adults (e.g., Kennedy, Mather, & Carstensen, 2004). At the same time, evidence suggests that older adults tend to recall more general, as opposed to specific, event memories, tending to skip over the details and focus mainly on the memory's emotional gist (Baddeley & Singer, 2007). In our later years, narrative identity may become warmer and fuzzier.

Counselors who work with the elderly sometimes employ the method of *life review* to encourage older adults to relive and reflect upon past events (Butler, 1963). In life review, older adults are encouraged to mine their autobiographical memory for specific events that seem to have meaning and value. Life review therapists teach their clients how to reminisce productively about these events and to reflect upon their meaning. Some studies suggest that life review can improve life satisfaction and relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety among older adults (Serrano, Latorre, Gatz, & Montanes, 2004). Even without undergoing formal training or assistance in life review, however, older adults may draw increasingly on reminiscences as the years go by. Positive memory biases among older people may give narrative identity a softer glow in the later years. The increasing tendency with age to recall more generalized memories may also simplify life stories in old age (Singer et al., 2007).

Culture and Narrative

A central finding in the study of narrative identity is that as adults move into and through midlife they become better able to construct life stories that derive positive meaning from negative events (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; King & Hicks, 2006; Pals, 2006b; Woike & Matic, 2004). Finding positive meanings in negative events is the central theme that runs through McAdams's (2006) conception of *the redemptive self*. In a series of nomothetic and idiographic studies conducted over the past 15 years, McAdams and colleagues have consistently found that midlife American adults who score especially high on self-report measures of generativity—suggesting a strong commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations and improving the world in which they live (Erikson, 1963)—tend to see their own lives as narratives of redemption (Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; McAdams, 2006; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams et al., 2001). Compared to their less generative American counterparts, highly generative adults tend to construct narrative identities that feature redemption sequences, in which the protagonist is delivered from suffering to an enhanced status or state. In addition, highly generative American adults are more likely than their less-generative peers to construct life stories in which the protagonist (a) enjoys a special advantage or blessing early in life; (b) expresses sensitivity to the suffering of others or societal injustice as a child; (c) establishes a clear and strong value system in adolescence that remains a source of unwavering conviction through the adult years; (d) experiences significant conflicts between desires for agency/power and desires for communion/love; and (e) looks to achieve goals to benefit society in the future (McAdams, 2006). Taken together, these themes articulate a general script or narrative prototype that many highly generative American adults employ to make sense of their own lives (see also Colby & Damon, 1992; Walker & Frimer, 2007). For highly productive and caring midlife American adults, the redemptive self is a narrative model of *the good life*.

The redemptive self is a life-story prototype that serves to support the generative efforts of midlife men and women. Their redemptive life narratives tell how generative adults seek to give back to society in gratitude for the early advantages and blessings they feel they have received. In every life, generativity is tough and frustrating work, as every parent or community volunteer knows. But if an adult constructs a narrative identity in which the protagonist's suffering in the short run often gives way to reward later on, he or she may be better able to sustain

the conviction that seemingly thankless investments today will pay off for future generations. Redemptive life stories support the kind of life strivings that a highly generative man or woman in the midlife years is likely to set forth. They also confer a *moral legitimacy* to life (Hardy & Carlo, Chapter 19, this volume), a life-narrative function that Taylor (1989) and MacIntyre (1981) identify as central to the making of a modern identity. Certain kinds of life narratives exemplify what a society deems to be a good and worthy life. Indeed, virtually all life narratives assume some kind of moral stance in the world. Narrators operate from a moral perspective and seek to affirm the moral goodness of their identity quests. Taylor (1989) writes that "in order to make minimal sense of our lives, in order to have an identity, we need an orientation to the good," and "we see that this sense of the good has to be woven into my understanding of my life as an unfolding story" (p. 47).

The conception of the redemptive self brings to attention the crucial role of culture in the construction of narrative identity over the lifespan. The kinds of life stories that highly generative American adults tend to tell reprise quintessentially American cultural themes—themes that carry a powerful moral cachet. Indeed, the stories of highly generative American adults may say as much about the cultural values that situate the story and the teller as they do about the storytellers themselves. The life-story themes expressed by highly generative American adults recapture and couch in a psychological language especially cherished, as well as hotly contested, ideas in American cultural history—ideas that appear prominently in spiritual accounts of the seventeenth-century Puritans, Benjamin Franklin's eighteenth-century autobiography, slave narratives and Horatio Alger stories from the nineteenth century, and the literature of self-help and American entrepreneurship from more recent times (McAdams, 2006). Evolving from the Puritans to Ralph Waldo Emerson to Oprah, the redemptive self has morphed into many different storied forms in the past 300 years as Americans have sought to narrate their lives as redemptive tales of atonement, emancipation, recovery, self-fulfillment, and upward social mobility. The stories speak of heroic individual protagonists—the *chosen people*—whose *manifest destiny* is to make a positive difference in a dangerous world, even when the world does not wish to be redeemed. The stories translate a deep and abiding script of what historians call *American exceptionalism* into the many contemporary narratives of success, recovery, development, liberation, and self-actualization that so pervade American talk, talk shows, therapy sessions, sermons, and commencement speeches. It is as if especially generative American adults, whose lives are dedicated to making the world a better place for future generations, are, for better and sometimes for worse, the most ardent narrators of a general life-story format as American as apple pie and the Super Bowl.

Different kinds of narrative identities make sense in different kinds of cultures. In Erikson's (1958) classic study of Martin Luther's identity formation, the stories that young man Luther constructed to make sense of his own life—stories about physical encounters with devils and saints—made all kinds of cultural sense in sixteenth-century Christian Germany, but they strike the modern secular ear as somewhat odd. A member of a rural Indian village may account for his feelings of tranquility this morning as resulting from the cool and dispassionate *food* he ate last night (Shweder & Much, 1987). His story will make sense to his peers in the village, but it will not fit expectations for life-narrative accounts in contemporary Berlin.

Furthermore, within modern societies different groups are given different narrative opportunities and face different narrative constraints. Especially relevant here are gender, race, and class divisions in modern society. The feminist author Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) remarked that many women have traditionally "been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over – take control of – their own lives" (p. 17). The historical and contemporary life experiences of

many African Americans do not always coalesce nicely into the kind of life-narrative forms most valued by the white majority in the United States (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Narrative identity, therefore, reflects gender and class divisions and the patterns of economic, political, and cultural hegemony that prevail at a given point in a society's history (Franz & Stewart, 1994; Gregg, 2006; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

With respect to cultural effects, researchers have noted strong differences in autobiographical memory and narrative identity between East Asian and North American societies. For example, North American adults typically report an earlier age of first memory and have longer and more detailed memories of childhood than do Chinese, Japanese, and Korean adults (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer, 2003). In addition, several studies have noted that North Americans' personal memories tend to be more self-focused than are the memories of East Asians (e.g., Wang, 2001, 2006). The differences are consistent with the well-known argument that certain Eastern societies tend to emphasize interdependent construals of the self whereas Western societies emphasize independent self-conceptions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; reviewed by Smith, Chapter 11, this volume). From an early age, Westerners are encouraged to think about their own individual exploits and to tell stories about them. In a more collectivist culture that inculcates interdependent self-construals, by contrast, children may be encouraged to cultivate a listening role over a telling role and to construct narratives of the self that prioritize other people and social contexts.

Wang and Conway (2004) asked European American and Chinese midlife adults to recall 20 autobiographical memories. Americans provided more memories of individual experiences, and they focused their attention on their own roles and emotions in the events. In contrast, Chinese adults were more inclined to recall memories of social and historical events, and they placed a greater emphasis on social interactions and significant others in their stories. Chinese also more frequently drew upon past events to convey moral messages than did Americans. Wang and Conway (2004) suggested that personal narratives and life stories fulfill both self-expressive and self-directive functions. Euro-Americans may prioritize self-expressive functions, viewing personal narratives as vehicles for articulating the breadth, depth, and uniqueness of the inner self. By contrast, Chinese may prioritize the self-directive function, viewing personal narratives as guides for good social conduct. Confucian traditions and values place a great deal of emphasis on history and respect for the past. Individuals are encouraged to learn from their own past experiences and from the experiences of others, including their ancestors. From a Confucian perspective, the highest purpose in life is *ren*—a blending of benevolence, moral vitality, and sensitive concern for others. One method for promoting ren is to scrutinize one's autobiographical past for mistakes in social conduct. Another method is to reflect upon historical events in order to understand one's appropriate position in the social world. It should not be surprising, then, that personal narratives imbued with a Confucian ethic should draw upon both individual and historical events in order to derive directions for life.

Conclusion

Narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person begins to work on in late adolescence and emerging adulthood and continues to rework for much of the rest of life. Combining a selective reconstruction of the past and imagined scenario for the future, narrative identity helps to provide a person's life with the sense of temporal continuity and purpose that Erikson (1963) originally identified as a cardinal function of ego identity. Narrative identity integrates a life in time and culture. Providing a subjective, storied explanation for how a person came to be and where his or her life may be going in the future, narrative identity also lends a moral legitimacy to a life, linking the person's own story up with the master moral narratives

that preside within a given culture. As such, then, any person's particular narrative identity is a co-authored, psychosocial construction, a joint product of the person him/herself and the culture wherein the person acts, strives, and narrates.

The concept of narrative identity may be traced back to McAdams's (1985) initial attempt to re-cast Erikson's idea of ego identity into narrative terms. McAdams (1985) launched a research program focused on analyzing the salient content and structural dimensions of life stories. Since then, the concept of narrative identity has evolved considerably, assimilating themes from cognitive science, life span and life-course studies, cultural psychology, social and personality psychology, clinical psychology, and other disciplines wherein scholars have begun to consider the narrative features of human lives. The concept of narrative identity plays a major role today in the multi-layer personality theory developed by McAdams and Pals (2006) and in a broad, interdisciplinary framework for understanding the self as actor, agent, and author, recently articulated by McAdams and Cox (2010). The current chapter has traced the historical evolution of the concept of narrative identity, reviewed research and theory on the development of narrative identity across the human life course, and examined the role of culture in the making of narrative identity. The study of narrative identity continues to attract researchers from many different disciplines and points of view. What links them all together is the goal of understanding how human beings make narrative sense out of their own lives, how they develop the stories that come to comprise their very identities, how those stories change over time, and how those stories function—psychologically, socially, morally, culturally—as the storyteller journeys across the long course of adult life.

Acknowledgments The preparation of this chapter was supported by a grant from the Foley Family Foundation to establish the Foley Center for the Study of Lives at Northwestern University.

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