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The role of narrative in personality psychology today

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Over the past 25 years, narrative theories and methods have helped to revitalize the discipline of personality psychology by providing new tools and concepts for discerning the inner patterning and meaning of human lives and by helping to recontextualize personality studies in terms of culture, gender, class, ethnicity, and the social ecology of everyday life. This article (a) briefly traces recent historical developments in personality psychology as they relate to the increasing influence of narrative approaches; (b) describes a three-tiered conceptual framework for understanding personality in terms of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and life stories; and (c) illustrates one important research program on life stories in personality — studies of the redemptive self. (*Personality, Traits, Life Stories, The Redemptive Self*)

My own scholarly work on the narrative study of lives sits at the interface of personality psychology, life-span developmental studies, cultural psychology, and cognitive science. I consider the life story to be an internalized and evolving cognitive structure or script that provides an individual's life with some degree of meaning and purpose while often mirroring the dominant and/or the subversive cultural narratives within which the individual's life is complexly situated (McAdams, 2006a). In that I typically endeavor to identify those psycho-literary themes that distinguish one life story from the next and to link those different themes to other features of individual variation in human lives, my research looks and feels a lot like personality psychology — that branch of psychology that focuses on broad individual differences in human behavior and experience. Indeed, I consider personality psychology my home discipline, to the extent I have a home, and I have a much deeper understanding of personality psychology as a discipline than I do of any other discipline (McAdams, 2006b). In this paper, therefore, I have chosen to focus mainly on personality psychology and to consider how the rise of narrative studies over the past 25 years or so has influenced what personality psychologists do and how they think about their intellectual mission.

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What is personality psychology? And what was it 25 years ago?

Personality psychology is the scientific study of the whole person. Since the field's inception in the 1930s, personality psychologists have sought to provide scientific accounts of psychological individuality. As such, their research typically focuses on those factors, both within the person and in the person's environment, that are hypothesized to account for why one person thinks, feels, strives, and acts differently from another. Personality psychologists develop and validate ways of measuring individual differences, necessitating a quantitative and focused inquiry into single dimensions of human variation within large samples of individuals — what Gordon Allport called the *nomothetic* approach to personality research. At the same time, personality psychologists aim to put the many different conceptualizations and findings about many different dimensions of human variation together into illuminating personological portraits of the individual case — what Allport called the *idiographic* approach. How to reconcile the different demands of analytic, quantitative, nomothetic studies on the one hand and synthetic, qualitative, idiographic inquiries on the other has been a central conundrum for personality psychology since the very beginning.

Personality psychology enjoyed decades of growth and favor until the late 1960s, when a series of critiques undermined the field's confidence. The most important critique came from Walter Mischel, who argued persuasively that broad individual differences in personality *traits* fail to account for the lion's share of the variance in human behavior, thought, and feeling. Adopting neo-behaviorist and social-learning principles of the day, Mischel asserted that behavior is mainly a function of situational variation and environmental contingencies. People do what their immediate situations tell them to do rather than what their long-standing internal traits might prompt them to do. Along with a number of other important trends in the field, Mischel's critique cast serious doubt on the viability of the concept of a personality trait, a bedrock concept for personality studies. The critique seemed to generalize to the entire field of personality psychology, calling into question any theory that imagined human beings as organized, self-determining individuals who showed some consistency in their behavior and thought from one situation to the next and over time. In the minds of many researchers in the 1970s and early 1980s, if there were no traits, there could be no personality.

If one looks back to what personality psychology was 25 years ago, then, one sees a field in disarray. In the wake of the situationist critique, many psychologists wondered if there was any need at all for the very idea of personality. Since the early 1980s, however, personality psychology has made a remarkable comeback, and a significant portion of that recovery story might be entitled, "The Revenge of the Trait." An avalanche of nomothetic research conducted in the past two decades strongly supports six conclusions regarding personality traits: (a) Individual differences in self-report traits are significantly associated with trait-consistent behavioral trends when behavior is aggregated across situations; (b) traits are powerful predictors of important life outcomes, like mental health, marital satisfaction, job success, and even longevity; (c) individual differences in traits show substantial longitudinal consistency, especially in the adult years; (d) traits appear to be highly heritable, with at least half of the variance

in trait scores accounted for by genetic differences between people; (e) traits appear to be complexly linked to specific brain processes (e.g., the amygdala, prefrontal cortex) and the activity of certain neurotransmitters (e.g., dopamine); and (f) most trait terms can be classified in terms of five basic trait clusters, often called the Big Five — extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience.

The comeback of the trait concept has helped to revitalize personality psychology over the past 25 years. Today the field offers strong theories and even stronger data to describe and explain important variations in psychological individuality. So where does narrative fit in all of this?

The influence of narrative

Freud wrote about dream narratives; Jung explored universal life myths; Adler examined narrative accounts of earliest memories; Murray identified recurrent themes in TAT stories and autobiographical accounts. But none of these classic personality theorists from the first half of the 20th century explicitly imagined human beings as storytellers and human lives as stories to be told. The first *narrative* theories of personality emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during that same period when the field of personality psychology was struggling with the situationist critique. Tomkins (1979) proposed a *script theory* of personality that imagined the developing individual as something of a playwright who organizes emotional life in terms of salient scenes and recurrent scripts. In Tomkins' view, the most important individual differences in psychological life had little to do with basic traits or needs but instead referred to the particular kinds of affect-laden scenes and rule-generating scripts that individuals construct from their own experiences as they move through life. In a somewhat similar vein, I formulated a *life-story model of identity*, contending that people begin, in late adolescence and young adulthood, to construe their lives as evolving stories that integrate the reconstructed past and the imagined future in order to provide life with some semblance of unity and purpose (McAdams, 1985). The most important individual differences between people are thematic differences in the stories that comprise their narrative identities, I argued, apparent in the story's settings, plots, characters, scenes, images, and themes. For both Tomkins and my own model, then, coherence and consistency in human personality, to the extent they might be found anywhere, were to be found in the kinds of scripts and stories — both conscious and unconscious — that people construct about their lives.

Both Tomkins and I emphasized the *integrative* power of personal narrative — how it is that stories put things together for the person, how they lend coherence to a life by organizing its many discordant features into the synchronic and diachronic structures of character and plot. In the context of personality psychology's situationist critique, life stories served as an alternative to traits in the effort to show that people's behavior and experience are guided at least as much by internal factors as they are by the vagaries of external situations. If the organizing forces for human lives were not to be found in traits, then perhaps they reside in the internalized stories people live by.

As research advances of the 1980s and early 90s re-established traits as the dominant constructs in personality psychology, however, narrative approaches began to assume new roles in the field. Like traits, life narratives speak to the organization and structure of lives, but unlike traits, narrative approaches to personality explicitly address issues of *context*. Strongly influenced by social constructionist perspectives on the self, leading theorists and researchers such as Hubert Hermans, Gary Gregg, Ruthellen Josselson, Michael Pratt, Bertram Cohler, and Avril Thorne developed narrative approaches to personality that placed life-story construction more explicitly in the contexts of everyday talk and cultural discourses, that emphasized the ways in which life stories make for multiple and contextualized selves even as they serve to integrate lives in time, and that highlighted the roles of gender, class, race, and social positioning in the construction and the performance of life stories. If narrative theories in the 1980s aimed, as did trait approaches, to reveal the inner coherence of lives in sharp response to the situationist critique, by the year 2000 they had managed to appropriate (and improve upon) some of the main themes in the old situationist position — namely, the emphasis on local meanings, contingent performance, and the role of historical and cultural contexts in the expression and development of personality.

The ways in which narrative theories and methods have helped to recontextualize personality psychology in recent years are evident in many different studies and research programs. For example, researchers have shown how particular traits and needs are expressed through particular kinds of life stories, and how traits may combine with narratives to predict psychological well-being and other important life outcomes. Moving well beyond traits, researchers have examined how particular values and moral orientations are reflected in and shaped by life narratives, family stories, and broader community and societal myths. Narrative approaches have been extensively employed in the study of difficult life events and major life decisions, revealing how people make sense of adversity and change and how that sense-making influences the development of personality. Some researchers have focused on the internal process of life-story construction: What forms of autobiographical reasoning do people employ in creating a life story? Are different forms of reasoning related to different levels of psychological maturity and well-being? Other researchers have examined the public performance of life-narrative: How are life-narrative accounts shaped to fit social contexts? As contexts change over time, how do people's narrative understandings of themselves also change?

While narrative approaches have enriched nomothetic research in personality psychology as evidenced in the studies above, the turn toward narrative has also revitalized personality psychology's commitment to idiographic research. With their emphasis on exploring rich, qualitative data about individual lives, narrative methods have given researchers new tools for examining the particularities of the single case. Narrative theories of personality have also begun to supplement the traditional psychoanalytic theories as frameworks of choice for psychobiography and for the intensive examination of individual human lives. It may be through narrative approaches that personality psychology will eventually make significant headway in reconciling its historical divide between nomothetic and idiographical ways of understanding persons.

Three levels of personality

Since the 1930s, personality psychologists have searched for an integrative conceptual framework to organize the many strands of nomothetic research and to guide the idiographic study of the single life. For reasons pertaining to (the lack of) conceptual specificity and empirical validity, the grand personality theories developed in the first half of the 20th century — from Freud to George Kelly — were never able to do the trick. In the 1950s and 60s, most personality psychologists hunkered down to do research on their favorite personality construct, forswearing broad theory for very circumscribed conceptual schemes. During the dark years of the situationist critique, most personality psychologists turned their attention away from theory altogether in order to defend or attack the viability of the trait concept. When the dust settled in the 1980s, the newly energized trait enthusiasts developed comprehensive taxonomies of personality traits, such as the Big Five. But trait taxonomies leave too much out of the picture of what personality psychologists actually do in their research, and they fail to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the whole person in biographical, social, and historical context. In recent years, a new integrative framework has emerged in personality psychology, and it draws a good deal of its inspiration from narrative studies (McAdams, 2006b; Singer, 2005). The new model views personality in terms of three different levels, each of which provides its own characteristic discourse for describing and explaining psychological individuality.

Level 1 is the domain of *dispositional traits*. Like those subsumed within the Big Five taxonomy, dispositional traits refer to those broad, linear, bipolar, comparative, and decontextualized differences between people that go by such names as extraversion, depressiveness, friendliness, orderliness, playfulness, pugnacity, the tendency to seek out adventure, the tendency to feel vulnerable, and so on. Typically assessed via self-report questionnaires and peer ratings, dispositional traits speak to the broad contours of human individuality — what a particular person is *generally* like, how he or she *usually* acts in many different situations, how other people *typically* see the person. Because they are (by definition and necessity) broad and decontextualized constructs, traits are not well designed to address issues of specificity, process, context, and change in personality. At best, they provide a *psychology of the stranger* — a sketch of those broad attributions one might make upon a first meeting of a person.

At Level 2 of personality, *characteristic adaptations* fill in many of the details of psychological individuality. Characteristic adaptations are more particularized aspects of personality that are contextualized in time, place, or social role. Encompassing motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental concerns, they include characteristic motives, goals, strivings, interests, attitudes, values, coping skills, defense mechanisms, relational styles, social schemata, stage-specific concerns, and domain-specific patterns of response. Characteristic adaptations speak to what people want or do not want and how they go about getting what they want or avoiding what they do not want in particular situations, during particular times in their lives, and/or with respect to particular social roles they assume. If dispositional traits provide a sketch of what a person is generally like, characteristic adaptations address the particularities of everyday life: How a person

tends to act in particular situations; how a person deals with particular kinds of stresses; what a person is most concerned about at this particular time in his or her life.

Neither dispositional traits nor characteristic adaptations, however, speak to the problem of meaning in human lives. How do people make sense of their own lives in full? This is where narrative enters the picture. At Level 3 of personality, *integrative life stories* are those internalized and evolving self-narratives that people construct to make sense of their lives in time. Strongly shaped by culture, class, gender, and other contextual factors, life narratives are *psychosocial constructions* of the self — they are co-authored by persons and the social worlds wherein their lives make sense. Culture provides people with a menu of narrative forms and contents from which the person selectively draws in an effort to line up lived experience with the kinds of stories available to organize and express it. Indeed, the story menu goes so far as to shape lived experience itself: We live in and through our stories. A person's life story may contain many smaller stories, told from different points of view. Different internalized accounts may conflict with each other as they reflect the multiplicity, flux, and indeterminacy of an individual person's life as played out in a complex social world. Yet even partial and self-contradictory stories provide life with some degree of meaning and purpose. People carry their stories around with them, in the same sense that they carry around their traits. But more so than traits, stories are made and remade, performed and edited, instantiated, contoured, and lived out in the social ecology of everyday life and with respect to the norms of narrative content, structure, and expression that prevail in a given culture.

In sum, a full accounting of psychological individuality must draw creatively upon the very different discourses of traits, adaptations, and life stories to spell out what a person is generally like, how he or she adapts to the many different demands of social life, and what the person believes his or her life means as a psychosocially constructed narrative evolving over time.

One particular kind of life narrative: The redemptive self

A growing body of research suggests that people in many different societies and different language traditions tend to construe dispositional tendencies in terms roughly akin to the Big Five groupings of extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness. But nothing like a comprehensive taxonomy of forms exists at Levels 2 and 3 of personality. Given the importance of culture, furthermore, in setting the parameters and providing the content possibilities of life-story construction, it seems unlikely that anything resembling a canonical anthology of idealized life-story types would ever prove especially illuminating. Indeed, some scholars object to any effort to find similar types and themes among different narratives, suggesting that each life story account is unique and uniquely situated in a complex and shifting matrix of teller, text, and context. Others argue, however, that common patterns can nonetheless be discerned for certain kinds of persons under certain kinds of conditions. This latter argument underlies my own research program examining the vicissitudes of one particular kind of life-story form, what I call *the redemptive self* (McAdams, 2006a).

In a series of intensive nomothetic and idiographic studies we have conducted over the past 15 years, my students and I have consistently found that midlife American adults who score especially high on well-validated measures of *generativity* — Erik Erikson's notion of committing oneself to the well-being of future generations — tend to see their own lives as narratives of redemption. Compared to their less generative American counterparts, these caring and productive midlife adults — men and women who are typically deeply invested in their own family and work lives and who tend to be very involved in community, civic, and/or religious institutions — tend to construct life stories that feature redemption sequences, which we define as scenes wherein 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 stories in which the protagonist (a) enjoys a special advantage early in life; (b) expresses sensitivity to the suffering of others or societal injustices 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.

Our research suggests that the redemptive self is a life-story prototype that serves well the generative efforts of many midlife American adults, both black and white, male and female. Their redemptive narratives suggest that these especially productive and caring men and women seek to give back to society in gratitude for the early blessings their stories tell them they have obtained. In everyday 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 is likely to set forth.

But the redemptive self also says as much about American culture and tradition as it does about the highly generative American adults who tend to tell this kind of story about their lives. I argue that 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 17th-century Puritans, Benjamin Franklin's 18th-century autobiography, slave narratives and Horatio Alger stories from the 19th century, and the literatures of self-help and American entrepreneurship in the 20th century (McAdams, 2006a). From the Puritans to 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 to 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 American exceptionalism into the many contemporary narratives of success, recovery, development, and so on. It is as

if especially generative American adults are, for better and for worse, the most ardent narrators of a general life story format as American as apple pie and the Super Bowl.

Conclusion

Over the past 25 years, narrative studies have impacted personality psychology in two very positive ways. First, narrative theories suggested new foci for personality psychologists' efforts to find coherence and consistency in individual human lives. In addition to personality traits, people's internalized and evolving life stories speak to the ways in which people's lives are more than the mere accumulation of situational influences. Life stories guide behavior and decision making, and they speak to how people create meaning in their lives. Second, narrative approaches have helped to re-contextualize personality psychology. Unlike the dominant trait discourses in the field today, narrative approaches have turned personality psychologists in the direction of the particularities in the individual life and have opened up new ways to consider the influences of gender, ethnicity, class, and culture in the development of personality. A growing number of psychologists today view personality as a patterning of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and integrative life stories set in culture and shaped by human nature. Often told by especially caring and productive midlife adults, the redemptive self is one particular life-narrative form that enjoys considerable currency in contemporary American life. Inspired by the turn toward narrative in many other fields, personality psychologists should continue to explore the different ways in which people make sense of their lives through narratives, the different kinds of stories that they tell, and the significance of these ways and these stories for psychological, social, and cultural life.

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