

Chapter 17

Lost Possible Selves and Personality Development

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Introduction

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” is a question that is frequently posed to children. With age, our answers to the question of “what we want to be” may be far removed from childhood dreams of becoming a firefighter, an astronaut, an artist, or a garbage collector. And certainly, we are less likely to be asked what we want to be when we grow up when we are, after all, grown-ups. Yet, in a sense, adults answer this question every day as we seek our life goals, striving to become the persons we hoped to be.

Personal goals are a key aspect of psychological well-being (e.g., Emmons, 1986, Sheldon & Hoon, 2007). Having, valuing, and making progress on personal goals are associated with psychological well-being (King, 2008a). Goals are the way we experience a sense of purpose, a key aspect of the experience of meaning in life (Heintzelman & King, 2013). Personal goals play an important role in a larger framework of self-regulation providing life with organizing principles, with beginnings, middles, and ends, so that experiences make sense (King, 2008b). Goals lend coherence to affective experience: We feel good or bad depending on how we are progressing in our valued motivational pursuits (Carver & Scheier, 2008). Striving toward personal goals attaches us to larger motivational concerns, allowing us to enact the behaviors that will meet our broader needs (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). Goal pursuit might also play a role in personality development. An unreliable teenager might set a goal to become a more conscientious young adult. An adult who is hostile might set a goal to become more compassionate. Success at these goals would seem to imply that a person has matured: That the pursuit of a personal goal has contributed to development (see Hudson & Fraley, *in press*).

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Nevertheless, for all its beneficial associations, goal pursuit is not without its downsides (King & Burton, 2003). There are numerous places where such pursuit can go awry. The selection of a goal may be poorly suited to one's abilities, skills, and opportunities. Beliefs about what future experiences will bring fulfillment can be inaccurate (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). In addition, most of the time, people pursue multiple goals (Vancouver, Weinhardt, & Schmidt, 2010) and this multiplicity can engender conflict and stress (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013; Emmons & King, 1988). Devoting resources to a particular goal may mean neglecting others. This prioritizing can be based on inaccurate perceptions of one's abilities, leading to poorer performance outcomes (Vancouver, Gullekson, Morse, & Warren, 2014). Furthermore, caring about a goal means monitoring progress and potentially experiencing negative emotions, when progress is lower than anticipated, and disappointment, in the face of failure (Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). Pursuing a long-term life dream can involve delaying gratification, putting off immediate pleasures, to regulate behavior toward a distal desired end. Although such capacities are a hallmark of effective self-regulation (King & Trent, 2012), if those distal futures are never realized, sacrifices (or sunken costs) may be a source of considerable distress. Finally, not all goal-relevant outcomes are in the control of the person pursuing a goal. Life events may render goals unavailable, no matter our efforts. Traumatic life experiences can not only simply disrupt the pursuit of valued goals but also draw the very value of those goals into question, destroying a person's sense of meaning (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Having a life dream rendered impossible by life events leaves a person open to the experience of regret: Facing the awful truth that one's considerable efforts have been wasted time (King & Hicks, 2007). Mentally extrapolating our lives into future means attaching ourselves to a potentially precarious fiction: When we set a goal, we place a bet on the future and invest our present lives in the pursuit of that future. That investment, in turn, defines a degree of vulnerability if a goal cannot be attained.

Disengaging from cherished goals can be challenging and people seem more likely to redouble their efforts in the face of failure, rather than moving on (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998). The capacity to disengage from unavailable goals predicts subsequent well-being (Wrosch, Amir, & Miller, 2011) and a well-regulated system would seem to be one that responds to failures by flexibly divesting from lost causes (Wrosch, Bauer, & Scheier, 2005) and investing in new goals that promise fulfillment. This optimal process speaks to remarkable human strengths, including the capacity to acknowledge failure and to courageously invest once again in the future, even when the risks of such investment have been borne out by experience. Contemplating this optimal process conjures images of the person, phoenix-like, rising up from the ashes of dashed life dreams to reinstate a sense of purpose.

Although such strengths are often (and justifiably) celebrated when they are demonstrated, we suggest that there may be value in attending to not only "the rising up" but "the ashes": That there may be value in digging into those dying embers to acknowledge and contemplate the hopes and dreams one once pursued. When life circumstances prevent the person from seeing their life goals to fruition, those

lost futures are not merely a source of regret. Even as they can be thought of as implying a crisis, experiences that disrupt goal pursuit may also be opportunities to develop. The stance that a person takes toward lost motivational pursuits, the people they wished to be but no longer can, can serve both as an indicator of psychological maturity and as a portent of the maturational process (King & Hicks, 2007). Placing unattainable goals in a developmental context provides a window to the processes by which traumatic experiences can spur personality development.

In this chapter, we explore the ways that goals, life dreams, or *possible selves* that are disrupted by life experiences might play a role in personality development. To begin, we first step away from the context of goals to review, briefly, the concepts of posttraumatic growth (PTG) and personality development (from a trait perspective). We suggest although both of these approaches capture something about how life experiences can influence development, they each fall short in terms of uncovering the process of that development. Then, we describe an alternative approach to personality development, ego development, that is well suited to revealing that process. We show how narrative features suggesting accommodation provide a means of tracking active personality development. Then, we return to the potential place of goals in personality development, considering specifically how accommodation is demonstrated in narrative descriptions of lost goals or lost possible selves. Finally, we draw links from this research on rather dramatic life changes to everyday life and the types of goal changes that are required, perhaps, of all adults as they consider and reconsider what they want to be when they grow up.

PTG and Personality Development

Can negative life experiences be sources of personality development? The potential for stressful experiences to lead to positive changes has long been recognized. This idea is perhaps best reflected in accumulated evidence for stress-related or PTG. However, research on this intuitively appealing idea has limits which are largely absent from research on personality development from the trait approach. These two approaches to the potential for life events to contribute to adult personality development, though different, offer complementary approaches to the process by which having experienced a negative or traumatic experience a person is, in fact, better for it. Here, we review each of these literatures, highlighting their strengths and limitations. We then review an alternative approach to personality development in adulthood that allows for an examination of the role of the active developer in his or her development through challenging life experiences.

Posttraumatic Growth

Tedeschi and McNally (2011) defined PTG as positive personal change as a result of struggling with a trauma. Research demonstrates that individuals who have

experienced a range of different negative life experiences report having grown as a result of these (e.g., Karanci & Acarturk, 2005; Klosky, et al., 2014; Lowe, Manove, & Rhodes, 2013; Morris, Shakespeare-Finsh, Reick, & Newberry, 2005). PTG is typically measured using self-report scales on which individuals rate the extent to which a traumatic events has led to positive changes in various domains. For instance, individuals might rate the extent to which a traumatic experience has led them to deeper relationships with others, a greater appreciation for each day, a better sense of life priorities, or a stronger sense of their own capacities to handle life difficulties (e.g., Park, Chmielewski & Blank, 2010; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Research using such self-reports suggests that PTG is not uncommon, with between 30 and 70% of survivors of various traumatic experiences reporting PTG (Joseph, Murphy & Regel, 2012). Reports of PTG following traumatic experiences are strongly related to psychological, social, and spiritual well-being (though not typically physical health; e.g., Joseph et al., 2012; Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Park et al., 1996, 2010; Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012).

Interestingly, PTG is not simply associated with a kind of Pollyannaish, naive thinking style. Self-reported PTG is related to appraisals of events as more severe, threatening, and stressful as well as heightened intrusive thoughts about the trauma (Helgeson et al., 2006). The relationship of intrusive thoughts on well-being is moderated by the perception of PTG: In a sample of younger adult cancer survivors, those who report high levels of PTG, intrusive thoughts were associated with *higher* well-being (Park et al., 2010). These results suggest that the subjective sense of PTG may transform even negative experiences into ones that support well-being. Thus, self-reported PTG captures quite well the subjective feeling that one has been changed for the better by a traumatic experience. Moreover, this subjective feeling is linked to subsequent adjustment in a way that suggests it is important to functioning.

Importantly, however, it is far from clear that individuals who report growing from traumatic life experiences have actually changed in an objective way. Conclusions about subjective reports of PTG may always be open to a variety of alternative explanations, including social desirability, positive illusions, and cognitive dissonance (Coyne & Tennen, 2010; Tennen & Affleck 2009; Bonanno, 2004). Certainly, *feeling* like one has grown through life events is a strong predictor of subsequent well-being. We might think of PTG as involving a healthy coping style (i.e., positive reappraisal or benefit-finding) but it is not clear that reports of PTG reflect the “actual” change (King & Trent, 2012). Claims about developing through life experiences require longitudinal research that tracks variables beyond the subjective feeling of having been changed for the better by experience. Researchers in personality psychology have begun to address this issue using the trait approach.

Adult Personality Development: The Trait Approach

When we think of the characteristics that make a person “mature,” we might think of personality descriptors like stable, responsible, or compassionate. Trait psycholo-

gists have examined how personality traits (typically focusing on the Big 5: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) change over the course of life, and this research largely lends empirical support to intuitive ideas about what it means to be mature. Meta-analyses of longitudinal studies show normative age-related changes in personality traits that look very much like maturation. Specifically, research shows that, particularly from adolescence through young adulthood, people are likely to become less neurotic, more conscientious, and more agreeable (e.g., Roberts, Walton, & Veichtbauer, 2006; Specht, Egloff, & Schmacke, 2011; Vaidya, Gray, Haig, Mroczek, & Watson, 2008). Such changes seem to indicate something like development, a movement toward a more “mature” (i.e., more emotionally regulated, more responsible, and more kind) level of personality functioning. The mechanisms of these changes (in keeping with their timing) have been suggested to be the additional demands and social roles that require young adults to cultivate conscientiousness and agreeableness (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). That these changes occur, at all, is notable. Traits might be the least likely aspects of a person to change through life, given that by definition traits are thought to represent enduring and stable behavioral tendencies (e.g., Allemand, Steiger, & Hill, 2013).

These trait changes are understood as loosely age related in a broad way and comparatively little research has examined whether *specific life experiences* are associated with personality development. A small but growing number of large longitudinal studies have allowed for an examination of the ways traits relate to life events over time. These studies identify two types of processes. First, they examine whether personality traits predict specific life events (a process called *selection*). Generally speaking they do, with studies showing, for instance, that extroverts are more likely to experience positive life events, while neuroticism is associated with experiencing more negative life events (Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993).

A second process, one that is more relevant to our purposes, refers to how events shape personality traits and predict trait change (a process called *socialization*). Some research supports the idea that experiences can influence later changes in personality. For example, the type of training college-aged students receive can predict personality changes over time (e.g., increases in conscientiousness; Lüdtke, Roberts, Trautwein, & Nagy, 2011). In addition, longitudinal research shows that success in the domains of career and romantic relationships can predict increases in extraversion and decreases in neuroticism over time (Scollon & Diener, 2006). More recently, one study showed that, compared to a control group, individuals who experienced military training failed to show the normative increase in agreeableness that was found in a control sample across 8 years (Jackson, Thoemmes, Jonkmann, Lüdtke, & Trautwein, 2012). Other research suggests that the experience of negative events predicts higher levels of neuroticism, and the experience of positive events predicts increases in extraversion and conscientiousness (Sutin, Costa, Wethington, & Eaton, 2010). Such patterns indicate that *negative* events, per se, might not be particularly likely to lead to personality development.

A strength of the trait approach is that it features the kind of longitudinal assessments required to make claims about “actual” change. Further, this research does not rely on subjective reports of change. Nevertheless, in comparison to research on

PTG, what is missing from the trait approach to development is a strong sense of the active developer and the process of change itself. That is, this approach does not seem to fully capture the importance of who the person is and his or her perceptions of experiences as playing an important role in the developmental trait change. A few studies do implicate the active developer and these perceptions. For example, in a study on a sample of the general population of Germany, individuals with higher life satisfaction showed more positive change in emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness during major life role transitions (Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2013). These results suggest that coming from a position of psychological strength can spur developmental changes during potentially difficult times.

In addition, one longitudinal study examined how subjective feelings about a stressful life event in the trajectory of trait change over time (Sutin et al., 2010). In this study, longitudinal trait measurements were buttressed with an interview in which participants were asked to describe a stressful life event. Appraisals of these events as involving “learning a lesson” were measured in the interviews. The results showed that appraising stressful events as providing lessons predicted trait change (including increases in extraversion and conscientiousness and lowered neuroticism) over time (Sutin et al., 2010). This research suggests that how people think about stressful experiences can influence whether an event is associated with subsequent indications of higher (or lower) levels of maturity.

Comparing PTG and research on personality development from the trait perspective reveals a bit of a disconnect. PTG would seem to do a very good job of capturing the person’s subjective feelings of change and some of PTG may be reflected in trait change. For instance, feeling that one has become more compassionate as a result of a traumatic experience might be reflected in higher levels of agreeableness. Learning to “not sweat the small stuff” might be reflected in decreases in neuroticism. Yet, other aspects of PTG may be irrelevant to traits, such as the sense that one has gained an appreciation of everyday life. Consider that a neurotic person might remain neurotic through challenging life experiences and an extravert might remain highly extraverted, but each of these individuals might change in a different way or on a different level: They might have come to experience themselves and the world in a way that is transformed by experience, qualitatively if not quantitatively. A person can show a great deal of stability at the trait level and yet feel that they have grown in ways that are missed by a trait approach. At the same time, there is no question that a person’s subjective report of “growing” requires less subjective verification. Moreover, neither PTG nor the trait approach to development allow for a sense of how development occurs, the underlying process of change itself. We turn next to a different perspective on personality development that addresses these missing pieces.

An Alternative Approach: Ego Development

Although the trait approach is the dominant approach in contemporary personality psychology, it is not the only way to understand the person. Jane Loevinger (1976)

used the term ego to refer to an individual's frame of reference in approaching the self and world. For Loevinger, the ego is "the striving to master, to integrate, and make sense of experience" (Loevinger, 1976, p. 59). The developmental level of the ego then would dictate what a person sees in the world and the sense the person makes of what he or she sees.

Ego development refers to the level of complexity with which one experiences oneself and the world (King & Hicks, 2007; Loevinger, 1976). At its lowest levels, the ego is dominated by impulses and thinking is simplistic. With development, the ego comes to see the world from an increasingly complex frame of reference, recognizing conflicts, the contextual nature of experience, and the relativity that characterizes many human decisions. High levels of ego development imply greater tolerance for ambivalence and a preoccupation with issues of identity and respect for the subjectivity of others (Pfaffenberger, Marko, & Combs, 2011).

Unlike PTG and traits, ego development is not proposed to be available to self-report. Rather, the complexity and sophistication of one's frame of reference is measured using the Sentence Completion Test (SCT; Hy & Loevinger, 1996). On this measure, participants are asked to complete sentence stems (e.g., "What gets me into trouble is...") and responses are scored by raters trained using standard guidelines. Low-level responses generally involve impulses, conventions, and rules. High-level responses include taking multiple perspectives, considering various possibilities, and conditional relationships. Although time-consuming, this measure has been shown to track changes in personality and cognitive complexity over time (e.g., Helson & Roberts, 1994).

Ego development (as measured by the SCT) relates to openness to experience increased compassion, intellectuality, tolerance (Helson & Roberts, 1994; Helson & Wink, 1987) as well as empathy and the capacity for interpersonal connectedness (Carlozzi, Gaa, & Liberman, 1983; Pals & John, 1998). Interestingly, ego development is *not* related to self-reports of personal growth through difficult experiences, and it is generally independent of psychological well-being (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). Ego development is not about feeling like one has grown. Rather, it appears to tap into a way of interpreting the world, about how one *is* rather than how one *feels* (King, 2011).

Ego development, though a rather unusual and somewhat difficult construct, is especially useful for tracking the process of personality development through difficult life experiences because Loevinger explicitly acknowledged that ego development *relies* on such experiences. Ego development is not normative age-related change. It has no such inevitability. Rather, Loevinger (1976) stated that only when the environment fails to meet the person's expectations can development occur. She described *pacers* as experiences that facilitate development by challenging a person to ever more sophisticated ways of experiencing the self and world. Loevinger (1976) conceived the ego as a buffer that determines how we experience the world around us. Experiences come through that buffer, perhaps beveling it in different ways, honing its relationship to the world and the self. This idea resonates very well with the notion that in adulthood personality development is driven by the need to accommodate life changes, as we now consider.

Process: Accommodation in Adulthood Drawing on Piaget's concepts of developmental processes, Block (1982) proposed that life experiences can play a role in adult personality development through assimilation and accommodation. As described by Piaget, assimilation involves using existing schemas to make sense out of the current environment. When these existing frames of reference are not up to the challenge of making sense of new experience, schemas are changed, revised, or invented. This is the process of accommodation. In adulthood, stressful or traumatic life experiences may call for accommodative change, revising one's sources of meaning, one's values, or philosophy of life.

Accommodation is the presumed mechanism underlying changes in ego development over time. Research has shown that experiencing a broad range of life events predicts ego development cross-sectionally and longitudinally (e.g., Helson, 1992; Helson & Roberts, 1994). This research suggests that the experience of difficult times (i.e., pacers) is associated with enhanced ego development. Studies linking difficult times to ego development, however, only assume accommodation has occurred in response to those life difficulties. Is there a way to measure the process of accommodation, making explicit the revising of meaning structures that is thought to precipitate these changes? One way researchers have sought to do this is by examining the stories people tell about difficult life experiences. These stories have been used as a window into the action of accommodation.

Narratives, Accommodative Processing, and Ego Development The life story approach to personality holds that the narrative we create about our lives provides a key source of identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The stories we create about life experiences are instantiations of meaning making and of how we have made sense of these important, sometimes crucial, life experiences. As the ego is proposed to be the author that makes sense of experience, King et al. (2000) proposed that stories of major life events might provide a way to examine the accommodative process itself. Research on narrative constructions of life transitions has examined this proposal.

For example, in one prospective study, parents of children with Down syndrome (DS) were asked to write a narrative account of finding out that they would be parenting a child with DS (King et al., 2000). Parents also completed measures of psychological well-being and the SCT as a measure of ego development. They were contacted 2 years later to complete the well-being and ego development measures a second time. The stories they provided were reliably coded for narrative features that tapped two dimensions, closure, and accommodation. We describe each of these dimensions and their correlates below.

Closure Closure included dimensions indicating narrative coherence including foreshadowing, positive affective tone, resolution, and happy endings. Excerpts of stories rated high in closure include the following (from King et al., 2000, p. 523).

... We knew that our daughter was going to get a very loving supportive family who would make sure she achieved everything possible for her.

I knew everything would be all right. He was first and foremost our baby boy and DS was one characteristic of Jamie. He is as much or more of a blessing to our family as any child could be.

I know my daughter is quite special. It's as if she's part of another race or from another planet. She's definitely wired differently. And I think those wires are hooked directly to God. She's the closest I've come to an angel on Earth.

Excerpts from stories low on closure include (from King et al., 2000, p. 519):

Images of adults with DS flooded my mind. They were not pretty images. I was afraid he would die from the surgery and more afraid that he wouldn't.

Finding out was devastating. I was depressed, didn't want him. When I told my mother, she fainted. My other child became so upset due to the circumstances that she vomited. It was simply devastating.

We were given an Exceptional Parents magazine. On the way home from the blood test, I found a picture of a crib with a lid on it, like a cage. I remember wondering, what do we have? What are we faced with? I also remember thinking that now we'll never be normal.

Results for closure were limited to concurrent measures. Specifically, those parents whose stories were highly coherent and conveyed a strong sense of closure were more likely to report higher concurrent well-being. No prospective relationships emerged, suggesting that it may be that those who are high on well-being tell more coherent stories about their experiences.

Accommodation Accommodation referred to features including how active the narrator was in the story, how much the person fully explored the experience, and the degree to which the person experienced a paradigmatic shift because of the event. These processes are, perhaps, less transparent than the coding for closure and so we share here an excerpt of the instructions for paradigmatic shift (King et al., 2000, p. 520):

...the new experience requires a revision of structures—an essential change in response to the environment. For our sample, this concept serves as an analogy for qualitative change in how the person sees the world and him or herself. Accommodative change means that the person has been forced to change, centrally and qualitatively, his or her views of the self and world.

To get a sense of the richness with which accommodative processing is conveyed in narratives, consider the following examples, each of which received a high score in the content analyses:

I was surprised how much I totally suppressed the information. Total denial for 3 weeks.... I was shocked at my own inability to deal with such an unexpected event. I cried a lot. The pain was so deep. I felt cheated—I could hardly function. I was so absorbed with my own fears. But I did regroup. I did grow. And I did learn to accept the situation. That opened the door for me to bond and love my child. But it took time. (King et al., 2000, p. 522)

I cried some and experienced waves of “unknown” embracing me.... I knew little about DS—it was an abstraction. Any handicap fell into the category of a childhood memory of seeing “waterheads,” as I was told or remember, out on a shopping trip getting into a bus. My daughter was flesh and blood and a good nurse, and that was the reality I remember dealing with. I thought very little about her future, but I knew I would bow to no predictions. Irrational thoughts came to me at times but did not consume much thinking time: “I must have DS too, it just hasn't been discovered yet” or “This child must be a consequence for wrong decisions in the past.” (King, 2001, p. 60)

It was long enough ago that the word was Mongoloid. I was alone, and it was late at night when the doctor told me. Of course, my mind clicked in to an offensive mode of denial—bad dream, etc. I chose not to call my husband.... Instead—I laugh at this now because I was 33—I called my parents. I think I wanted them to fix things—they had been pretty good at that in the past.... Then I realized that I was mourning as if my child had died, yet I still had a nice fat baby in the nursery. I rang for him to be brought to me expecting him to be a monster instead of the cute thing I saw in the delivery room. I tore all of his clothes off of him and just looked at him. He was beautiful. The doctor recommended immediately institutionalizing him and said it would be best if I never saw my son.... It took a day of being a totally hysterical mother before they would let me see or hold my son. The moment I held him, I knew he would stay with me. (King 2001, p. 65)

Clearly, narratives high in accommodative processing were highly vivid and often included (as the examples above show) a tendency to comment on one's own coping processes. Finally, they were also likely to show an intriguing tendency to focus on the physical reality of the child (King & Hicks, 2007). Importantly, although narratives including accommodative processing were, on average, longer than those low in this quality, they were not more negative or more traumatic.

Was accommodative narrative processing related to well-being and ego development? The results showed that this aspect of the narratives was generally unrelated to measures of well-being. However, accommodative processing was related to reports of concurrent stress-related growth. Moreover, accommodative processing prospectively predicted self-reported stress-related growth over 2 years (King et al., 2000). Interestingly, self-reported growth through the experience of parenting a child with DS was highest at 2 years for those whose stories were characterized by high levels of both accommodation and closure. This pattern suggests that the subjective sense of personal growth may require not only working through a potentially traumatic event but also finding a sense of positive resolution around that event.

Narrative accommodation was also associated with ego development concurrently. Furthermore, accommodative processing predicted gains in ego development over 2 years, particularly for parents who had "room to grow": Accommodation that is actively grappling with experience, letting go of previous meaning structures, and exploring new ones, at time 1 was especially associated with ego development among parents who were relatively lower on ego development at that time (King et al., 2000). These results suggest, first, that accommodative processing appears to be a characteristic of the mature ego. Second, they suggest that actively accommodating difficult experiences can facilitate ego development over time.

Similar patterns of results for closure and accommodation have been found in other samples (e.g., Lilgendahl, Helson, & John, 2013; Pals, 2006): Closure generally is associated with subjective well-being while accommodation is associated with ego development. And these two outcomes appear to be independent of each other. Such patterns have led to the suggestion that there are two narrative pathways that are associated with two different aspects of maturity (King, 2001; King & Hicks, 2007; Pals, 2006). Importantly, these two pathways are orthogonal. Accommodating a life transition does not imply a lack of closure. Individuals who fully explore potentially traumatic life experiences are not, by necessity, "sadder but wiser."

In sum, narratives of important life experiences are a context in which accommodative processing can be measured and such processing is associated with ego development both concurrently and prospectively. Might narratives about goals serve as a similar venue to capture accommodation and track its association with personality development? We address this question next.

Narrating the Future: Possible Selves and Ego Development

Examining accommodation in the context of goals requires that we consider something beyond a straightforward “to-do list.” The construct of possible selves is especially useful in this regard. Possible selves are personalized representations of goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). They involve images of the self in the future in a host of various roles. Possible selves link goals to broader identity concerns (Oyserman & James, 2011). Features of possible selves (e.g., their content and salience in a person’s mental life) have been shown to predict important outcomes such as effort and performance in the academic domain (e.g., Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Possible selves provide a richer context in which to examine the process of accommodation. Because possible selves refer to the host of possible people a person may consider becoming, they allow for an examination of not only who one wishes to be, but who one *used to* wish to be, *the lost possible self*.

King and Raspin (2004, p. 607) defined lost possible future selves as representations of the self in the future, which might have once held the promise of positive affect, but which are no longer a part of a person’s life. These possible selves represent the ashes referred to previously: The remnants of who one wished to be in another time, “what might have been” if circumstances had been different (King & Hicks, 2007).

Lost possible selves would seem to be an excellent context in which to measure the processes of personality development through life-changing events. Given the difficulty of letting go of previously cherished goals and the likelihood that these goals might be threatening sources of regret, the degree to which a person is able to elaborate on these goals would seem to be a good indicator of psychological complexity (or ego development). We might expect the developed ego to look upon these goals as legitimately good ones, even if they are no longer available to the self. Although a person’s current best possible self is a likely source of well-being, we might expect that the capacity to elaborate on a lost possible self would be especially strongly related to ego development, concurrently and over time.

In order to examine these predictions, two samples of community adults who had experienced such events were recruited. These included women who had experienced divorce after more than 20 years of marriage (King & Raspin, 2004) and gay men and lesbian women (King & Smith, 2004). Although these samples clearly differ in many ways, they each can be seen as having once likely espoused a very different future than the one they were currently pursuing. While the divorced

women almost assuredly had imagined their lives in the future with their ex-husbands during their long marriages, the gay and lesbian sample provided a somewhat different possibility. Although most of these participants had imagined that they would “grow up” to be straight (heterosexual), some did not. Nevertheless all of these participants certainly lived in a context in which a different path, a “straight possible self” was the norm.

Each sample was asked to write narrative descriptions of two possible selves and complete measures of psychological well-being and ego development. As with the parents of children with DS, they completed the well-being and ego development measures again, 2 years later.

The first possible self-narrative collected from these samples was their current best possible self. Instructions were:

We would like you to consider the life you imagine for yourself currently, and in the future. What sorts of things do you hope for and dream about? Imagine that your life has gone as well as it possibly could have. You have worked hard and achieved your goals. Think of this as your “best possible life” or your “happily ever after.”

The second narrative was their lost (or for the gay participants “straight”) possible self. The instructions for the lost possible selves were variations on the following:

We would like you to consider your future as you imagined it before [the life changing event]. Try to remember how you imagined your future to be. What sorts of things did you hope for and dream about for your life? Think of this as your “best possible life” or your happily ever after, if you had not experienced [the event].

Two characteristics of these possible selves were examined, their salience and their level of elaboration. Salience was measured using self-report. Immediately after writing each narrative, participants made rating of the salience of that possible self in their current mental life (e.g., “How easy was it for you to bring this description to mind? How vivid was the image for you?”). Elaboration measures were provided by content analyses. A team of coders reliably coded the narratives for their levels of detail, vividness, and richness. The level of elaboration of the lost possible self was the key measure of accommodation.

To appreciate the difference between high and low elaboration, consider the following examples. First, the following is a relatively elaborate lost possible self provided by a woman who experienced divorce after over 20 years of marriage:

I think I was raised to be a wife and mother. I thought if I followed all the “rules,” we would live happily ever after.... Living in a small town in a modest home, being a housewife in retirement years—it was sort of like the television show *Mayberry RFD*. I wanted to be “Aunt Bea,” but with a contented husband who let me be myself—like “Andy.” Life would be simple, easy and sweet. (King, 2001, p. 65)

In contrast, a low-elaboration lost possible self from a divorced women is:

I am a realist and never expect anything from life. (King & Raspin, 2004, p. 616)

Similarly, an example of a highly elaborate straight possible self from a gay man:

As I was growing up, I envisioned my life to be like the lives of those I admired. Those lives were something to aspire to. I grew up in a small town.... My parents and their friends were

involved in volunteer work, owned businesses, and were active in community politics. My dream was to be a veterinarian. I imagined that I was married (as that is what is supposed to happen). I dreamed that my wife would be the manager of the pet store we both owned.... We would be active in the community. Small towns can be so much fun.... I would be well-known as someone who is a good person and down to earth.... The business would be successful and eventually passed down to our children. (King, 2001, p. 63)

Finally, an example of a straight possible self rated low on elaboration, from a gay man:

As I am considered a handsome man, I imagine I would probably have a beautiful blonde wife to contrast to my own dark features. I probably would have concentrated more on education and not so much on partying. Therefore I'd have an executive type position, tidy house in the suburbs, and two kids. (King & Smith, 2004, p. 981)

How did current and lost possible selves relate to well-being and ego development? Although the results for each sample differed in some ways (see King & Raspin, 2004 and King & Smith, 2004, for the divorced women and gay samples, respectively), similar patterns emerged across these different groups. These patterns resonate with those identified for narratives more generally. That is, there were clear differences in the predictors of well-being and predictors of ego development. First, well-being was most strongly associated with the salience ratings for the possible selves. Specifically, endorsing a highly salient current best possible self was strongly related to concurrent well-being. In contrast, the salience of the lost (or straight) possible self was negatively related to well-being and positively related to regret. Thinking about an image of the self in a previously desired but unavailable future was associated with distress. In addition, in both samples, ego development was associated with elaborating on the lost (or straight) possible self. As predicted, the capacity to elaborate on "what might have been" predicted ego development concurrently and prospectively.

Closing Thoughts: Of Phoenixes and Their Ashes

The studies reviewed here were conducted in the hopes of uncovering a place for lost possible selves in personality development. The samples were chosen specifically because they had experienced potentially life-changing events, events that challenged identity and meaning and required a revision of the life story. The choice of ego development as the outcome of interest was, of course, no accident. This aspect of maturity was thought to be ideal for studying individuals who, because of life experience, might endorse lower levels of well-being but might, nevertheless, provide an opportunity to show that negative experiences can play a role in maturity (King & Hicks, 2007). What are the implications of these studies on these potentially exceptional samples for everyday life and everyday development?

Certainly, to the extent that goals are a common aspect of everyday life, all adults are likely to weather the experience of failure and disappointment. Although it may be tempting to simply avoid contemplating these losses, an examination of who we

wanted to be may have its benefits: It may not be a pathway to ever increasing happiness but it might be an important step toward wisdom and perhaps acceptance of life-changing events (see Chap. 21, this volume).

These studies have another fascinating lesson for adulthood more generally. As we have noted throughout this chapter, the outcomes of well-being and ego development were independent of each other and were predicted by distinct narrative features. This independence suggests an important lesson about the “trade-offs” of adulthood. Specifically, they suggest that no trade-off is necessary. Happiness and complexity, these two sides of maturity, were never negatively correlated. In the long run, joy is not compromised by wisdom.

Among the participants in these studies there were certainly phoenixes who rose above the ashes of their previous hopes and dreams to construct amazing future selves toward which to strive. Some of these beautiful birds left the ashes of their previous lives behind with nary a thought. Others rose from those ashes, to be sure, but, prior to taking flight, they paused to allow themselves to be changed by their losses. Their eventual flight was no less joyful but perhaps it was made a bit richer by their willingness to contemplate what might have been, even as they perched to soar again toward who they hoped to become.

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