3 Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Identity

Theory, Research, and Clinical Implications

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Going back to Freud, clinicians have listened to, tried to understand, and tried to change the stories their patients tell them. Different therapeutic approaches have tended to privilege different kinds of stories and to suggest different strategies for interpretation and intervention. Classic psychoanalysis, for example, has traditionally sought to unmask the disguised meanings of manifest dream narratives. Carl Rogers taught an empathic stance toward life narrative: Therapists were to encourage and affirm their clients' autobiographical recollections, holding back critical judgment and expressing the necessary unconditional positive regard through which a client might eventually actualize the good inner self. Cognitive-behavioral therapists pay careful attention to personal narratives, too, as they work to reframe negativistic and depressogenic life stories in more positive, productive, and life-affirming terms. Cutting across a wide range of theoretical orientations, many therapists implicitly know that human beings are natural storytellers, that autobiographical stories reflect personal issues, that therapy involves working with the stories people bring to the session, and that to change a person's life story is, in effect, to change the person. Indeed, this perspective has led some to contend that narrative ought to serve as "a non-trivial point of convergence for the therapy field" (Angus & McLeod, 2004, p. 373).

Although it has developed largely within the fields of personality and lifespan developmental psychology, the broad theory described in this chapter, as well as the growing body of research it has generated, is simpatico with what many psychotherapists know, feel, and experience in their daily work: Human beings create stories and then live according to them.
Over the past 20 years, one of us (McAdams) has articulated a life-story model of adult identity, which proposes that people living in modern societies begin, in their late-adolescent and young-adult years, to construe their lives as ongoing autobiographical stories, reconstructing the past, interpreting the present, and imagining the future in such a way as to provide life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning (McAdams, 1985, 1993, 2001, 2006). A person’s narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that he or she is implicitly working on, a story that continues to develop as the person moves through the adult life course. The life-story model of identity anticipated a broad turn toward narrative in the social and behavioral sciences over the past two decades (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Josselson & Lieblitch, 1993) while reflecting parallel theoretical developments in cognitive, social, developmental, industrial-organizational, and cultural psychology. The model sets forth a conceptual agenda for understanding the development of narrative identity over time, the place of narrative in personality and culture, the different kinds of stories people tell and live by, the role of narrative in making sense of human suffering and loss, and the role of life narrative in mental health. Picking up on the last point, the life-story model of adult identity resonates with the emergence, in recent years, of narrative therapy within clinical circles (e.g., Angus & McLeod, 2004; White & Epston, 1990) and suggests implications for understanding many forms of psychotherapy and counseling as narrative interventions (Lieblitch, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004).

STARTING POINT: THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

In his famous eight-stage model of psychosocial development, Erik Erikson (1963) argued that adolescents and young adults face the challenge of constructing a unifying and purposeful ego identity. Erikson argued that identity versus role confusion defines the central psychosocial problem for this period in the human life course. The problem stems from many sources. The first is sex. The eruption of puberty, the emergence of primary and secondary sexual characteristics, the resurgence of the adolescent libido, the thrill and the anxiety that accompany the full realization of one’s own sexual potential—all of this and more usher in new concerns about the self: “Who am I now? I no longer feel like a child, but am I really an adult?”

Second, taking his lead from Piaget, Erikson asserted that the adolescent mind is a newly abstract and ideological mind. Blessed now with what Piaget (1970) called formal operational thinking, the adolescent is able to reason about his or her life in highly abstract and hypothetical terms. The self becomes an object of abstract speculation—and fascination. “What might I be? How might my life be different if I were black instead of white? Male instead of female? An atheist instead of a Catholic?” As a result of their new cognitive powers, many adolescents and young adults become interested in philosophical and ideological issues. “What do I really believe? What is true for me? What does my life mean?” These kinds of questions make no sense to an 8-year-old. Children may know who they are, Erikson argued, but they do not know that such knowing is potentially problematic. Before adolescence, we do not really have an identity because we are not endowed with the cognitive software required to understand that having an identity is a really big, contested, and complex psychological deal.

Third, and arguably most important, identity emerges as an issue in adolescence and
young adulthood because society mandates that this is indeed the right time for its emergence, especially in modern Western societies (Giddens, 1991). Compulsory schooling ends in the teenage years. It is now time to leave home, get a job, go off to college or the military, or take some other demonstrable step toward the autonomy and the responsibilities that come with adulthood. Parents, teachers, counselors, friends, and others encourage the adolescent to begin to think about his or her life from a broader, more abstract, and more long-term perspective. Identity becomes an on-time developmental task. "What are you going to do now? What kind of life are you going to make?" These kinds of questions may motivate the adolescent to rethink the truisms of childhood, even to rebel against norms, standards, conventions, and assumptions that were taken for granted in the past. Erikson suggested that many adolescents and young adults enter a period of psychosocial moratorium, wherein they experiment with new values, beliefs, aspirations, and goals for the future. Whether through outright rebellion or concerted introspection, the adolescent or young adult endeavors to find and/or create a psychosocial niche in the adult world. Among the most important components of the niche are ideology, occupation, and intimacy. As we move into adulthood, Erikson argued, we come to define ourselves, in part, through what we believe, what we do for a living, and with whom we come to share our lives.

The optimal development of ego identity helps to integrate the self and meaningfully situate the person in the adult world. The psychosocial integration of which Erikson wrote seems to have two forms (McAdams, 1985). First, identity integrates a life synchronically. It helps to organize the many contemporaneous roles, talents, proclivities, interests, goals, and situational demands that characterize a person's inner and outer lives into a more or less coherent pattern. With the achievement of identity, the person comes to feel that he or she is authentic in some sense, that he or she is living in such a way that seems both intrinsically right (true to the self) and more or less consistent with what society, or some valued group within society, expects. Second, identity integrates a life diachronically, that is, in time. Erikson contended that identity challenges the individual to discern threads of continuity between the past, present, and imagined future. Within a coherent, integrative identity, who I am now should make sense in terms of who I believe I was in the past and who I anticipate being in the future.

IDENTITY AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STORY

Identity, then, is a self-constructed configuration or patterning of the self that integrates disparate psychological elements—talents, needs, beliefs and values, goals, important memories, important roles—in such a way as to provide a person with a sense that his or her life is more or less unified over time and across life contexts and meaningfully situated within the ideological, economic, social, and cultural ecology of the adult world. What form might such a configuration take? If identity were a tangible thing, what might it look like? How might it be structured? Psychologists have looked long and hard for a guiding metaphor to capture the rich meaning of Erikson's concept of identity. For example, one line of thinking holds that identity itself is structured like a theory (Epstein, 1973). People construct theories of themselves, complete with axioms, models, and testable hypotheses. The identity-as-theory view recalls George Kelly's (1955) conception of human beings as lay scientists, seeking to predict and explain the world and themselves, testing hypotheses as they move through life. In a
similar vein, a large number of cognitively oriented perspectives in psychology underscore the ways in which people process self-relevant information, imagining the self as something like a schema or frame or network of associations within which mental representations of self-relevant phenomena are organized.

There are at least two fundamental problems, however, with efforts to translate Erikson's concept of identity into purely cognitive, information-processing terms. First, the resultant metaphors seem rather bloodless and effete when set up against the experientially rich and emotionally complex configuration that Erikson describes. Adolescents and young adults may indeed be formulating new theories about themselves, but, psychosocially speaking, they seem to be doing so much more. Second, most cognitive conceptions of identity fail to capture the sense in which identity integrates a life in time. Erikson argued that identity arranges the self in such a way as to show how the past has given birth to the present and how the present will give birth to the future. The configuration or patterning that Erikson viewed as identity itself seems to be organized, in large part, along temporal lines. As such, identity explains who I once was, how I came to be who I am today, and where my life may be headed in the future. It is fundamentally about beginnings, middles, and endings. Thinking about Erikson's conception in this way leads naturally to a metaphor that seems rather more organic and dynamic than what is typically offered by cognitive psychology: the metaphor of identity as a story.

McAdams (1985) first proposed that identity can be viewed as an internalized and evolving story of the self—a personal myth—that persons living in modern societies begin to construct in late adolescence and young adulthood. The story is situated within an ideological setting, or backdrop of fundamental belief and value upon which the plot unfolds. The plot contains key autobiographical scenes, what Singer and Salovey (1993) called self-defining memories. These are vivid and often emotionally charged episodes from the past, such as high points, low points, and turning points in life. The story also features central characters or personal imagos (McAdams, 1985). An imago is an idealized personification of the self that captures a select group of important traits, goals, roles, relationships, or identifications in a person's life and serves to function as one of the main characters in the story—the self-as-loving-father, for example, or the self-as-tough-guy-who-grew-up-on-the-wrong-side-of-town. As Erikson knew, modern adults play many different roles in life and express many different, and often contradictory, psychological qualities. Therefore, a life story may contain many different imagos, many different personifications of the self, each serving as a character in the same story. As Bruner (1990) argued, characters strive to accomplish goals and overcome obstacles over narrative time. Among the most compelling goals are those linked to power and love, or what Bakan (1966) called agency and communion, respectively. McAdams (1985) proposed that agency (with its attendant strivings for power, achievement, autonomy, self-improvement, self-expansion, self-insight) and communion (encompassing erotic love, friendship, intimacy, caregiving, belongingness, community) are the two most general and most common thematic lines in adults' life stories.

Although life stories begin to emerge in consciousness in late adolescence and young adulthood, people implicitly gather material for the stories they will eventually create from the first day of life onward (McAdams, 1993; Tomkins, 1979). For example, the quality of early attachment bonds may ultimately come to shape how the person makes narrative sense of life in the adult years. Insecure attachments may predispose a person to construct a life story with a relatively negative or tragic narrative tone, a story in which characters
do not enjoy the confidence that their world is secure and that their best intentions will lead to happy endings. By contrast, secure attachments in infancy may pave the way for the construction of more positive—comic and romantic—personal stories in adulthood. Early experiences of many sorts may eventually become the grist for the narrative mill of identity. (See also, Shorey, Chapter 9, this volume.)

But identity is not simply determined by past experience. Instead, the past is open to constant reinterpretation—to the selective, creative, and adaptive powers of the storytelling self. Anticipating contemporary research on autobiographical memory, Erikson (1963) argued that people work hard to transform the past into something that makes sense in terms of who they are today and who they may be in the future. Like revisionist historians, self-storytellers recast the past into a meaningful and convincing narrative, a myth that explains the self's origins and its destiny. Erikson described it best in this passage:

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

In hundreds of studies cognitive psychologists have documented the selective and interpretive nature of autobiographical memory (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Rubin, 2006). As far as memory goes, the personal past is nothing like a long videotape that can be readily played back at the push of a button. Most of the events in a person's life are forgotten soon after they occur, and those that are remembered may be subject to a wide range of biases, mistakes, and distortions. Whereas people usually remember well the thematic and emotional gist of important events from the distant past, memory for specific details is typically less reliable. Furthermore, what is summoned forth from the autobiographical storehouse is often shaped and contoured according to current concerns and future goals (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). In an important psychological sense, the past is always up for grabs in autobiographical memory. People do not consciously misremember or create fantasies out of thin air, but they do implicitly and naturally give their recollections of the past narrative form, smoothing out inconsistencies, sharpening transitions, embellishing characters, and introducing drama, tension, conflict, climax, resolution, and the many other features expected of good stories.

Narrative identity summons forth and organizes those relatively few autobiographical memories that seem (to the person who remembers them) most important for the formation of the self and links those memories to both the person's understanding of his or her current station in life and his or her aspirations, dreams, hopes, and plans for the future. Therefore, a life story is not synonymous with the whole of one's autobiographical memory but instead is a highly selective and reorganized subset of recollections from the personal past that is linked in narrative to how the person sees the present and imagines the broad outlines of the future. Narrative identity is comprised of the stories that stick around. As a collection, these stories demonstrate how a person came to be, who a person is now, and where a person's life is going.
Research has shown that it is not until late adolescence and young adulthood that people are able and motivated to use autobiographical memory in the service of constructing full life stories (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Therefore, it is during that same period in the life course, when identity steps to the fore, that the human mind focuses its powers on the construction of a coherent narrative of the self, an autobiographical story that provides a single life, situated in time and culture, with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning. With further development and life experience, people continue to work on their life stories, reconstructing the autobiographical past and reimagining the future, as they move into and through their middle-adult years and beyond. At least through late midlife, adults' life stories develop in the direction of greater narrative richness, thematic coherence, and integration of the self (McAdams, 1993; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006).

DIFFERENT KINDS OF STORIES AND THEIR PLACE IN PERSONALITY AND CULTURE

People tell many different kinds of stories about their lives. Researchers have examined variations in structure and content of life stories, and they have linked these variations to a wide range of psychological and social variables. Empirical findings strongly suggest that individual differences in narrative identity relate to other important aspects of personality, to psychological well-being, and to socially consequential life outcomes.

Some narrative accounts are relatively simple in structure whereas others exhibit high levels of complexity, differentiation, and integration. More complex life stories have been linked to higher levels of ego development and the personality trait of openness to experience. For example, McAdams (1985) found that people who score relatively high on Loewinger’s (1976) measure of ego development—indicating a more nuanced and mature perspective on the self and the world—tended to construct life narratives with a greater number of plots, characters, and interrelated themes. Ego development predicts greater complexity in narrative accounts of one’s life in full and in more circumscribed narratives of particular domains in life. For example, McAdams, Booth, and Selvik (1981) found that religious college students scoring high in ego development tended to construe their own religious development as a story of struggle, ambivalence, and exploration. Those scoring at relatively low levels of ego development, suggesting a less nuanced and more conformist perspective on self and world, tended to tell stories of continuity in religious development, showing how their beliefs and values had remained the same over time, even in the face of challenge and doubt. In addition, McAdams et al. (2004) found that students high on the self-reported trait of openness to experience constructed self-defining autobiographical memories that expressed more motivational conflict, emotional complexity, and multiple points of view, than did students lower in openness to experience.

A number of studies have linked thematic lines of agency and communion in life stories to power and intimacy motivation, respectively (e.g., McAdams, 1982; Woike, Gersekovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999). People who score high on measures of the need for power tend to construct life stories that showcase strong and assertive protagonists who seek to effect big changes in their instrumental and interpersonal worlds—classical images of the warrior, the sage, and the adventurer. People with strong needs for intimacy display more communal images, like the caregiver, the friend, and the lover, and they tailor their life stories to accentuate
attachment bonds and their connections to human communities. Some life stories feature strong tendencies toward both agency and communion, sometimes narrating dramatic conflicts between these two thematic lines. Life stories that show high levels of both agentic and communal content are often associated with personality and social characteristics indicative of a strong commitment to both parental and occupational roles as well as high levels of community involvement and what Erikson (1963) called *generativity*, or an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moscovitz, 2000; McAdams, 2006).

A growing body of research links individual differences in life narratives to psychological well-being and mental health. Bauer and colleagues have shown that people who prioritize intrinsic motivations in their life stories—motivations that spring from inner desires for personal fulfillment rather than extrinsic goals of status and social acceptance—tend to score higher on measures of subjective well-being than do individuals whose life stories show fewer themes of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). Happiness and well-being have also been associated with life stories that show positive resolution of life conflicts (e.g., King & Hicks, 2006).

Researchers also have identified a form of life narration that appears to be strongly linked to depression and low levels of psychological well-being. In a *contamination sequence*, the narrator describes a scene that begins with joy, excitement, or some other highly positive emotional state but turns suddenly and irrevocably negative (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). The bad outcome of the scene undoes, contaminates, or ruins all the good that preceded it. Adler, Kisel, and McAdams (2006) coded lengthy life-narrative interviews told by midlife adults for evidence of contamination imagery. They also coded the same accounts for the depressogenic attributional style—assigning negative events to stable and global causes—a way of thinking and narrating that is linked to depressive symptoms. The number of contamination sequences identified in the autobiographical texts was a stronger predictor of self-reported depression than was depressogenic attributional style (Adler et al., 2006).

Life stories are both influenced by personality variables, such as traits and motives, and are part and parcel of personality itself. McAdams and Pals (2006) have developed a broad conceptual model that divides personality into three separate levels or domains (see also, Singer, 2005). Level 1 includes broad *dispositional traits*, such as those encompassed in the well-known Big Five trait taxonomy (extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience; McCrae & Costa, 1990). Accounting for broad consistencies in behavior and thought across situations and over time, dispositional traits sketch an outline of psychological individuality. Level 2 includes *characteristic adaptations*—motives, goals, domain-specific strategies, values, interests, schemas, and a wide assortment of more specific personality constructs, contextualized in developmental time, social place, and/or social role. These adaptations fill in many of the details of psychological individuality. Level 3 consists of integrative *life stories* that comprise narrative identity. These stories speak to the overall meaning of a person's life. Personality, then, can be seen as a person's unique and evolving patterning of *traits, adaptations*, and *narratives* set in time and culture.

Social and cultural factors have an impact on all three levels of personality. Culture has a modest impact on the development of dispositional traits by providing rules and norms for the display of trait-related behavior. For example, high levels of extraversion may be expressed in very different ways in, say, New York City and Kyoto, Japan. Culture has a stronger psycholog...
stronger impact on the timing and the content of characteristic adaptations. For example, psychologists have uncovered significant differences between collectivist East Asian and more individualistic North American societies with respect to favored values, motives, and goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Culture has its strongest impact, however, on life narratives. Indeed, life narratives may themselves be seen as cultural texts (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Culture provides people with a menu of images, metaphors, plots, characters, and expected endings regarding how to live a good or worthy life. People pick and choose from the menu, appropriating certain cultural forms and rejecting others as they construct a narrative of the self that captures their lived experience and helps their life make sense (McAdams, 2006). Different cultures allow for varying degrees of innovation in the construction of a narrative identity, but all cultures place limits on what can be told. More importantly, cultures set the full storytelling agenda for lives. They specify the very parameters of story coherence and comprehensibility. In a very real sense, then, every life story is jointly authored by the purported storyteller, him- or herself, and by the cultural milieu within which the story finds its meanings.

NARRATING SUFFERING, GROWTH, AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION

How do people tell stories of life’s defeats, suffering, pain, and loss? The many trials and setbacks that invariably confront people as they move through the adult life course offer the greatest challenges to the construction of a coherent narrative identity. But they also often provide the greatest opportunities. In both life and literature, good stories invariably include danger, suffering, and daunting obstacles to the protagonist’s quest (Bruner, 1990). A rapidly growing body of research examines how people narrate negative events in their lives and how these narrations contribute to, or sometimes undermine, psychological health, growth, and development.

When it comes to life storytelling, there are many ways to narrate negative events. Perhaps the most common response is to discount the event in some way. The most extreme examples of discounting fall under the rubrics of repression, denial, and dissociation. Some stories are so bad that they simply cannot be told—cannot be told to others and, in many cases, cannot really be told to the self. Freeman (1993) argues that some traumatic and especially shameful experiences in life cannot be incorporated into narrative identity because the narrator (and perhaps the narrator’s audience as well) lacks the world assumptions, cognitive constructs, or experiential categories needed to make sense of the story. Less extreme are examples of what Taylor (1983) called positive illusions. People may simply overlook the negative aspects of life events and exaggerate the potentially positive meanings. For example, “I may be sick, but I am not nearly as sick as my good friend’s husband”; “God is testing my resolve, and I will rise to the challenge.” Bonanno (2004) has shown that many people experience surprisingly little angst and turmoil when stricken with harsh misfortunes in life. People often show resilience in the face of adversity, Bonanno maintains. Rather than ruminate over the bad things that happen in their lives, they put it all behind them and move forward. (See also, Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, Chapter 13, and Dijkstra, Gibbons, & Buunk, Chapter 11, this volume.)

In many situations, however, people cannot or choose not to discount negative life
events. Instead, they try to make meaning out of the suffering they are currently experiencing, or experienced once upon a time. For example, McLean and Thorne (2003) showed that adolescents often report learning lessons and gaining insights from self-defining memories that involve conflict with others. Pals (2006) argues that autobiographical reasoning about negative events ideally involves a two-step process. In the first step the narrator explores the negative experience in depth, thinking long and hard about what the experience feels or felt like, how it came to be, what it may lead to, and what role the negative event may play in one's overall understanding of self. In the second step, the narrator articulates and commits the self to a positive resolution of the event. Pals (2006) warns that one should not pass lightly over the first step. When it comes to narrative identity, Pals suggests, the unexamined life lacks depth and meaning.

Consistent with Pals (2006), a number of studies have shown that exploring negative life events in detail is associated with psychological maturity. For example, King and colleagues have asked people who have faced daunting life challenges to tell stories of what might have been, had their lives developed in either a more positive or more expected direction (see King & Hicks, 2006, for an overview). In one study mothers of infants with Down syndrome reflected upon what their lives might have been like had they given birth to babies not affected by the syndrome. Those mothers who were able to articulate detailed and thoughtful accounts, suggesting a great deal of exploration and meaning making in their processing of this negative life event, tended to score higher on Loevinger's (1976) measure of ego development than did mothers who discounted what might have been (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). In other studies, King and colleagues examined life narrative accounts from women who had been divorced after many years of marriage and from gay and lesbian adults who reflected on what might have been had they been straight (King & Raspin, 2004; King & Smith, 2005). In both studies psychological maturity was associated with greater personal exploration in narrative accounts, and greater exploration predicted increases in maturity in a 2-year follow-up.

The second step in making narrative sense of negative life events involves constructing a positive meaning or resolution (Pals, 2006). This can be done in many ways. The narrator may derive a particular lesson from the event (e.g., "I learned that I should never criticize my mother") or a more general insight about life (e.g., "I realized how important it is to cherish every moment") (McLean & Thorne, 2003). The narrator may show how the negative event ultimately made it possible for very positive events to occur later, on or how it turned the person's life in a positive direction (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). The positive turn in life may involve a move toward activities that are of deep intrinsic interest to the person, serving to reconnect the person to what he or she feels to be the "true" or authentic self (Bauer et al., 2005). Or the positive turn may enhance intimacy and consolidate social relationships (King & Smith, 2005). When narrators are able to derive positive or redemptive meanings from negative life events, they may feel that they have now fully worked through the event and attained a sense of narrative closure.

Numerous studies have shown that deriving positive meanings from negative events is associated with life satisfaction and indicators of emotional well-being (e.g., King & Hicks, 2006; McAdams et al., 2001). Finding positive meanings in negative events, furthermore, is the central theme that runs through McAdams's (2006) conception of the redemptive self. In a series of nomothetic and case-based studies conducted over the past 15 years, McAdams and colleagues have consistently found that midlife American adults who score especially high or the well

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high on self-report measures of generativity—suggesting a strong commitment to promoting
the well-being of future generations and improving the world in which they live (Erikson,
1963)—tend to see their own lives as narratives of redemption. Compared to their less
generative American counterparts, highly generative adults tend to construct life stories that
feature redemption sequences in which the protagonist is delivered from suffering to an
enhanced status or state.

Beyond redemption sequences themselves, highly generative American adults are also
more likely than their less generative peers to construct life stories in which the protagonist
(1) enjoys a special advantage or blessing early in life, (2) expresses sensitivity to the suffering
of others or societal injustice as a child, (3) establishes a clear and strong value system in ado-
lescence that remains a source of unwavering conviction through the adult years, (4) experiences
significant conflicts between desires for agency/potence and communion/love, and (5)
seeks to achieve goals to benefit society in the future. Taken together, these themes articulate
a general script or narrative prototype that many highly generative American adults employ
to make sense of their own lives. With its moral mandate to give back in gratitude for early
blessings received, with its unwavering conviction regarding the goodness and truth of one’s
quest, and with the confidence that the story instills regarding the possibility that bad things
can be overcome, the redemptive self serves to support a life committed to making a positive
difference in the world. This is a good story to have, or to make, if one wishes to leave a
positive mark on the world for generations to come.

At the same time, the redemptive self may say as much about American culture and tradition
as it does about the highly generative American adults who tend to tell this kind of story
about their lives. The life-story themes expressed by highly generative American adults recapture
and enshrine in a psychological language especially cherished, as well as hotly contested,
ideas in American cultural history—ideas that appear prominently in spiritual accounts of
the 17th-century Puritans, Benjamin Franklin’s 18th-century autobiography, slave narratives
and Horatio Alger stories from the 19th century, and the literatures of self-help and American
entrepreneurship from more recent times (McAdams, 2006). Evolving from the Puritans
to Emerson to Oprah, the redemptive self has morphed into many different storied forms
in the past 300 years as Americans have sought to narrate their lives as redemptive tales of
atonement, emancipation, recovery, self-fulfillment, and upward social mobility. The stories
speak of heroic individual protagonists—the chosen people—whose manifest destiny is to
make a positive difference in a dangerous world, even when the world does not wish to be
redeemed. The stories translate a deep and abiding script of American exceptionalism into
the many contemporary narratives of success, recovery, development, liberation, and self-
actualization that so pervade American popular discourse, talk shows, therapy sessions, ser-
mons, and commencement speeches. It is as if especially generative American adults, whose
lives are dedicated to making the world a better place for future generations, are, for better
and sometimes worse, the most ardent narrators of a general life story format as American
as apple pie and the Super Bowl.

**CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS: NARRATIVES AND THERAPY**

Psychotherapy is a redemptive enterprise. Through therapy, people work to transform suf-
ferring into well-being, convert confusion into coherence, and edit their self-stories in order to
open up new possibilities for being. In modern American culture, therapy has come to represent the obvious place for revising the self (Cushman, 1995), and regardless of the specific content of treatment or the therapeutic orientation of the clinician, the work of therapy can easily be understood in narrative terms.

In recent years psychotherapists and counselors have developed new approaches that make the work of editing and revising one's personal stories the explicit focus of treatment. For example, White and Epston (1990) encourage clients to externalize their problems, objectifying them and personifying them as entities distinct from the self, with whom they are currently in a difficult relationship. They contend that this practice fosters a sense of authorship of one's own life story and empowers clients to reauthor these stories in ways that are more conducive to psychological well-being. This process of editing and revising is undertaken both literally, through the use of letter writing (between client and therapist, between client and important others, and between client and personified problems) throughout treatment, and ultimately at the level of narrative identity.

Others have also explicitly incorporated narrative techniques into the therapist's toolbox. For example, Angus, Levitt, and Hardtke (1999) developed a taxonomy of narrative processes that occur in the therapeutic context. They identified examples of clients who adopted one of three different modes: external (telling stories about a life event), internal (providing a descriptive elaboration of subjective experiences of an event), and reflexive (reflecting, interpreting, or analyzing an event or one's subjective experiences of the event). The authors developed an empirical and reliable coding system for these three narrative processes and suggested that a client's distinctive pattern of shifts between processes has important implications for therapy, because such shifts may signal emotional distress or disrupt the coherence of the treatment.

Psychotherapy can thus be understood as a fundamentally narrative endeavor—one in which clients and therapists use stories as tools and seek to revise and edit the problematic stories of episodes that have been incorporated into the client's narrative identity. The precise mechanisms whereby therapy works in this context could be many—from giving clients a safe arena wherein they can simply talk about experiences they have avoided talking about in the past to providing opportunities for making narrative sense of difficult experiences and integrating them into one's evolving sense of self. Furthermore, the experience of going to therapy is itself an episode that is likely to be reconstructed later and thus influence narrative identity. Indeed, in a study of women's life stories, Lieblich (2004) found that her participants quite often spontaneously mentioned their experiences in therapy and tended to point to these experiences as key areas of their personality development. If identity is comprised of the collection of self-relevant stories one constructs about oneself, stories about therapy may be especially important. In a classic book on psychotherapy, Jerome Frank wrote that weaving the "myth" of the therapeutic experience is vital to the individual's continued well-being once treatment has ended (1961, p. 327). This sentiment was echoed by Spence (1982) when he wrote that the therapeutic narrative "may also maintain its structure over time and enable the patient to better retain what he [sic] learned during the analysis" (p. 270). So, in addition to being good candidates for incorporation into narrative identity, stories about therapy serve a fundamental role in the development and maintenance of therapeutic gains.

Researchers have begun to focus on the types of stories clients tell about their experiences in therapy and the relationship between these stories and important dimensions of psychological functioning, such as subjective well-being and ego development. Adler and
McAdams (2007) collected therapy stories from a diverse group of adults who had recently ended treatment. They found that individuals who were high in psychological well-being (compared to those low) tended to recall their therapy experience as the story of a victorious battle from the past. In this kind of story, a personal problem rises from obscurity to become (temporarily) a fierce antagonist, only to be defeated once and for all by a reenergized self. In contrast, those adults high in ego development (compared to those low) tended to recall their therapy experience as one chapter in an ongoing narrative of self-development. In this kind of story, the self continues to face new problems over time, but the central therapeutic relationship facilitates the individual’s journey of ongoing growth.

Crafting the story of one’s experience in therapy is a challenging task. Certain life experiences are relatively easy to narrate and fit smoothly into the person’s ongoing story of self. Events such as leaving one’s parents’ home, getting a job, and pregnancy are milestones that occur in many people’s lives, and most people are familiar with common cultural stories about these types of occasions. By contrast, other experiences pose a significant challenge to successful narration. They may be unexpected or difficult and are rarely found in people’s imagined future scripts. When these events do occur, they resist easy incorporation into one’s narrative identity, for the individual is posed with the often daunting task of constructing a story about them in order to render them meaningful. The experience of having been in psychotherapy is a good example of one of these particularly challenging episodes. Yet, as explained above, it may be vitally important to craft a coherent narrative of one’s psychotherapy experience in order to maintain the gains from treatment. Adler, Wagner, and McAdams (2007) found that individuals who were high in ego development (compared to those low) told more coherent stories about their experiences in therapy. This finding suggests that high levels of ego development may provide narrators with the kind of sophisticated frameworks for meaning making that are especially well-suited for the important task of making good sense of the psychotherapy experience. It should be noted, however, that ego development is typically positively associated with measures of intelligence, though at modest levels. It would not be surprising to learn that IQ correlates with the coherence of narrative accounts. At the same time, the significant association between ego development and narrative coherence found in Adler et al. (2007) still held after controlling for educational level and a measure of verbal fluency, both themselves typically associated with intelligence.

The accumulated body of theory and research on narrative identity and psychotherapy has produced several avenues for influencing the work of psychotherapists. First and foremost, the narrative perspective provides a new way for therapists to understand the therapy process. Regardless of the specific theoretical orientation one adopts or the unique therapeutic techniques employed, therapy can be understood as essentially a narrative endeavor. Indeed, whether a therapist is using the tools of exposure therapy to help a client overcome a specific fear of flying or bringing the insight and interpretation of psychodynamic perspectives to help a client understand his or her lifelong relational patterns, both of these interventions seek to help the client come to a new way of understanding the self—to tell a new story about his or her life. Second, the narrative perspective reminds therapists that there is a broad range of potential outcomes for successful therapy, not all of which can be quantified with typical questionnaire-based measures. Elliott and James (1989) lamented that psychotherapy outcome research and practice “may dwell excessively on client perceptions of symptom relief, at the expense of other changes important to clients” (p. 456). Indeed, narratives tap
into clients’ continual experience of self, and as such, they should not be regarded as simply an isolated cognitive phenomenon or as a straightforward byproduct of recovery (Lysaker, Lancaster, & Lysaker, 2003). This narrative reformulation of the therapeutic enterprise provides a richer and more personal conception of the client as an individual and encourages treating the whole person (e.g., Singer, 2005).

Third, the narrative perspective puts a new set of tools at the clinician’s disposal. The development of explicitly narrative therapies has expanded the range of interventions therapists can undertake to modify clients’ self-stories. In addition, basic research on narrative identity has produced a growing list of toxic narrative patterns, such as contamination sequences and incoherent plots, as well as beneficial ways of constructing personal stories, such as redemption sequences and positive closure. These patterns provide obvious sources of intervention for therapists as they become aware of their clients’ narrative styles and encourage them to adopt different patterns.

Finally, the “storying” of the therapeutic experience itself may be vitally important for clients. Different ways of narrating therapy are related to different constellations of psychological functioning once treatment has ended (e.g., Adler & McAdams, 2007). Psychotherapists should be aware that their clients are in a constant process of constructing stories about their experiences in therapy and that they will carry these stories with them after termination. Thus, therapists may want to talk with their clients about what types of stories they are crafting about the therapy itself and help shape these nascent narratives into stories that will promote health and well-being for years to come.

REFERENCES


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