TARGET ARTICLE

Personality, Modernity, and the Storied Self:
A Contemporary Framework for Studying Persons

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As the scientific study of the individual person, personality psychology historically has struggled to provide the kind of broad conceptual framework capable of orienting theory and research around human individuality in cultural context. This article presents a new integrative framework for studying persons that brings together recent advances in the field of personality with the emerging social science emphasis on the narrative study of lives, while situating personality inquiry within the cultural context of contemporary modernity and the unique problems of the modern self. The framework builds on a clear distinction between the "I" and the "Me" features of personality in the modern world and the delineation of three relatively independent levels on which modern persons may be described. In personality, the I may be viewed as the process of "selfing," of narrating experience to create a modern self, whereas the Me may be viewed as the self that the I constructs. Personality traits, like those included within the Big Five taxonomy, reside at Level I of personality description and provide a general, comparative, and nonconditional dispositional signature for the person. Level II subsumes tasks, goals, projects, tactics, defenses, values, and other developmental, motivational, and/or strategic concerns that contextualize a person's life in time, place, and role. Speaking directly to the modern problem of reflexively creating a unified and purposeful configuration of the Me, life stories reside at the third level of personality, as internalized integrative narrations of the personal past, present, and future. It is mainly through the psychosocial construction of life stories that modern adults create identity in the Me. Life stories may be examined in terms of their structure and content, function, development, individual differences, and relation to mental health and psychosocial adaptation.

Ever since Allport (1937) conceived of personality psychology as the scientific study of the individual person, personality psychologists have struggled to find a conceptual framework that might integrate what they know about individual persons and guide their explorations of the unknown. In the beginning, they especially looked to Freud (1916/1961), Jung (1933), Adler (1927), Lewin (1935), Murray (1938), Rogers (1951), Kelly (1955), and other early writers who offered comprehensive theories of personality. The grand theories developed in the first half of this century continue to inspire some research and to help some students and professionals organize their understanding of personality today (Maddi, 1980; McAdams, 1994b; Monte, 1995). But these theories also have been repeatedly criticized for being too general and ambiguous, for being based on dubious or dated assumptions about human nature, and for being out of touch with what personality researchers, in the laboratory and in the field, actually study and do (M. Leary, 1994; Liebert & Spiegler, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1996). What many personality researchers actually do is to focus on particular constructs (e.g., the need for achievement, self-monitoring) or questions (e.g., What are the predictors of psychological well-being? Is altruistic behavior a function of traits or situations?) about human individuality and social behavior, but leaving unsketched or sketchy the big picture of how their constructs, their questions, and their findings fit into a general framework for understanding individual persons.
If we do not subscribe fully to one of the traditional comprehensive theories of personality, how can we begin to formulate and elaborate the big picture? Some personality psychologists have proposed general conceptual frameworks and models that, although less ambitious than grand theories per se, seek to organize the central constructs, questions, and findings one might employ to understand the individual person and predict what the person will do. For example, McClelland (1951) proposed that an adequate understanding of personality requires collecting data on three different kinds of personality constructs—stylistic traits, cognitive schemata, and dynamic motives. Mischel (1973, 1977) rejected most dispositional constructs like traits and motives and opted instead to situate the person explicitly within his or her self-defining local environments, as a planful social information-processing moving from one situation to the next. According to Mischel, persons should be understood in terms of domain-specific cognitive encoding strategies, self-regulatory systems and plans, and other "cognitive social-learning person variables" (1973, p. 252) that specify how a person makes sense of and interacts within a particular setting.

The most celebrated general framework for personality proposed in the last 15 years is the five-factor model of personality traits, typically called the "Big Five" (Goldberg, 1981; John, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Advocates of the Big Five taxonomy have synthesized the results of many factor-analytic studies to produce a compelling framework for organizing information on persons in terms of five broad trait categories: extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience. Although many now look to the Big Five as the long-awaited comprehensive framework for studying the person (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1996), others are less sanguine about the inherent ability of any trait-based scheme, no matter how comprehensive, to account for human individuality (Block, 1995; Cantor, 1990; McAdams, 1992, 1995; Pervin, 1994). Like Mischel's critique in the 1970s, the emergence of the Big Five in the 1980s marks a significant development in the field of personality psychology. But as an integrative framework for studying persons, the Big Five may not be comprehensive enough, for it makes the whole of personality to be synonymous with traits. Furthermore, the Big Five may not capture how contemporary adults living in modern and postmodern (Gergen, 1992) societies understand their own individuality. As we move into the next century, personality psychology requires a more comprehensive and contemporary framework to meet the challenge Allport set forth.

The purpose of this article is to outline a new conceptual framework for studying persons that builds on the positive developments the field of personality has witnessed since the time of Allport, while explicitly situating the individual person within the particular sociohistorical setting that deeply contextualizes that person's life. The subject of most personality psychologists' inquiries is the contemporary Western adult, living in a modern industrial or postindustrial society. One cannot understand the modern adult, male or female, unless one grasps the unique problems and opportunities for the human life course posed by modernity (Giddens, 1991; C. Taylor, 1989). By ignoring the macrocontext of modernity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the grand theories of personality have assumed too much about the general and said too little about the particular. They have tended to make too many unsubstantiated universalistic claims about all people living in all societies, but offer too few well-documented propositions concerning how people understand their own particular lives in modern societies. This is not to reject the possibility that there exist universal, cross-cultural truths about human personality, such as those that may be couched in terms of human evolution and the structure of the brain (D. M. Buss, 1991; R. Wright, 1994). But much of what is required to describe and understand the individual person is grounded in the person's culture and in the sociohistorical setting within which the person's life makes sense. Meeting Allport's challenge to develop a psychology of the individual requires the development of integrative frameworks for understanding individual persons as they exist in history and in culture. The current article, then, focuses on persons as they live in and through modern societies, faced with the unique problems and possibilities of modernity, including the problem of constructing the modern self.

Conceptual and Historical Background

Modernity and Postmodernity

Modernity refers most generally to the economic, political, and cultural systems spawned in the 19th and 20th centuries by the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of capitalism and the proliferation of markets and trade, the increasing domination of science and technology, and the rising power of nationalist states, especially democracies, beginning in Western Europe and America and eventually spreading to parts of Asia (e.g., Japan) as well. Although there remain substantial cultural differences among those societies impacted by modernity, modern societies still tend to share certain features and outlooks. For example, modernity is often
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perceived as encouraging a positivistic, technocratic, and rationalistic outlook on the world (Gergen, 1992). Furthermore, modernity is usually associated with a growing skepticism toward religion and other traditional sources of authority (e.g., the monarchy) and the spreading belief that progress and human betterment reside in the advances of science, technology, and economic and political development (Harvey, 1990). Among other things, modernity celebrates reason, objectivity, rational discourse, and developmental progress in accord with scientific laws and other consensually validated systems of knowledge and belief.

In the realm of psychology, it would appear that modernity ushered in a new quality of consciousness about the individual self. In his historical survey of the concept of identity, Baumeister (1986) concluded that it was sometime around the year 1800 when a significant number of Westerners began to write of problems they were encountering in experiencing a sense of continuous and individuated selfhood. For the past 200 years or so, Westerners have expressed repeated doubts about the extent to which they experience themselves as (a) essentially the same person from one situation to the next and over time and (b) a unique and integrated person who is consistently different from, as well as related to, other unique persons in the environment. It is with the rise of modernity in the West that an increasing number of people, beginning with the elites and spreading to the expanding professional and working classes, have come to find both challenging and problematic the experience of individual selfhood.

To understand the particular problems and challenges in selfhood posed by modernity, one needs to comprehend the unique qualities of the modern self. At least six qualities may be discerned.

1. In modernity, the self is viewed as a reflexive project that the individual "works on." In the modern view, selves are not given or conferred, but rather they are made. One's very identity becomes a product or project that is fashioned and sculpted, not unlike a work of art or a technological artifact (Giddens, 1991). Like the artist or the technician, modern men and women are ultimately responsible for the selves they make. To use James's (1892/1963) felicitous distinction, the "I" reflexively creates a modern "Me," for which the I must assume authorship and responsibility.

2. The individual works on the self in everyday social life. C. Taylor (1989) saw "the affirmation of the ordinary life" (p. 209) to be a hallmark of the modern self. One need not be a king or philosopher to possess a unique self or to be involved in a self-defining project of significant proportions. One need not have a special relationship with God or some other external authority who legitimates the self. Instead, in the 19th century, legitimacy could reside in common bourgeois life, with its emphasis on moral rectitude and good works (Gay, 1984). Even today, modern men and women find legitimacy in the everyday social life of work and family, the main domains wherein selves are made and remade.

3. The modern self is multilayered, possessing inner depth. Even before Freud proclaimed the power of the unconscious, 19th-century men and women were keenly aware of the distinction between the public and the private selves and of the possibility of profound depth and layering within (Baumeister, 1986; Ellenberger, 1970; Gay, 1984, 1986). Thus, the reflexive project of the self involves a concerted examination of the modern person's rich inner life, where, it is assumed, some form of truth or meaning may be discerned (C. Taylor, 1989). Given the modern skepticism about external moral authority, the self becomes, for many, an inner moral source. It becomes especially important in modernity, therefore, to be "true to one's self."

4. The self develops over time. Modern men and women routinely adopt a developmental rhetoric in making sense of their own lives (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Improvements in nutrition and stupendous advances in medical science have dramatically increased life expectancy among modern adults, resulting in a regularization of biography (Hagestad, 1988) as modern men and women now fully expect to live well into their 70s and beyond. Anticipating that they will experience the full normative life course, modern adults think of themselves as growing, changing, moving through on-time passages and stages, as the self forms a trajectory of development from the remembered past to the anticipated future (Langbaum, 1982). Such developmental thinking provides a comfortable conceptual environment for notions of progress and self-improvement over time, as captured in such well-worn humanistic ideas as self-actualization, self-realization, self-fulfillment, and even self-transcendence (Jung, 1961; Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1951). According to this pervasive view, life is like a journey with attendant opportunities and risks; one must make the most of opportunities as they arise and minimize risks, though risks must sometimes be taken to entertain opportunities for growth and positive change (Giddens, 1991).

5. The developing self seeks a temporal coherence. If the self keeps changing over the long journey of life, then it may be incumbent on the person (whose self it is) to find or construct some form of life coherence and continuity to make the change make sense. How are lives in time to be made sensible in the modern world? It is no coincidence that the rise of the novel as a Western art form and the growing popularity of keeping
journals, diaries, and other autobiographical devices neatly parallel the rise of modernity in the West (Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1984), for making sense of the modern self as it changes over time centrally involves the construction of self-narratives. Narratives, or stories, have the capacity to integrate the individual’s reconstituted past, perceived present, and anticipated future, rendering a life-in-time sensible in terms of beginnings, middles, and endings (MacIntyre, 1984; McAdams, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988). Therefore, “a person’s identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens, 1991, p. 54).

Modern selves connect most deeply to each other in “the pure relationship.” With rising industrialization, the Victorians came to romanticize the household as a sacred retreat from the aggressive world of capitalist work, wherein the tender passions of love and intimacy could be nurtured and experienced in their fullest (Gadlin, 1977). Since the 19th century, modern men and women have placed increasingly higher stock in the value of love and intimacy as antidotes to the onerous demands of work. What has resulted, argued Giddens (1991), is the emergence of a new relational ideal. It is the pure relationship—a romantic bond between partners that is not a product of traditional external conditions of social and economic life but rather exists primarily for the personal fulfillment of the partners themselves, as an intensive, reflexively organized partnership, dependent on mutual trust between partners, constantly open to scrutiny and renegotiation, and aimed ultimately at the establishment of intimacy, or the sharing of two individual selves to create a shared history. To use Buber’s (1970) terms, the I and the Thou meet each other, as more or less free, independent, and well-defined agents, for the primary purpose of relating to each other, so that each may find greater fulfillment and life meaning and create a narrative that binds them together and consolidates their commitment to each other (McAdams, 1989). But commitment is always seen as freely given and indeed freely withdrawn should the relationship develop in a way that no longer meets the needs of one or both partners. The modern self, so seemingly independent and autonomous, holds extraordinarily high expectations for fulfillment in the pure relationship.

Contemporary selfhood may be further contextualized by considering what some scholars have viewed as a recent cultural shift toward postmodernity. Some scholars argue that many so-called modern societies have recently entered a transitional period wherein many of the certainties of modernity—for example, the faith in science and technology, assumptions about objectivity and rational discourse, belief in progress, the assumed coherence of political/economic systems such as capitalism and Marxism—have been severely undermined, leaving a confusing multiplicity of power discourses and language games that now constitute postmodern social life (Harvey, 1990). Indeed, the term postmodern is used in many different ways to refer to an assortment of perceived trends in art, architecture, literature, the media, social organization, and human consciousness, many of which seem to have come to the fore in Western thinking since the 1970s. What many of these trends seem to have in common is a skeptical and playfully ironic attitude about grand systems and universal claims, such as those undergirding modernity, and an affirmation, albeit ambivalent, of diversity, dynamism, and the momentary expression of the particular.

With respect to the sense of self, Gergen (1992) questioned the ability of contemporary Westerners to find unity and purpose in their lives amid the constant change and wild multiplicity—or what Gergen called multiphrenia—of postmodern life. Drawing on deconstructionism and other postmodern themes, Sampson (1989a, 1989b) argued that psychology needs to develop a new understanding of the person. Because postmodern life is so indeterminate and fluid and because technology and the global economy now link people together from all over the world, it no longer makes sense to think of persons as individuals who author self-defining projects, argued Sampson. Rather, persons are like “locations” of intersecting forces and interacting voices situated within a particular social community and linked in the postmodern era to many other communities around the globe.

Psychologically, what the I has traditionally considered to be “my” self—that which is mine, that which I have self-reflexively authored, made, constructed, explored, controlled—may no longer be mine, Sampson suggested. “Persons become guardians of particular assets, not their owners,” he wrote (Sampson, 1989a, p. 919). Persons are creatures whose very identities are constituted by their social locations (Sampson, 1989a) or their momentary positions in discourse (Davies & Harre, 1990). The self-narrations that purportedly provide a temporal coherence for lives are not really “inside” the person, subject to the person’s revision, waiting to be told, continuing to be enacted. Instead, the postmodern person seems to reside amid the stories, that surround and define him or her on a moment by moment basis. The self is as much “out there,” in the swirl and confusion of the postmodern world, as it is “in the mind” of “the person.”
It is difficult to know just how literally to interpret some characterizations of the postmodern self. One wonders: If the multiphrenia of postmodern life is as extreme as Gergen (1992) made it out, why is it that most men and women are still able to function more or less adaptively in daily life, rarely forgetting their names, their histories, and their goals? And one wonders how many contemporary people actually see themselves as mere locations in time and space rather than as embodied actors with internalized intentions and plans. Indeed, some observers argue that the term postmodernism is something of an exaggeration and that recent trends in social life indicate a kind of culmination of modernity, or what Giddens (1991) called a period of high modernity (see also Smith, 1994). Still, the postmodern take on selfhood underscores the difficulty contemporary adults are likely to experience in crafting the reflexive project of the self, especially with regard to their efforts to find a temporal coherence to life through the construction of a self-defining life story. Many observers of contemporary social life argue that it is a coherent and vivifying life story that best provides the modern adult with that quality of selfhood that goes by the name of identity (Giddens, 1991; MacIntyre, 1984; McAdams, 1985, 1993; C. Taylor, 1989). And writings on both modernity and postmodernism seem to support Langbaum (1982) when he wrote that identity "is the spiritual problem of our time" (p. 352).

Personality Psychology and the Narrative Study of Lives

Personality psychology was born within psychology departments in American universities in the 1930s. Although such personality theorists as Freud, Jung, and Adler had been writing for over 30 years by then, it was during the 1930s that a number of separate lines of inquiry came together to generate a new academic discipline focused on the psychological study of the individual person. The first issue of the journal Character and Personality (now the Journal of Personality) appeared in 1932. The journal aimed to join German studies of character with British and American studies of individual differences in persons, incorporating case studies, correlational surveys, experiments, and theoretical discussions. In 1937, Allport published the first authoritative textbook in the field, Personality: A Psychological Interpretation, defining personality as "the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine [the person's] unique adjustments to his [or her] environment" (p. 48).

Allport's text was the first to articulate a comprehensive vision situating the field of personality psychology within the context of the academic arts and sciences. The book also presented Allport's own personality theory, an eclectic blend of propositions built around a model of a more or less conscious and rational self whose individuality could be conceptualized readily in terms of broad personality traits. Allport positioned his theory as a humanistic alternative to Freudian determinism. Soon a number of other grand theories of personality appeared on the scene (e.g., Angyal, 1941; Cattell, 1946; Dollard & Miller, 1950; Eysenck, 1952; Fromm, 1941; Horney, 1945; Kelly, 1955; Maslow, 1954; Murray, 1938; Rogers, 1951; Sullivan, 1953), such that by the mid-1950s Hall and Lindzey (1957) could catalogue approximately 20 rival systems for understanding the individual person. By the time Hall and Lindzey's text appeared, however, the grand theorizing was over, and personality psychologists had settled down to the eminently empirical business of testing hypotheses derived from theories—some grand and some ad hoc—through laboratory and field research, elaborating the many constructs needed to describe what persons do and who persons are (McAdams, in press-a). Through the late 1960s, personality psychologists seemed to focus their energies on the elaboration of constructs, devising and refining a wide variety of measurement tools for assessing such individual-difference variables as the need for achievement (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), authoritarianism (Adorno, Frankel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), generalized anxiety (J. Taylor, 1953), field-independence (Witkin, 1950), Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970), social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964), and extraversion (Eysenck, 1973). Although many looked to the careful measurement of trait-like constructs as personality's ticket to scientific credibility in the 1950s and 1960s, others saw a disconcerting sprawl (Sanford, 1963) of balkanized research programs, each pushing its own pet construct rather than addressing integrative issues about how whole persons live real lives (Adelson, 1969; Carlson, 1971).

A turning point for the field of personality psychology was Mischel's (1968) critique of conventional personality research methods and the generalized concept of the personality trait. Adopting a social-learning perspective on human behavior and experience, Mischel questioned the utility of thinking about persons in terms of internal, global, and stable traits that determine behavior across different situations and over time. Behavior is much better predicted, argued Mischel, by sorting out the exigencies of the situations within which behavior is embedded. The ensuing "trait-versus-situation debate" preoccupied personality psychologists through the 1970s and early 1980s, as many saw Mischel's critique of traits to be an indictment on the entire field.
of personality psychology itself. When the dust began to clear, however, personality psychology emerged a stronger and more diversified field with a greater awareness of the complex ways in which individual differences in persons interact with a wide variety of contextual variables to produce behavior that is both situated and personal (D. M. Buss & Cantor, 1989; Funder & Colvin, 1991; Kenrick & Funder, 1988; Maddi, 1984; West, 1983).

The rejuvenation of personality psychology is most evident today on two broad fronts. First, theory and research on general personality traits is probably stronger today than ever before. Research from the 1980s yielded impressive evidence for both the (a) heritability (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990; Plomin, Chipuer, & Loehlin, 1990; Tellegen et al., 1988) and (b) longitudinal consistency (Conley, 1985; McCrae & Costa, 1990) of personality traits, and for the (c) efficacy of trait scores in the prediction of behavior aggregated across many different situations (Epstein, 1979, 1986; Moskowitz, 1982). In their search for a consensual taxonomy for traits, furthermore, many personality psychologists have rallied around the Big Five (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae, 1992) or similar schemes identifying between three and seven basic trait dimensions (Cloninger, 1987; Hogan, 1987; Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992; Peabody, 1984; Wiggins, 1992; Zuckerman, 1992). There is growing interest in couching Big Five dimensions in terms of their evolutionary significance (e.g., MacDonald, 1995). Furthermore, research on the biological bases of personality traits continues to move ahead briskly (e.g., Davidson & Tomarken, 1989; Eysenck, 1990; Revelle, 1987). Although the concept of trait need not suggest a connection to innate temperament and neurophysiological underpinnings, a growing number of personality psychologists are coming to see individual differences in traits as strongly influenced by constitutional factors (Gray, 1994; McCrae & Costa, 1996; Revelle, 1995).

A second broad front for personality research and theorizing today encompasses a wide variety of cognitive, emotional, and social approaches to persons that emphasize the purposive nature of human behavior and experience (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990). Rather than focusing on the dispositional traits that individuals "have" as basic dimensions for their personality, these approaches examine the different goals (Pervin, 1989), strivings (Emmons, 1986), tasks (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987), projects (Little, 1989), scripts (Demorest, 1995), strategies (D. M. Buss, 1987), current concerns (Klinger, 1977), and so on that people formulate and utilize to "do" things in the social world (Cantor, 1990). From this perspective, human behavior is exquisitely social and conditional, always oriented to the future as well as the past, and regulated by complex cognitive processes. Although trait research has traditionally relied on self-report scales and questionnaires, researchers of this second persuasion are more likely to ask their participants to provide direct personal accounts about the past and anticipated future, to relate autobiographical happenings and expectations, and to tell stories, of various kinds, about their lives (Baumeister, 1994; McAdams, 1982; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne, 1995). As psychologists have become more interested in personal accounts and stories as methods for collecting data on the social–cognitive–motivational aspects of personality, they also have begun to formulate new personality constructs and models that are explicitly couched in story terms, as witnessed in McAdams' (1985, 1987, 1990, 1993) life-story model of identity, Tomkins' (1987) script theory, and theories offered by Hermans and Kempen (1993), Gregg (1991, 1995), and others who view their work as contributing to what Josselson and Lieblich (1993) called the Narrative Study of Lives.

The turn to narrative in personality reflects parallel trends in other domains of psychology (Howard, 1991), cognitive science (Linde, 1990; Schank, 1990), and other social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Bruner (1990) argued that narrative is the natural mode through which human beings make sense of lives in time, and he implored psychologists to turn their research toward stories (e.g., Britton & Pellegrini, 1990). Sarbin (1986) suggested that narrative may be a new "root metaphor" (p. 3) for psychology as a whole. Industrial-organizational psychologists now examine stories, myths, and metaphors that define particular companies, corporations, and other social institutions (Pondy, Morgan, Frost, & Dandridge, 1983). Some psychoanalysts now conceptualize therapeutic work as story negotiation; the analyst helps the analysand construct a new and more adaptive story for life (Schafer, 1981). Romantic love has even been reconceptualized as a story co-authored by lovers (Sternberg, in press). Surveying a wide range of work in psychology and the social sciences, Polkinghorne (1988) identified an emerging human science tradition that places narrative at the center of understanding human lives:

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories we tell and hear told, with the stories that we dream or imagine or would like to tell. All these stories are reworked in the stories of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meanings of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.
We explain actions in terms of plots, and often no other form of explanation can produce sensible statements. (p. 160)

From this perspective, lives may be viewed as narrated texts, known and "read" as stories, framed through discourse, and told in culture. Cohler and Cole (1994) wrote:

The life story is a narrative precisely because it represents a discourse of a particular kind, organized with a potential listener or reader in mind and with an intent, often implicit, to convince self and others of a particular plot or present ordering of experience rendered sensible within a particular culture. (p. 6)

With respect to identity among modern adults, therefore, what Cohler and Cole termed the implicit intent is to convince the self and others that one's life can be told through a more or less coherent narrative that makes sense both to the self and within the context of one's own society (McAdams, 1985). A person's identity partly reflects the kinds of stories that prevail in his or her culture. Thus each person's life story may be located within a particular literary tradition, the modern storied world and the world of stories within which the individual lives, acts, and narrates.

This article's proposed framework for studying persons brings together contemporary trends in personality psychology emphasizing (a) dispositional traits and (b) the social/cognitive facets of purposeful human behavior with the emerging human-science affirmation of the narrative study of lives. Such a framework should stimulate integrative research and theorizing that appreciates and seeks to understand the complexity of adult lives in modern societies, wherein the project of constructing a storied self remains so salient, and reorienting personality psychologists and others who study human lives toward Allport's challenge to develop an integrative psychology of the individual person.

General Framework

If personality psychology is the scientific study of the individual person, then personality psychologists must seek first and foremost to know persons. What do we know when we know a person? What does it take to know a person in a scientific way? Scientists seek to describe and explain their observations of phenomena. In personality psychology, observations and measurements of persons are generally made in systematic and structured ways through the use of standardized questionnaires, laboratory investigations, interviews, ethnographic inquiries, content analysis, and so on. These observations and measurements must then be organized in terms of constructs and propositions, and these constructs and propositions should be further organized into an integrative framework so that persons can be fully described and explained. Although description and explanation go hand in hand, description would appear to be more basic, for scientists typically determine what a phenomenon is (description) before they are able to consider why it is (explanation). With respect to persons, explanations for the "what is" may take a myriad of forms. For example, the determinants of personality may be found in genetic influences, brain structure, early family training, birth order, social learning patterns, class and race effects, gender, culture, cohorts, and so on. There is no shortage of explanations. But what is it that must be explained?

It is proposed that an adequate description of the person requires the clear distinction between the I and the Me features of personality and the delineation of three relatively independent, nonoverlapping levels on which the person can be described. In personality, the I may be viewed as the process of "selfing," of narrating experience to create a self, and the Me may be viewed as the self which the I narrates. The three levels hold a wide assortment of personal characteristics that are, in principle, potential components of the self—that is, potential characteristics of the Me that the I constructs.

Level 1 consists of those broad, decontextualized, and relatively nonconditional constructs called traits, that provide a dispositional signature for personality description. Traits are typically assayed through self-report and may, therefore, be considered as features of the self, features of the Me that the I constructs. No description of the person is adequate without trait attributions, but trait attributions themselves yield little beyond A Psychology of the Stranger (McAdams, 1994c). At Level 2 (called personal concerns), personality descriptions invoke personal strivings, life tasks, defense mechanisms, coping strategies, domain-specific skills and values, and a wide assortment of other motivational, developmental, or strategic constructs that are contextualized in time, place, or role. Level 3 presents personality concepts that are especially derivative of adult life in modern societies. In modernity, a full description of adult personality commonly requires a consideration of the extent to which a human life expresses unity and purpose, the hallmarks of identity for the reflexive project of the modern self. At Level 3, then, reside the psychosocial constructions that constitute identity. In the modern world, such constructions assume the form of stories of the self—internalized and evolving life stories that integrate the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future. As a psychosocially constructed narrative, modern identity manifests a particular (a) structure and content, (b)
function, and (e) developmental course, and it may be further described in terms of (d) individual differences in types of self stories and (e) the extent to which a life story facilitates adaptation or reinforces pathology for the person whose identity the story is.

I and Me

Amid the recent proliferation of "self" theories in personality and social psychology (e.g., Banaji & Prentice, 1994), it has become almost routine to cite William James’s (1892/1963) conception of the duplex self—the I and the Me. But few authors have been consistently clear about what this distinction really means. Part of the confusion stems from the fact that James labeled these two facets of the “same” self with two pronouns, suggesting to some readers that the I and the Me are each a kind of entity, that the self-as-subject and the self-as-object are two sides of the same coin or two different ways of looking at the same thing. Although there is a sense in which this is true, a clearer way to think about the self is to identify the I as a process and the Me as a product (McAdams, 1994b, in press-b). Thus, the I is really more like a verb; it might be called “selfing” or “I-ing,” the fundamental process of making a self out of experience. To self (a verb) is to apprehend one’s actions, thoughts, feelings, and so on as “mine.” To self is to grasp phenomenological experience as one’s own, as belonging to me. To self is to locate the source of experience as oneself. Thus, selfing is responsible for human feelings of agency or “the degree to which an action is unreflectively grasped as one’s own and oneself is grasped as its source” (Blasi, 1988, p. 229).

Selfing is also responsible for the fundamental sense of otherness (Blasi, 1988). Rarely do people mix this up. As James (1892/1963) observed, rarely does Peter go to bed and wake up the next morning thinking he is Paul. Whether or not Peter knows precisely who he is, Peter virtually never forgets that he is, that his experience is his and not Paul’s. To do so would be to suffer a selfing problem of rather dramatic proportions.

Some psychologists have employed the term ego to refer to the process of selfing. In her theory of ego development, Loevinger (1976) wrote: “The organization or the synthetic function is not just another thing that the ego does, it is what the ego is” (p. 5). And: “The striving to master, to integrate, to make sense of experience is not one ego function among many but the essence of the ego” (Loevinger, 1969, p. 83). Some theories of ego development—the development of selfing—suggest that this process of making experience mine emerges in the first 18 months of life or so and that it receives sustenance and support from an attentive and caring interpersonal milieu (Bowby, 1969; Harter, 1983; Kohut, 1977; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Stern, 1985). Attachment bonds (Bowby), mirroring relationships (Kohut), experiences of affective attunement (Stern), and the like provide the interpersonal support to strengthen and consolidate the infant’s developing sense that it exists as an “active, causal agent, a source and controller of actions, separate from other persons and objects in the world” (Harter, 1983, p. 279). The process of selfing—the I itself—begins with the establishment of an existential base—“I exist”; “I am the source of my experience”—and then evolves over time toward the more mature and complex modes of meaning making characteristic of higher stages of I development (Loevinger, 1976).

The Me is the primary product of the selfing process. It is the self that selfing makes. Termed the self-concept by many, the Me exists as an evolving collection of self-attributions that result from the selfing process. The Me casts a wide net, incorporating what James (1892/1963) called the material, social, and spiritual realms of that which is mine. Thus, one’s Me may include one’s car, one’s spouse, and one’s religious beliefs, in the sense that all of these things may be viewed as more or less mine. Included, too, are a wide variety of personality characteristics that selfing incorporates into the Me. One’s traits—for instance, extroversion, neuroticism—are aspects of the self to the extent that one considers them to be Me. Similarly, the Me incorporates personal concerns and life stories, to the extent that these characteristics of personality are experienced as one’s own. One way to experience something as one’s own is to sense that one has indeed constructed, authored, or made it. This is the experience that many modern adults feel vis-à-vis their “own” life stories. Thus, the process of selfing involves constructing and authoring experience as one’s own, as well as appropriating, synthesizing, reflecting on, and simply observing experience in such a way that it is deemed to be mine. Over time, selfing builds up and attempts to bind together the Me. Developmentally speaking, therefore, the I emerges and then evolves, whereas the Me is more or less “produced.” Development of the Me over time expresses itself as the changing result or outcome of the selfing process, reflecting the myriad of changes occurring in a person’s life as well as changes in the selfing process itself.

What, then, is the relation between personality on the one hand and the I and the Me on the other? Allport defined personality as an organization of psychophysical systems that determine the person’s “unique adjustment” (1937, p.48) or “characteristic thought and behavior” (1961, p.28) in the social world. With respect
to the Jamesian self, one might add that the systems to
which Allport referred must also be potential candidates
for the Me. In other words, any aspect of personality—trait, concern, or story—may, in principle, be part
of the self-concept; the person may assume ownership
of it, may make it mine through selfing. However,
personality is not synonymous with the self-concept
because (a) some parts of the Me are not aspects of
personality (my dog, my clothing) and (b) some parts
of personality may not be the targets of selfing, even
though in principle they could be. The second exception
takes cognizance of the general modernist view, often
attributed to Freud, that human experience is multiply
layered, that selfing may only go so deep, leaving
behind unconscious (Erdelyi, 1985) or implicit
(Schachter, 1987) aspects of personality (e.g., defense
mechanisms, repressed strivings, deeply conflic
tial goals)—parts of personality that selfing regards as "not-
Me" or that selfing simply does not regard at all.

If personality characteristics are potential candidates
for inclusion within the Me, they also have certain I-like
properties in that any aspect of personality—trait, con-
cern, or story—may be viewed as potentially influen-
cing the process of selfing. For example, an extravert
may make sense of his or her experience in a way very
different from an introvert. Similarly, particular goals,
strivings, projects, life stories, and so on may double as
general schemas, in that they may influence how the
person sees, reflects on, constructs, and makes sense of
the Me. Some personality characteristics (e.g., field-in-
dependence) seem more likely to operate in this fashion
than others (e.g., friendliness). Furthermore, the overall
process of selfing may be viewed as an aspect of per-
sonality itself. But traits, concerns, and stories are not
"parts" or "components" of the I; instead, they are
potential Me elements that, like any other Me elements,
may have implications for how the I works.

Dispositional Signatures:
Personality Traits

Dispositional traits are those relatively noncondi-
tional, relatively decontextualized, generally linear, and
implicitly comparative dimensions of personality that
go by such titles as "extraversion," "dominance," and
"neuroticism." Once written off as mere linguistic con-
vieniences (Shweder, 1975) or attributional errors (Ni-
sbett & Ross, 1980), traits have made a remarkable
comeback since about 1980, when few personality psy-
chologists seemed willing to admit in public that they
even "believed in" traits (Jackson & Paunonen, 1980).
A significant body of recent research shows that trait
attributions based on careful observations reflect real
differences in the behavior and the personalities of
people about whom the attributions are being made
(Block, Weiss, & Thorne, 1979; Funder & Colvin,
1991; Moskowitz, 1990). Aggregation studies show
that self-report trait scores often predict trends in be-
havior fairly well (Kenrick & Funder, 1988). Individual
differences in trait scores show substantial stability over
time, especially across the adult years (McCrae &
Costa, 1990). The Big Five taxonomy provides a pow-
erful system for organizing traits. In the 1970s, many
wondered if it even made sense to suggest that traits
exist. Now, not only do they exist, but many psycholo-
gists are convinced that all of the many traits that do
exist may be assimilated to a comprehensive system
organized as a five-factor space. There is so much good
news about traits today that some personality psycholo-
gists are ready to conclude that the whole of personality
is traits and nothing more (A. H. Buss, 1989).

In any early and influential article on the Big Five
trait scheme, Goldberg (1981) contended that the Eng-
lish language includes five clusters of trait-related terms
because personality characteristics encoded in the Big
Five have proved especially salient in human interper-
sonal perception, especially when it comes to the evolu-
tionarily crucial task of sizing up a "stranger." Gold-
berg may have been more right than many trait
enthusiasts, however, would like him to be, for the
ultimate outcome of a good trait analysis would appear
to be little more than a systematic psychology of the
stranger. Reliable and valid trait ratings do indeed pro-
vide an excellent "first read" on a person by offering
estimates of a person's relative standing on a delimited
series of general and linear dimensions of proven social
significance. Knowing where somebody stands on ex-
traversion or neuroticism is indeed crucial information
in the evaluation of strangers and others about whom
one knows very little. It is the kind of information that
strangers quickly glean from one another as they size
one another up and anticipate future interactions. It is
the kind of information that people fall back on when
they know little else about the other who is being
observed. Such information is valuable precisely be-
cause it is comparative and relatively nonconditional.
A highly extraverted person acts in a more outgoing and
sociable way compared to most other people (comparative)
and tends to act this way in a wide variety of
settings (nonconditional), though by no means in all.

Consider, furthermore, the phenomenology of tradi-
tional trait assessment in personality psychology. In
rating one's own or another's traits on a typical paper-
and-pencil measure, the rater/participant must adopt an
observational stance (for self-ratings, a way of selfing)
in which the target of the rating becomes an object of
comparison on a series of linear and only vaguely
conditional dimensions (McAdams, 1994a). To rate the
self (or other) on an extraversion-keyed item such as “I am not a cheerful optimist” (Costa & McCrae, 1985), one must judge the extent of one’s own “cheerful optimism” in comparison to the cheerful optimism of people one knows or has heard about, or perhaps even an assumed average level of cheerful optimism of the rest of humankind. Ratings like these must have a social referent to be meaningful. The end result is a determination of the extent to which the self is seen as more or less extraverted across a wide variety of situations, conditions, and contexts, and compared to other people in general. There is, therefore, no place in trait assessment for what Thorne (1989) called the conditional patterns of personality (see also J. C. Wright & Mischel, 1987). Conditional patterns include such Me-attributions as “My dominance shows when my competence is threatened; I fall apart when people try to comfort me; I talk most when I am nervous” (Thorne, 1989, p. 149).

The two most valuable features of trait description—its comparative and nonconditional qualities—double as its two greatest limitations, as well. As persons come to know one another better, they seek and obtain information that is both noncomparative and highly conditional, contingent, and contextualized. They move beyond the mindset of comparing individuals on linear dimensions, beyond a psychology of the stranger (McAdams, 1994c). They move beyond traits to construct a more detailed and nuanced portrait of personality so that the stranger can become more fully known. The same can be said for perception of the self. Thinking of oneself in terms of traits is a particular style of selfing with which most Western adults, and indeed many children, are intimately familiar. Indeed, modern Westerners may be more comfortable with this form of selfing than people in certain other societies (Miller, 1984). Within modernity, people typically have little trouble rating the Me on linear, bipolar, noncontingent, and implicitly comparative dimensions. Yet, their selfing does not stop with traits. Knowing the self well requires an exploration of those aspects of living that are less amenable to trait analysis. The I does not leave traits behind. But if it is to produce a Me that holds the kind of richness and texture that modern people have come to expect, then the process of selfing must supplement trait ratings with attributions that are more intricately contextualized.

Contextualization of Lives: Personal Concerns

There is a vast and largely unmapped territory in personality wherein reside such constructs as motives (McClelland, 1985), values (Rokeach, 1973), defense mechanisms (Cramer, 1991), coping styles (Lazarus, 1991), developmental issues and concerns (Erikson, 1963; Havighurst, 1972), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), personal projects (Little, 1989), current concerns (Klinger, 1977), life tasks (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987), attachment styles (Hazen & Shaver, 1990), conditional patterns (Thorne, 1989), core conflictual relationship themes (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1991), patterns of self-with-other (Ogilvie & Rose, 1995), domain-specific skills and talents (Gardner, 1993), strategies and tactics (D. M. Buss, 1987), and many more personality variables that are both linked to behavior (Cantor, 1990) and important for the full description of the person (McAdams, 1995). This assorted collection of constructs makes up a second level of personality, to which might be given the rather generic name of “personal concerns.” Compared with dispositional traits, personal concerns are typically couched in motivational, developmental, or strategic terms. They speak to what people want, often during particular periods in their lives or within particular domains of action, and what life methods people use (strategies, plans, defenses, and so on) to get what they want or avoid getting what they do not want over time, in particular places, and/or with respect to particular roles.

What primarily differentiates, then, personal concerns from dispositional traits is the contextualization of the former within time, place, and/or role. Time is perhaps the most ubiquitous context. In their studies of the “intimacy life task” among young adults, Cantor, Acker, and Cook-Flanagan (1992) focused on “those tasks that individuals see as personally important and time consuming at particular times in their lives” (p. 644). In their studies of generativity across the adult life span, McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993) focused on a cluster of concern, belief, commitment, and action oriented toward providing for the well-being of the next generation, a cluster that appears to peak in salience around middle age. Intimacy and generativity must be contextualized in the temporal life span if they are to be properly understood. By contrast, the traits of extraversion and agreeableness are easily defined and understood outside of time. They are not linked to developmental stages, phases, seasons, and so forth.

The temporal context also distinguishes traits on the one hand from motives and goals on the other. Motives, goals, strivings, and plans are defined in terms of future ends. A person high in power motivation wants, desires, and strives for power—having an impact on others is the desired end state, the temporal goal (Winter, 1973). To have a strong motive, goal, striving, or plan is to orient oneself in a particular way in time. The same cannot be readily assumed with traits. Extraversion is not naturally conceived in goal-directed terms. It is not necessary for the viability of the concept of extraversion.
that an extraverted person strive to obtain a particular
goal in time, although of course such a person may do
so. Extraverted people simply are extraverted; whether
they try to or not is irrelevant. The case is even clearer
for neuroticism, for the common-sense assumption here
is that highly neurotic people do not strive to be neurotic
over time. They simply are neurotic. Although disposi-
tional traits may have motivational properties (Allport,
1937; McCrae & Costa, 1996), traits do not exist in time
in the same way that motives, strivings, goals, and plans
are temporally contextualized.

Contextualization of behavior in place was a major
theme of the situationist critique in the 1970s (Frederik-
sen, 1972; Magnusson, 1971). The situationists argued
that behavior is by and large local rather than general,
subject to the norms and expectations of a given social
place or space. Attempts to formulate taxonomies of
situations have frequently involved delineating the
physical and interpersonal features of certain kinds of
prototypical behavioral settings and social environ-
ments, like "church," "football game," "classroom,"
and "party" (Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982;
Krahe, 1992; Moos, 1973). Certain domain-specific
skills, competencies, attitudes, and schemas are exam-
ple of personality variables contextualized in place.
Also included here are Thorne's (1989) conditional
patterns and certain very simple personal scripts (Dem-
orest, 1995), such as "When I am at home, I am unable
to relax;" "When the weather is hot, I think about how
miserable I was as a child, growing up in St. Louis;" "If
I am lost in Chicago, I never ask for directions." To
know a person well, it is not necessary to have informa-
tion about all of the different personal scripts and con-
ditional patterns that prevail in all of the different
behavioral settings he or she will encounter. Instead, the
personality psychologist should seek information on
the most salient settings and environments that make up
the ecology of the person's life and investigate the most
influential, most common, or most problematic per-
sonal scripts and conditional patterns that appear within
that ecology (Demorest & Alexander, 1992).

Another major context in personality is social role.
Certain strivings, tasks, strategies, defensive mecha-
nisms, competencies, values, interests, styles, and so on
may be role-specific. For example, one may strive to
achieve excellence in a professional domain but be little
concerned with standards of performance in other ac-
tivities. One may value peace and tranquility in the role
of mother but look for adventure as a friend or lover.

Ogilvie and Ashmore (1991) developed a new approach
to personality assessment that matches personality de-
scriptors with significant persons in one's life, resulting
in an organization of self-with-other constructs. Each
self-with-other cluster includes characteristics that the
I attributes to the Me-with-a-particular-other-person.
For example, the Me may be viewed as rational, calculat-
ing, and cool when with Linda, as dominant and
nurturant when with my oldest daughter, and as cool,
withdrawn, and pensive when with George. It would
appear that some of the more significant self-with-other
constellations in a person's Me would be associated
with important social roles. Like social places, not all
social roles are equally important in a person's life.
Among the most salient in the lives of many modern
men and women are the roles of spouse/lover,
son/daughter, parent, sibling, worker/provider, friend,
and citizen.

If personality traits can be organized into a five-fac-
tor space, what kind of map might lend order to the
rather ill-defined, bulky, and disorderly array of con-
structs that make up Level 2 of personality? McCrae
and Costa (1996) propose that contextualized con-
structs like goals and strivings may be viewed as char-
acteristic adaptations that are derived from the interac-
tion of basic traits and environmental contingencies.
If this is true, then one might expect that the five-factor
space would readily accommodate the different con-
structs grouped under personal concerns as well. There
is no compelling reason, however, to believe that the
language of nonconditional and decontextualized dis-
positions should work well to describe constructs that
are situated in time, place, and role. Consistent with this
supposition, Kaiser and Ozer (1996) found that per-
sonal goals, or what they term motivational units, do
not map onto the five-factor structure demonstrated for
traits. Instead, their study suggests that the structure of
personal goals may be more appropriately conceptual-
ized in terms of various content domains (e.g., work,
social). Ogilvie and Rose (1995) proposed that certain
motivational constructs within Level 2 may be organ-
ized into the four categories of acquire (obtain a positive
state), keep (maintain a positive state), cure (make a
negative state positive), and prevent (avoid a negative
state). Conceptual efforts like these will be most fruitful
when they aim to develop an indigenous theoretical
framework for the contextualized domain of Level 2,
rather than importing theories, models, and concepts
from the language of traits.

The Problem of Identity:
Life Stories

As one moves from Level 1 to Level 2, one moves
from the psychology of the stranger to a more detailed
and nuanced description of a flesh-and-blood, in-the-
world person, striving to do things over time, situated
in place and role, expressing herself or himself in and
through strategies, tactics, plans, goals, and so on. The dispositional signature provides a nonconditional and broad-based outline of the major trait-like features of personality, and constructs from Level 2 contextualize a life in time, place, and role. So what is missing? The answer stems from the characteristic mindset of modernity, within which individuals are expected to create selves that develop over time and that define who they are as similar to and different from others and as individuals whose lives manifest some degree of unity and purpose. Therefore, what is missing is identity. The problem of identity is the problem of overall unity and purpose in human lives (McAdams, 1985). It is a problem that has come to preoccupy men and women in modern societies over the past 200 years (Baumeister, 1986). It is not generally a problem for children, though there are some exceptions. It is not as salient a problem for many non-Western and nonmodern societies that put less of a premium on individualism and articulating a personalized self, although it is certainly not an unknown problem in many of these societies. It is not equally problematic for all contemporary American and Western European adults. It is probably somewhat more salient a psychosocial issue for lower-middle, middle-class, and upper-class men and women, as opposed to the poorest members of modern societies, but the rhetoric of identity is nonetheless quite pervasive in modernity and thus most modern adults are quite familiar with it.

Modern societies do not expressly prescribe particular identities for particular adults. At the same time, however, these societies insist that an adult should be someone who both fits in and is unique (Bellah et al., 1985). Beyond traits and personal concerns, the Me should be defined so that it is both separate and connected, individuated and integrated at the same time. These kinds of Mes do not exist in prepackaged, readily assimilated form. They are not passed down from one generation to the next, as they were perhaps in simpler times. Rather, modern selves must be made or discovered as people become what they are to become in time. The selves that people create before they reach late adolescence and adulthood are, among other things, "lists" of characteristics to be found in Levels 1 and 2 of personality. An 8-year-old girl may, for example, see herself as relatively shy (low extraversion) and very caring and warm (high agreeableness); she may know that she is a good ice skater (domain-specific skill); she may love amusement parks (interests); and she may have strong feelings of love and resentment toward her older sister (ambivalent attachment style). These are a few items in a doubtlessly long list of things making up the child's Me, including many that are not in the realm of personality proper ("I live in a white house;" "I go to Central School"). A list of attributions from Levels 1 and 2, however, does not an identity make, at least not in modern societies. Then again, 8-year-olds are too young to have identities in this sense because they are generally not able to experience unity and purpose as problematic in their lives. Therefore, one can know an 8-year-old very well by sticking to Levels 1 and 2.

But not so for a modern adult. Although the question of "Who am I?" may seem silly or obvious to a young child, modern men and women are likely to see such a question as potentially problematic, challenging, ego-involving, and so on. Such a question is relevant to modern adult selfing in a way that generally escapes the ego of childhood. For reasons that are physiological and cognitive, as well as social and cultural, it is in late adolescence and young adulthood that many contemporary men and women in modern societies come to believe that the self must or should be constructed and told in a manner that integrates the disparate roles they play, incorporates their many different values and skills, and organizes into a meaningful temporal pattern their reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future (Breger, 1974; Erikson, 1963; McAdams, 1985). The challenge of identity demands that the modern adult construct a "telling" of the self that synthesizes synchronic and diachronic elements in such a way as to suggest that (a) despite its many facets, the Me is coherent and unified and (b) despite the many changes that attend the passage of time, the Me of the past led up to or set the stage for the Me of the present, which in turn will lead up to or set the stage for the Me of the future (McAdams, 1990, 1993).

What form does such a construction take? A growing number of theorists believe that the only conceivable form for a unified and purposeful telling of an individual life is the story (Bruner, 1990; Charme, 1984; Kohler, 1982; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Howard, 1991; Kotre, 1984; Linde, 1990; MacIntyre, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1983). Modern adults bestow on the Me unity and purpose—that is, they provide the Me with an identity—by constructing more or less coherent, followable, and vivifying stories that integrate the person into society in a productive and generative way and provide the person with a purposeful self-history that explains how the Me of yesterday became the Me of today and will become the anticipated Me of tomorrow. Level 3 in personality, therefore, is the level of identity as a life story. Without exploring this third level, the personality psychologist can never understand how and to what extent the individual person living in a modern society is able to find unity, purpose, and meaning in life.
Experiencing the Life Story: 
Five Questions

Structure and Content: 
What Is a Life Story?

A life story is an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future (McAdams, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1990, 1993, 1996). For a given person, the life story is the narrated product of the characteristic way in which the I arranges elements of the Me into a temporal sequence complete with setting, scenes, characters, plots, and themes. In modernity, a person "has" a life story in the same sense that he or she has traits, goals, plans, values, and so on. All of these things may be appropriated into the Me as a result of the selfing process. Indeed, a person may "have" more than one life story, or the overall life story itself may consist of a collection of rather disconnected stories about the self, as Gergen (1992) suggested. But within the modern world, the adult selfing process seems to seek out opportunities for integrating different autobiographical accounts into a narrated whole, aiming to construct a Me that exhibits a modicum of unity, coherence, and purpose (Erikson, 1963; Giddens, 1991; C. Taylor, 1989).

A life story is a psychosocial construction. This means that although the story is constructed by the person whose story it is, the story has its constitutive meanings within culture. Indeed, one can speak of a sense in which the life story is jointly authored by the person and his or her defining culture(s). Different kinds of stories make sense in different kinds of cultures. Martin Luther’s narrations about physical encounters with devils strike the modern ear as odd (Erikson, 1958). A member of a rural Indian village who accounts for the tranquility she experienced one afternoon as a result of the “cool and dispassionate” food she ate the evening before tells a story that does not fit modernist expectations (Shweder & Much, 1987). Within modernity, furthermore, different groups are given different narrative opportunities and face different narrative constraints. Especially relevant in this regard are gender, race, and class divisions in modern societies. Heilbrun (1988) remarked that many women “have 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 empowerment of women’s narratives is a major theme in some feminist social science writings (e.g., Franz & Stewart, 1994; Riessman, 1992). The historical and contemporary life experiences of many African Ameri-
other. But identity reflects the I’s efforts to integrate the various tellings of self, both private and public, into a larger narrative framework that suggests life unity and purpose. Identity, then, is a quality of the Me. It is the Me’s overall storyness—its status as an integrative story form. As a quality of the Me, identity is no more real or true than any other aspect of self. But it is more integrative. Identity is the story that binds things together in the Me, to the extent that things can be so bound.

Like any story, identity has certain recognizable features of structure and content. According to Bruner (1986), stories are always about the “vicissitudes of human intention” organized in time. Likewise, the life story is set always in a particular time and place and features certain human characters who “intend” and strive to do things and accomplish goals over time. Furthermore, life stories incorporate many of the conventions laid down in story grammars (Mandler, 1984; Trabasso, Secco, & van den Broek, 1984). Episodes in the story may be structured as sequences of initiating events that motivate characters to make attempts to attain certain goals, which lead to particular consequences wherein goal-directed strivings are thwarted, resulting in reactions on the part of characters that complicate the plot further. Stories typically have endings as well, which provide a sense of closure and (sometimes) resolution. Like any story, furthermore, identity comes out of a set of literary traditions. In the modern West, life stories typically are expected to have their beginnings in the family, to involve growth and expansion in the early years, to locate later problems in early dynamics, to incorporate “turning point” moments or “epiphanies” that leave their mark on subsequent events, and to couch narrative movement in terms of progress or decline (Denzin, 1989; Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

Analyzing more than 200 accounts from life-story interviews, McAdams (1985, 1987, 1993) proposed that the structure and the content of adult life stories can be understood in terms of the following features.

1. **Narrative tone.** Life stories typically manifest an overall emotional tone or attitude, ranging simply from hopeless pessimism to boundless optimism. In Western literary traditions, affectively positive stories often take the form of “comedy” and “romance,” whereas negatively toned narratives may assume the forms of “tragedy” and “irony” (Frye, 1957). Any given life story may draw on comedic, romantic, tragic, and/or ironic forms to employ a range of tones that the I appropriates to the Me.

2. **Imagery.** Life stories display a characteristic quality of imagery. The imagery of a story is determined by the word pictures, the sounds, even the smells and tastes the author creates, the metaphors, similes, and so on that provide the narrative with a distinctive “feel.” Selfing involves the choice of the right kind of imagery to convey the unique quality of the person’s experience. Therefore, an individual’s favorite metaphors and symbols are reflective of what his or her identity is all about.

3. **Theme.** Themes are the goal-directed sequences that characters pursue in narrative. Themes convey human motivation—what characters want, what they strive to get and to avoid over time. In Western literary traditions, characters often seek some variation on power and/or love, or more generally what Bakan (1966) termed agency and communion. Agency refers to separation of the individual from and mastery of the individual over the environment, subsuming such overlapping motifs as power, autonomy, achievement, control, and isolation. Agency denotes story material in which characters assert, expand, or protect themselves as autonomous and active “agents.” Communion refers to union of the individual with the environment and the surrender of individuality to a larger whole, covering such motifs as intimacy, love, reconciliation, caring, and merger. Agency and communion have also been identified as fundamental axes for social interaction more generally, as represented in circumplex models of interpersonal behavior (T. Leary, 1957; Wiggins & Broughton, 1985). Life stories may be compared and contrasted, therefore, with respect to the degree to which the thematic lines of agency and communion dominate the text.

4. **Ideological setting.** MacIntyre (1984) and C. Taylor (1989) argued that the creation of identity through life narrative typically involves the establishment of some sort of moral stance—an implicit perspective on “the good”—from which the individual can judge the quality of his or her own life and the lives of others. In line with this idea, most modern life stories may be viewed as suggesting an ideological setting or a backdrop of fundamental belief and value that situates the plot in an ethico-religious location. The ideological setting, then, refers to the person’s religious, political, and ethical beliefs and values as they are instantiated in the story, including the individual’s account of how those values and beliefs came to be.

5. **Nuclear episodes.** Particular scenes that stand out in bold print in the life story may be called nuclear episodes. Of most importance are high points, low points, beginning points, ending points, and turning points in the story. These reconstructed scenes typically affirm self-perceived continuity or change in the Me over time. As an affirmation of continuity, a person may give high priority to a particular event from the past that encapsules in a narrative nutshell an essential and en-
during “truth” about the Me. Thus, the event may be symbolic “proof” from my past that “I am what I am.” As a declaration of change, a person may single out a particular event as an epiphany, through which the Me experienced rather sudden or decided transformation, as in a “loss of innocence,” a “fall from grace,” a “lucky break,” and so on (Denzin, 1989; McAdams, 1985). Therefore, what may be most important in a nuclear episode is not so much what actually happened in the past but what the memory of the key event symbolizes today in the context of the overall life narrative.

6. Imagoes. All stories contain human or humanlike characters. In a life story, the main character is the person whose life the story is about. But the main character may appear in a multitude of guises, each personifying particular aspects of the Me (McAdams, 1984). Therefore, an imago is an idealized personification of the self that functions as a main character in narrative. Imagoes are often one-dimensional, “stock” characters in the life story, and each integrates a host of different characteristics, roles, and experiences in the Me. Imagoes, then, are like little mes populating the big Me-narrative, main characters in the story who act and think in highly personalized ways. The concept of imago bears some resemblance to the idea of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) or ideal and ought selves (Higgins, 1987), and it shares conceptual space with certain psychoanalytic ideas such as internalized objects (Fairbairn, 1952) and inner states (Berne, 1964), voices (Watkins, 1986), and personifications (Sullivan, 1953). Within the life story, the I may personify aspects of the Me to produce such imagoes as “the good boy (or girl) who never gets into trouble,” “the sophisticated and intellectual professor,” “the rough-around-the-edges working-class kid from the wrong side of the tracks,” “the corporate executive living out the American dream,” “the worldly trader in search of all that is new and exotic,” “the athlete,” “the loyal friend,” “the sage,” “the teacher,” “the soldier,” “the clown,” “the peacemaker,” and many more. Although certain archetypal characters from myth and folklore may provide models for imago construction (Bolen, 1985; Feinstein & Krippner, 1988), the main characters in modern life stories seem to reflect more clearly contemporary culture, including the implicit character models a society lays out for the good or appropriate life (Bellah et al., 1985; MacIntyre, 1984). Furthermore, imagoes often personify the narrative themes of agency and communion, providing models of powerful or loving action, or both. Reflecting the multiplicity of modern life, a person’s life story is likely to contain more than one major imago. Research suggests that between about two and five main imagoes can often be identified in an adult’s life story (McAdams, 1996).

7. Endings: The generativity script. Stories are expected to have endings, as well as beginnings and middles. An increasingly pressing identity task for adults as they move into and through middle age is the fashioning of an anticipated ending for the life story that ties together the beginning and middle to affirm unity, purpose, and direction in life over time. Not just any ending will do, however. Ideally, the ending should produce new beginnings. Modern adults may seek in narrative an ending that enables them to attain a kind of symbolic immortality, generating a legacy of the Me that will “live on” even after they are no longer living (Becker, 1973; Kotre, 1984; McAdams, 1985). As a result, adults are challenged in midlife and thereafter to fashion what may be termed a generativity script (McAdams, 1985; McAdams, Ruetzel, & Foley, 1986). The generativity script is that part of the life story that concerns how the adult generates, creates, nurtures, or develops a positive legacy of the self, to be offered to subsequent generations. Ideally, a generativity script provides a sense of an ending for a life story although, at the same time, suggests that the ending generates new beginnings, extending the Me into future generations and beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of a single life. In this sense, the generativity script provides a narrative mechanism whereby the I can create a Me that “outlives the self” (Kotre, 1984).

Function:
What Does a Life Story Do?

The main function of the life story is integration. By binding together disparate elements within the Me into a broader narrative frame, the selfing process can make a patterned identity out of what may appear, at first blush, to be a random and scattered life. The I can provide an integrated telling of the self as a more or less followable and believable story. To the extent that the I is successful in doing this, it meets the modern challenge to create a self-reflexive project that is unified and purposeful although defying the centrifugal forces of the modern (and postmodern) world that threaten to undermine the person’s identity work. Life stories, furthermore, consolidate the Me’s position as both unique and individuated on the one hand and embedded within a psychosocial niche on the other. More than any other aspect of the Me, the life story shows how the self is different from but connected to other mes, and to society as a whole.

To say that the main function of the life story is temporal integration of the Me, however, is not to make the broader claim that life stories serve to integrate all
of personality or the person's entire life. (The same point is made by Gregg, 1995.) As a particular quality of the Me, identity is but one part of personality, though in modern societies this is an especially important and problematic part. The whole of personality is so complex, multiply determined, and contextualized that one should be loath to exaggerate the integrative power of identity even under the cultural aegis of modernity. It is not clear, indeed, whether personality itself can be readily construed as an integrative or integrated system. The grand theories of personality disagreed with each other in rather emphatic ways on this score. Although Allport (1937) and Rogers (1951) tended to attribute a great deal of potential unity to personality as a whole, Murray (1940) spoke of personality as a "full Congress of orators and pressure groups, of children, demagogues, communists, isolationists, war-mongers, mug-wumps, grafters, log-rollers, lobbyists, Caesars and Christs, Machiavellis and Judases, Tories and Promethean revolutionists" (pp. 160–161). Therefore, although the life story may provide the Me with a sense of unity and purpose in life, the life story is still no more than a telling of the self, a modern adult's way of making narrative sense of his or her own life in time. No matter how good the story is, such a telling does not render simple, clear, or nonproblematical such questions as "What is the integrative force in this personality?" "What is the dominant pattern in this personality?" "What is the key to understanding this person?" "What makes this person tick?" Such questions can be addressed in many different ways. Some of these ways may invoke issues of identity and the life story. Others may not.

Although life stories function first and foremost to integrate the Me in time, life stories perform other functions as well. Like many kinds of stories, life stories may serve to entertain others and the self. Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982) argued that the primary reason people tell, read, watch, and listen to stories is entertainment. And stories entertain primarily by appealing to curiosity and suspense, they suggest. The reader or listener wants to know what will happen next. He or she sticks with the good story to see now things will turn out in the end. Stories that do not hold the attention of the audience are not, in that time and place, good stories. There is probably a sense in which life stories work like this, too. Few people want to have a boring life story, even if their lives are relatively uneventful. In ways both pedestrian and artful, modern men and women try to create identities that both they and others find at least modestly interesting, hoping perhaps to elicit suspense and curiosity in the audience of the Me, even when the audience is the I itself. People try to tell their lives to others in entertaining and interesting ways. The presentation of the self in everyday life is not purely strategic, as Goffman (1959) suggested; it is an exercise in artistry as well.

Although stories delight, they also instruct. Sir Philip Sidney, writing in the 16th century, was one of the first to underscore the pedagogical value of story (Daiches, 1981). Sidney justified storytelling on the grounds that stories often teach the listener a moral lesson—a lesson about what the world ought to be and what ought to be the relations among its inhabitants. From Aesop's fables to the book of Exodus, stories tell people how to live, what values to hold, and what is right and what is wrong. According to this view of story function, the listener may improve his or her moral stature by imitating the deeds of the heroes and heroines in narrative. A similar justification of story was first provided by John Dryden, in the 17th century, who argued that stories provide instruction about psychological truth and reality as well as moral worth. Stories provide the listener with insights into human nature, revealing invaluable clues about the workings of the human mind, the normal course of development, interpersonal relationships, and the fine line between genius and lunacy. In recent years, the power of stories to educate and socialize people has become the focus of an increasing amount of research and discussion among educators, social scientists, policy makers, and the clergy (Bennett, 1993; Coles, 1989; Rouse, 1978; Tappan & Brown, 1989; Vitz, 1990). There is little doubt that the stories people tell about themselves have wide-ranging and unpredictable effects on the ways in which those who hear the stories make sense of their own lives and their own worlds. People educate and socialize each other by, among other things, sharing their narrative constructions of self.

Development: How Does a Life Story Change Over Time?

The development of identity over the modern life course may be divided into three broad eras. In the first, prenarrative era, infants, children, and early adolescents gather material for the self-stories they will someday construct. Identity is not yet a part of their tellings of the Me, but they are nonetheless immersed in experiences that may have a significant effect in the long run on the stories they someday will tell to provide their lives with unity and purpose. The second era of identity proper—the narrative era—runs from the point in adolescence or young adulthood when the individual begins to create a self-defining life story through most, if not all, of adulthood, during which time identity continues to be refashioned. A third, postnarrative era may
occur in some lives, synonymous with Erikson's (1963)
stage of ego integrity versus despair, wherein the eld-
early person looks on his or her life as something that
has been and may now be reviewed or evaluated as a
near-finished product, a complete story that may be
accepted (integrity) or rejected (despair), but which can
no longer be substantially changed (McAdams, 1993).

Infants and children are not actively creating identity,
for their Me tellings do not require a consideration of life
unity and purpose. But during the prenarrative era, a
wide range of experiences in family, school, church,
neighborhood, and so forth may impact identity in the
long run by providing narrative material to be used later
on. Early experiences of attachment, for example, may
ultimately have an effect on the narrative tone of adult
identities (McAdams, 1990, 1993). Ranging from being
negativism to blissful optimism, narrative tone speaks to
the person's underlying faith in the possibilities of hu-
man intention organized in time. It reflects the extent to
which a person believes that the world can be good and
one's place can be more or less secure within it. Infants
learn the first lessons of hope and trust played out over
time in the early attachment bonds (Ainsworth &
Bowlby, 1991; Erikson, 1963). The first formative in-
fluences on narrative tone may be traced to the earliest
years of life in which each person establishes secure or
insecure attachment relationships with caregivers and
begins the process of consolidating the subjective selfing
process (the I). Secure attachment, therefore, may pro-
vide a positively toned resource for subsequent identity
formation. It may help provide lives with hope and trust
and promote an unconscious and "enduring belief in the
attainability of fervent wishes" (Erikson, 1963, p. 118)
organized in time—a deeply ingrained assumption about
life and narrative, suggesting that wishful beginnings
may lead predictably to happy endings. By contrast,
insecure attachment may provide a negatively toned
resource for identity, paving the way for a more somber
narrative tone.

Sources for imagery and theme may also be traced
back to the prenarrative years. The magical and fluid
thought patterns of the preschooler are well suited for
the appropriation and stockpiling of emotionally
charged imagery, some of which may survive into
adulthood to give texture to the adult life story. Older
children understand themselves, their worlds, and their
stories in thematic, motivational terms. They organize
their desires for power and love in terms of goals and
plans for the near future, and ultimately these motiva-
tional scripts may find their way into the stories they
construct in adulthood when they finally apprehend the
psychosocial challenge of identity. By the time one has
reached the teenage years, therefore, a great deal of
to-be-narrated material has already been gathered.

Erikson (1963) was the first to identify adolescence
as prime time for the formation of identity. Chief among
the reasons for the emergence of identity as a central
issue in the teenage years, Erikson maintained, is the
eruption of genital sexuality and its attendant changes
in body form and emotional experience. Such dramatic
changes usher in a period of questioning. Erikson sug-
gested, "Who am I? I am not what I was before. What
is next for me, now that I am no longer a child but not
yet an adult?" Social and cultural forces play a major
role as well. In modern societies, people come to expect
that adolescents will begin to shape their lives into some
kind of pattern or design. Modern adolescents are ex-
pected to struggle with the ambiguities of their new
ontological status; they are expected to begin thinking
seriously about what roles they are going to assume in
the adult world of work and families; they are expected
to leave home soon, to begin lives "on their own." It
is likely that cognitive development also plays a critical
role. Blessed now with the power of formal-operational
thought, the adolescent is able to entertain hypothetical
scenarios about such abstract issues as truth, goodness,
and self. The problem of unity and purpose in the self
becomes an intellectual/emotional problem, one worthy
of philosophical questioning and emotional investment
(Breger, 1974).

The fashioning of identity in adolescence and young
adulthood typically begins with (a) the consolidation of
an ideological setting (Erikson, 1958; McAdams,
Booth, & Selvik, 1981) and (b) the reconstruction of the
past as a personal fable containing nuclear episodes that
the I now deems to be formative for the Me (Elkind,
ideological setting situates the action of the story on a
now taken-for-granted landscape of personal belief and
value concerning what is good and what is true. It
provides a moral compass for those strivings that will
be enacted in time to form the future chapters of the
story. High points, low points, turning points, and other
nuclear episodes are chosen and reconstructed to create
followable and convincing narrative explanations for
how the past gave birth to the present, and how the
present may now pave the way for the future. Therefore,
by (a) organizing personal values into an ideological
system that is seen as arising from the past and orienting
the self to the future and (b) selecting and underscoring
key scenes from the past that explain who I am today
and who I may be tomorrow, the adolescent or young
adult begins to make a story out of the Me.

The storied reconstruction of the past is always
accomplished through the consolidation of the present
and anticipation of what is yet to come. The aspiring
medical student may choose as a turning point experi-
ence from her past the day she received her first chem-
istry set. The young man who just broke up with this girlfriend may decide that an important memory from his past was the time the girl next door told him he was conceited. He will give up on women for now. He will pour himself into his work. He will advance quickly in the company. He will create a story in which the disappointments of love are consigned to the bad old days. He will prove the women wrong. In his new story, the rags of communion will give way to the riches of agency. Past disappointments in love will be magnified so that future successes in work will prove even sweeter than they might have been had the story had a nicer beginning.

In their 20s and 30s, many modern adults concentrate their identity efforts on the fashioning and refining of imagoes. As they enter the workplace, begin raising families, and become established in various sorts of communities, they make identity commitments to various social roles, and they invest time and thought into making sense of their lives in terms of a delimited set of main characters. Selfing during this time may involve figuring out just what it means to be “the caregiver,” “the small businessman,” and so on. Selfing pushes these idealizations as far as possible, exploring the many ways in which these personified characterizations of the Me can enrich the person’s life and life story. As one moves into midlife, however, subtle changes in story making and telling may begin to appear.

First, midlife may usher in a new concern for harmony and reconciliation in the life story. Now that many different imagoes have reached their zenith of Me expression, it may be time to consider how the divergent trends and themes they personify may be reconciled or balanced. Indeed, the striving for balance in the middle-adult years is a prominent theme in life-span personality theory (Fowler, 1981; Frenkel, 1936; Gutmann, 1987; Jung, 1961; Levinson, 1977), though little empirical research has demonstrated such a trend. McAdams (1993) provided some initial data from life-story interviews suggesting that adults over the age of 40 seek harmony and balance, and reconciliation in their life stories by (a) crafting especially integrative imagoes that combine strong needs for power and love (agency and communion) and (b) identifying conflicts among different imagoes that they hope to resolve in future chapters of the narrative.

Second, midlife may focus selfing on the creation of a satisfying ending for the narrative. Though modern men and women may be at the prime of their lives in the middle years, the social clock suggests that one’s current moment in the life span is now closer to the end than to the beginning (Neugarten, 1968). Selfing may now turn with much greater intensity to the generativity script. In their 40s, 50s, and 60s, modern men and women may begin to define themselves in terms of those things, people, and ideas they generate and leave behind. Wrote Erikson (1968), in middle age and after, the modern adult comes to realize that “I am what survives me” (p. 141). In light of this shifting sense of the Me, mature adults in the modern world may recast, revise, and retell their life stories so that the past is seen as giving birth to the present and the future, so that beginning, middle, and ending make sense in terms of each other. In part, their identities may become the stories of that which will survive them—how they were created so that they might create it, nurture it, and eventually let it go.

Modern people are working on their life stories throughout most of their healthy adult years (Giddens, 1991). The “working on” is often implicit, outside the main foci of daily consciousness. But certain activities can render such work more explicit, as adults will sometimes self-consciously seek to monitor, organize, and/or revise their life stories by keeping a journal, writing or telling an autobiography, or recounting the past and anticipating the future in the service of career counseling, marriage plans, setting financial goals, making New Year’s resolutions, and various other sorts of modern life scheduling and stock taking, to say nothing of psychotherapy. Whether explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, the identity work is sometimes fast and furious, as during phases of exploration, or what Erikson (1963) called psychosocial moratorium. Periods of identity change may follow significant life changes—getting married or divorced, having one’s first child, changing jobs, changing residences, losing one’s parents or one’s spouse, menopause, retirement—although these on-time and off-time markers do not automatically cause identity change (e.g., Caspi & Moffitt, 1993). Periods of identity change may also correspond to symbolic watersheds in the life course, such as hitting one’s 40th birthday or even getting those first gray hairs. During these periods, adults may call into question some of the narrative assumptions they live by. They may recast their life stories to embody new plots and characters and to emphasize different scenes from the past and different expectations for the future. The sense of an ending may change substantially, and as the envisioned ending changes, the entire narrative may become oriented in a very different way. At other times, however, adults experience relative stability in identity. During these more tranquil periods, the story evolves slowly and in very small ways, as selfing seems to rely on assimilation over accommodation. Adults may refine slightly their imagoes or tinker in minor ways with the sense of an ending. During these quieter times, identity appears to change very little.
Individual Differences:
What Kinds of Life Stories Are There?

There currently exist no consensually validated taxonomies of life stories for modern adults. Classification schemes for stories more generally may be drawn from mythology, folklore, drama, and literary studies. For example, Campbell (1949) identified a single heroic monomyth, versions of which may be found in a great number of cultures. Expanding on Aristotle, Frye (1957) described the four mythic archetypes of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony. Elsbree (1982) suggested that most stories draw on one or more of five archetypal actions: establishing or consecrating a home, winning a contest or fighting a battle, taking a journey, enduring suffering, and pursuing consummation. In the domain of life stories, Hankiss (1981) delineated four ontologies of the self: the dynamic form, in which a positive past leads to a positive present (e.g., the rich get richer); the antithetical form, in which a negative past leads to a positive present (e.g., rags to riches); the compensatory form, in which a positive past leads to a negative present (e.g., fall from grace); and the self-absolute form, in which a negative past leads to a negative present (e.g., paying now for the sins of yesterday). In a similar vein, Gergen and Gergen (1986) identified life narratives of progress, regress, and stability.

Individual differences in life stories may be couched in terms of the different kinds of narrative tones, imagery, thematic lines, ideological settings, nuclear episodes, images, and generativity scripts that identities may express (McAdams, 1985, 1993). Thus, although every life story is unique, there may exist common dimensions on which different stories may be compared and contrasted. And there may be more or less common types of stories. One might even expect that adults sharing certain common characteristics that make them part of a well-demarcated group—say, for example, eminent scientists, professional basketball players, women who have entered the professions after raising families, and so on—would construct and tell somewhat similar life stories. Thus, life stories may indicate not only how a given individual is unique and special but how he or she partakes of a common set of narrative resources unique to a particular group or type to which he or she belongs (Carlson, 1988).

In a recent study of the life stories constructed by 70 contemporary adults, McAdams et al. (in press) identified a prototypical commitment story that tended to match the narrative constructions of those adults who had distinguished themselves in paid work, volunteer activities, and on psychological measures as strongly concerned about promoting the well-being of the next generation. The life stories of these highly generative adults differed from those produced by their less generative peers on a coherent set of narrative forms, themes, and motifs that were reliably coded in the transcribed interviews and subjected to conventional tests of statistical significance. In the overall, the prototypical commitment story constructed by the highly generative adults was a story in which the protagonist comes to believe early on that he or she has a special advantage or blessing that contrasts markedly to the pain and misfortunes suffered by many others. Experiencing the world as a place where people need to care for others, the protagonist commits the self, at an early age, to living in accord with a set of clear and enduring values and personal beliefs that continue to guide behavior throughout the life span. Moving ahead with the confidence of early blessing and steadfast belief, the protagonist encounters an expectable share of personal misfortune, disappointment, and even tragedy in life, but these bad events often become transformed or "redeemed" into good outcomes, sometimes because of the protagonist's own efforts and sometimes by chance or external design. Thus, bad things happen but they often turn into good, whereas when good things happen they rarely turn bad. Looking to the future with an expanded radius of care, the protagonist sets goals that aim to benefit others, especially those of the next generation, and to contribute to the progressive development of society as a whole and of its more worthy institutions.

The prototypical story of commitment identified in the accounts of highly generative adults is not a Pangiollian tale of mindless cheer. Nor is it a conventional fairy tale in which everybody lives happily ever after. The results of McAdams et al. (in press) suggest instead that highly generative adults construct stories that are no more optimistic in narrative tone and contain no greater number of positive or lower number of negative affect experiences than those life stories created by less generative adults. Furthermore, highly generative adults did not reconstruct their childhoods as any more secure in key interpersonal relationships than did the less generative adults. Virtually all of the life story accounts contained a mixture of positive and negative affect. What distinguished the accounts of the highly generative adults from those of the contrasting sample, however, was the sequencing of affective scenes. Bad scenes tended to precede and eventually give birth to good. Put another way, good scenes often had their origins in bad scenes. Thus, one important function of negative affect scenes in the life stories of highly generative adults may be to set up or prepare the way for the emergence of good scenes, accentuating the good scenes through narrative contrast. The less generative adults rarely set their stories up this way. Indeed, they tended to employ the reverse strategy—a "contamina-
tion sequence,” in which a good scene functioned to set up an eventual negative outcome. Yet the stories of the less generative adults were not more negative overall.

In the case of highly generative adults, life stories emphasizing an early family blessing, the suffering of others, redemptive affect sequences, and moral steadfastness function to sustain and reinforce their generative efforts. This kind of story constitutes one especially powerful identity format for modern adults who are committed to doing good work for the next generation. This kind of life story provides a discourse for the self that supports a caring, compassionate, and responsible approach to social life (see also Colby & Damon, 1992). Yet, there doubtless exist other common types of life stories well suited for making sense of the lives of highly generative adults in modern society. Beyond the circumscribed realm of generativity and social responsibility, furthermore, lies a vast and virtually uncharted terrain for researchers seeking to collect, describe, and analyze the psychosocial constructions of human lives in narrative terms. Certain kinds of life stories may be associated, for example, with certain age groups and historical cohorts, representatives of certain socio-economic strata and niches, certain professions, religious and political groups, subcultures, and even personality types defined by their characteristic trait or concern patterns. Should this kind of narrative research proliferate in the future, psychologists would begin to catalog and systematize the many prevalent forms of identity constructed by men and women in modern societies.

Mental Health:
What Is a Good Life Story?

In commenting on Freud’s famous case study of “Dora,” Marcus (1977) wrote:

What we are led at this juncture to conclude is that Freud is implying that a coherent story is in some manner connected with mental health (at the very least, with the absence of hysteria), and this in turn implies assumptions of the broadest and deepest kind about both the nature of coherence and the form and structure of human life. On this reading, human life is, ideally, a connected and coherent story, with all the details in explanatory place, and with everything (or as close to everything that is practically possible) accounted for, in its proper causal or other sequence. And inversely, illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself. (p. 413)

One of Freud’s implicit aims for the Dora psychoanalysis was to expose as faulty or inadequate the young girl’s manifest story about her own neurosis. The “better” story was the one that was beginning to emerge in therapy as the latent tendencies and conflicts in her life rose to the surface. Had Dora not cut the analysis short, Marcus suggested, Freud might have reformulated her story to encompass the many tawdry plots and frightening themes that functioned, because of their repressed status, as the sources of her anxiety and her symptoms. The psychoanalytic cure, therefore, involves making conscious narrative out of that which has been repressed. In this way, the ego can triumph over neurosis. The selfing process is empowered to the extent that the unstoried chaos of the unconscious can be brought under conscious narrative control.

Today, some psychoanalysts and therapists of other stripes draw explicitly on the story metaphor to conceptualize what goes on in the therapy hour. The analyst and the therapist and client, work together to revise or rewrite a life narrative that no longer works well. In this sense, a good life narrative is internally coherent, makes for a continuous plot line in which early events “cause” or logically lead to later events, embodies closure and a sense of things fitting together into a final form, and is aesthetically appealing (Schafer, 1981; Spence, 1982; Steele, 1982). Storied constructions like these embody what Spence (1982) called narrative truth:

Narrative truth can be defined as the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality. Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that such and such is a good story, that a given explanation carries conviction, that one solution to a mystery must be true. Once a given construction has acquired narrative truth, it becomes just as real as any other kind of truth; this new reality becomes a significant part of the psychoanalytic cure. (p. 31)

Mental health surely involves much more than narrative truth in life. Psychiatric disorders of many kinds and other serious problems in living have multiple determinants and levels of meaning that are outside the domain of identity and the life story. Panic attacks and phobias may have little to do with identity; psychotic delusions indicate problems in selfing so severe that reformulating one’s identity seems rather moot. Nonetheless, a great many problems in modern living about which people consult with therapists, counselors, ministers, and so on speak directly to how people make sense of their lives in narrative terms. It is worth considering, therefore, what kinds of criteria modern adults, as well as mental health professionals, might employ in critically evaluating life stories in the interest
of effecting positive life change. Such criteria might also double as standards for maturity in adult identity, for the development of modern identity in the adult years should ideally move in the direction of increasingly good narrative form (McAdams, 1993, 1996). At least six standards of good life-story form may be identified: (a) coherence, (b) openness, (c) credibility, (d) differentiation, (e) reconciliation, and (f) generative integration.

Coherence refers to the extent to which a given story makes sense on its own terms. Do the characters do things that make sense in the context of the story? Do the motivations for their behavior make sense in terms of what is generally known about how human beings, in a given culture, act? Do events follow events in a causal manner? Do parts of the story contradict other parts? A story that lacks coherence is one that leaves the reader scratching his or her head, wondering why things turned out in such an inexplicable, puzzling way.

Some stories, however, are almost too coherent. They hang together so neatly that they seem too consistent to be true. A life story need not make everything fit together in a person’s life. Modern adults do not need perfect consistency to find unity and purpose in life. Indeed, a good life story is one that also shows considerable openness to change and tolerance for ambiguity. From the standpoint of postmodernity, openness would appear to be an especially crucial criterion. An open story propels the person into the future by holding open a number of different alternatives for future action and thought. In contemporary social life, life stories need to be flexible and resilient. They need to be able to change, grow, and develop as both the I and the Me change over time. Openness is, nonetheless, a difficult criterion to judge in life stories, for there is always the danger that too much openness reflects lack of commitment and resolve.

The third standard is credibility. The good, mature, and adaptive life story cannot be based on gross distortions of fact. Identity is not a fantasy. Modern adults create their identities, for sure. But they do not create them out of thin air, as one might a poem or a story of pure fiction. In identity, the good story should be accountable to the facts that can be known or found out. Although identity is a creative work of the imagination, it is still grounded in the real world in which storytellers live.

The good story is rich in characterization, plot, and theme. The reader is drawn into a complexly textured world in which full-bodied characters develop in intriguing ways over time, and their actions and interactions define compelling plots and subplots, as tension builds to climax and then resolution. In other words, good story tends to be richly differentiated. Similarly, a life story should develop in the direction of increasing differentiation. As the adult matures and gathers new experiences, his or her life story takes on more and more facets and characterizations. It may become richer, deeper, and more complex. As differentiation increases, however, the adult may seek reconciliation between and among conflicting forces in the story, harmony and resolution amidst the multiplicity of self. The good story raises tough issues and dynamic contradictions. And the good story provides narrative solutions that affirm the harmony and integrity of the Me. Reconciliation is an especially challenging task for selfing in midlife and beyond.

The sixth standard for good story form in identity may be called generative integration. To understand this last criterion, one must remember that a life story is about a human life. It is not simply a story that one might read in the New Yorker magazine. It is a narrative rendering of a particular life of a real person living in a particular society at a particular point in history. The human life exists in a social and ethical context that does not generally apply, or apply in the same way, to other kinds of stories (Booth, 1988). In mature identity, the adult is able to function as a productive and contributing member of society. He or she is able to take on adult roles in the spheres of work and family. He or she is able and willing to guide the next generation, to contribute in some small or large way to the survival, enhancement, or progressive development of the human enterprise. Mature identity in modern adulthood requires a creative involvement in a social world that is larger and more enduring than the self. It is to that world, as well as to the Me, therefore, that the story is to be oriented. Ideally, the I’s search for unity and purpose in the Me should benefit both the person fashioning the story and the society within which the story is fashioned.

Conclusion

Pioneers in the history of personality psychology envisioned the new discipline as the integrative centerpiece for all of psychology (Allport, 1937; Murray, 1938; Sanford, 1963). Personality psychology was to provide a comprehensive framework for studying individual persons in society, a framework that might help those psychologists who focused on learning, motivation, development, social processes, psychopathology, and other demarcated topics to organize their inquiries and their results in terms of human persons. Not all of psychology need be person centered, Allport wrote, but personality psychology should nonetheless provide the conceptual tools for thinking about psychology in terms of persons.
Despite their enduring appeal, the grand theories developed in the early days of personality psychology never quite succeeded in their efforts to orient psychology around persons. Although the grand theories still have a great deal of appeal, they tend to claim too much about all persons in general and say too little about the individual person in cultural context. As personality psychologists in later years focused their attention on the elaboration of personality constructs, they moved further and further away from what Allport saw as the field’s fundamental mission. Fifty years of research on motives, traits, schemas, and so forth have provided important advances in methodology and technique and have left personality psychology with a rich but rather confusing conceptual yield. Efforts to bring these balkanized research programs into a centralized conceptual system have been few and disappointing. Even the recent emergence of the Big Five as a dominant trait taxonomy has failed to provide a framework that is comprehensive enough to account for the many facets of personality and contemporary enough to make sense of the problems of modern selfhood.

The resurgence of personality psychology in the last 15 years suggests that the time may be right to take up anew the challenge of constructing integrative conceptual frameworks for studying the person. Creating the grand theory for all of personality is probably still too ambitious a task. But personality psychologists would do well to consider how the substantial advances the field has witnessed since the time of Allport might be reconstrued in terms of broad and integrative conceptual frameworks that specify what a scientist needs to know if he or she is to know well the individual person. Scientists and professionals in developmental, social, industrial-organizational, clinical, and counseling psychology should look to personality psychology for guidance in understanding individual persons. Sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists, too, may find that personality psychology can provide them with integrative frameworks for contextualizing their own research and theorizing about persons.

This article offers a provisional framework for studying the individual person in the cultural context of modernity. It is a framework founded on a clear distinction between the self-as-I and the self-as-me, and the articulation of three relatively independent levels or domains of personality functioning that specify dispositional traits, personal concerns, and life stories. There is no simple, single key to understanding the individual person, no fundamental level of rock-bottom truth. And there is no way to divorce culture from the person, no way to take the “modern” out of contemporary persons in modern societies, if one is to understand persons in the comprehensive way that Allport and other founders of personality psychology envisioned. The conceptual framework proposed in this article keeps the person in context. But it also displays the many and complex ways the person functions as an individual in the context, how the modern man or woman exists and develops as a complex and richly textured individual whose very individuality requires a complex and richly textured scientific account.

Notes

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