HANDBOOK OF
SELF-KNOWLEDGE

edited by
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THE GUILFORD PRESS
New York    London
(2012)
CHAPTER 20

Sitting at the Nexus of Epistemological Traditions

Narrative Psychological Perspectives on Self-Knowledge

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To inquire about self-knowledge implicitly suggests that there is a self that can be known in a verifiable way. Several psychological disciplines have developed creative and innovative methods for identifying and overcoming barriers to assessing the self in an objective manner. Yet from the perspectives adopted by the growing field of narrative psychology, the very mission of identifying objective self-knowledge is fraught. One of the most exciting elements of the field of narrative psychology is its location at the nexus of two epistemological traditions. On the one hand, narrative psychologists share many of the same concerns with validity, reliability, and prediction that are at the heart of most scientific psychological inquiry. On the other hand, narrative perspectives embrace the fundamental subjectivity of stories. Rather than regarding personal narratives as veridical accounts of what took place in an individual's life, stories are construed as revealing important psychological data about the individual's approach to making meaning out of those experiences. This meaning is idiosyncratic, dynamic, and deeply subjective; but it also turns out to be relatively stable, reliably assessed, and highly predictive of important psychological outcomes. By virtue of straddling this epistemological line, narrative perspectives offer an incredibly generative theoretical orientation toward the matter of self-knowledge. In this chapter I discuss narrative psychology's elegant, if sometimes uncomfortable, blending of epistemological traditions as they apply to the topic of self-knowledge. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the contributions and limitations of different approaches, and to illuminate the potential of continuing to walk this epistemological line.
Two Epistemological Approaches

The Paradigmatic Mode

Jerome Bruner, a pioneer in the field of narrative psychology, has written extensively about two complementary modes of thought that are brought to bear in approaching human psychology. Bruner (1986) terms one of these the paradigmatic mode, which, he suggests, “attempts to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation. It employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized, and related to one another to form a system” (p. 12). Indeed, the paradigmatic mode is the mode of science and is therefore concerned with logical argument, classification, and prediction. “Good” paradigmatic explanations are those that conform to a coherent and rational accounting of reality. They are typically grounded in specific, falsifiable, and unambiguously phrased hypothetical assertions that can be evaluated using the scientific method in the service of describing, explaining, and predicting phenomena. Not simply focused on the accuracy of their methods, paradigmatic approaches prescribe a framework for the task of conducting scholarship. Indeed, paradigmatic arguments are immensely powerful and occupy a position of supreme authority in modern industrialized societies (e.g., McLeod, 1997). The vast majority of modern psychological science embraces a fundamentally paradigmatic approach, and the other chapters in this volume are likely to do so as well, although few are likely to explicitly state as much.

The Narrative Mode

The other epistemological paradigm that Bruner identified is labeled the narrative mode. This mode of thought is concerned with how people make sense of their experiences through telling stories about them. These stories are about “human or humanlike intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). They capture people’s own explanations about what they want and how they go about achieving it. In contrast to scientific explanations, narratives do not aspire to be generalized, impersonal, or decontextualized. Narrative approaches reject the notion of the scientific method, instead embracing hermeneutic perspectives. From this standpoint, narratives are regarded as being deeply rooted in the specific, interpreted history of the individual. Far from mere literary productions, the stories people weave about their experiences serve as a foundational element of identity, what McAdams (1993) called “the stories we live by.” Indeed, the collection of stories that individuals craft about their lives can be understood as their “narrative identity” (McAdams, 2001).

The question of what makes a “good” narrative is much less straightforward than identifying the criteria for a “good” paradigmatic argument. While the criteria for evaluating scientific explanations enjoy such widespread consensus as to be implicit in most scientific discourse (though still discussed among philosophers of science), scholars working in the narrative mode continue to debate vigorously the nature of a good story. Offering a comprehensive account of that debate is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but one of the primary criteria by which personal
narratives are evaluated within narrative psychology, and one that makes for an especially relevant example for the domain of self-knowledge, is their coherence (e.g., Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010; McAdams, 2006).

At the most basic level, stories must be understandable to their audience if they are to convey their meaning adequately, no matter how simple the message (e.g., Labov, 1972). Indeed, the story “is a basic building block of human communication” (McLeod, 1997, p. 32); stories are the vehicles by which meaning is encapsulated for the individual and then transmitted to others. Stories serve a “binding” function that holds together a sequence of moments, focused on preventing “the utter dispersion of experience, its evaporation into nothingness” (Freeman, 2010, p. 171). A certain degree of coherence is simply necessary for this goal to be adequately fulfilled. But the standards of coherence against which stories may be assessed far exceed the grammatical and syntactic levels. In striving to organize the vicissitudes of human intention, personal narratives serve to unite temporally the present self with the selves of the past and of the future (e.g., McAdams, 2001). This diachronic integration, or temporal coherence, provides the through-line through which the moment of the story is connected to the moment of the storytelling (e.g., Adler & McAdams, 2007b). Although stories may be told with scenes that do not fall within a linear chronological order, such as flashbacks or imagined future scenarios, the audience must be able to sequence the events into a temporally coherent arc (e.g., Mandler, 1984). Indeed, Bruner (1990) argued that narrative’s “principle property is its inherent sequentiality” (p. 43). According to Bruner, temporal coherence is not simply a criterion by which narratives may be evaluated; it is a definitional standard for the form.

Habermas and Bluck (2000) suggest that good narratives espouse other types of coherence beyond the temporal dimension. First, personal stories ought to contain causal coherence, instructive points that explain the connections between different sets of actions or account for apparent discontinuities. Causal coherence shows up in narratives when the narrator describes the ways in which he or she views different elements of the story as being linked. This can be as simple as a cause-and-effect account of an experience, or it can be as sophisticated as joining specific historical events to one’s developing sense of self. Such instances of causal connection are a key way experiences are connected to the narrator’s identity (Pals, 2006). For example, when difficult experiences happen in adulthood, the individual is faced with the challenge of narrating these difficulties in a way that is either consonant with his or her existing life narrative or revising that narrative to accommodate the new circumstances (Pals, 2006). Second, personal narratives express thematic coherence, the repetition of often implicit judgments about the narrator or main character that, when assessed holistically, reveal a consistency in the nature of that character (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). For example, a story about a man’s life may contain several anecdotes about volunteering, working as a teacher, and the joys of being a parent, thus adding up to a coherent thematic assessment of the man as an especially generative person. Third, Habermas and Bluck assert that personal narratives ought to adhere to a cultural concept of biography. Personal narratives are adapted from templates available to the individual within his or her cultural context, “master narratives,” or outlines for how lives are supposed to unfold (e.g., Hammack, 2008). This assertion is supported by Bruner’s (1990) suggestion that personal stories “[make] comprehensible a deviation
from a canonical cultural pattern” (pp. 49–50). When people tell stories that deviate too widely from these social scripts, they can be hard to interpret; thus, cultural fluency can be considered a criterion for narrative coherence. These four elements of narrative coherence are far from the only ones that have been proposed and debated, but they capture the ways in which scholars working from a narrative perspective evaluate good stories from a narrative approach.

It is tempting to regard coherence as a linear concept when it comes to evaluating narratives, with higher degrees of coherence being better. There is certainly empirical evidence documenting the significant detrimental consequences of low levels of coherence for the narrator. For example, people suffering from psychopathology have been shown to have low levels of coherence in their stories (e.g., Adler, Chin, Kolisetty, & Oltmanns, in press; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2006). In the adult attachment literature, the criteria for secure attachment are highly aligned with the coherence of participants’ responses on the Adult Attachment Interview (e.g., Bouchard et al., 2008). Low levels of narrative coherence have also been associated with more simplistic worldviews, low psychological maturity, and low trait Openness to experience (e.g., Adler, Wagner, & McAdams, 2007). Certainly low narrative coherence impedes the believability of a story, which is associated with poor outcomes for the narrator.

Yet, as Freeman (2010) pointed out, “Some people become imprisoned by too-coherent narratives” (p. 168). High levels of narrative coherence can be bad for the narrator as well. Life is messy, and embracing the complexity of lived experience is vital if one is to have a believable narrative. This may be especially important in the wake of difficult life experiences. In an example drawn from an empirical study of personal narratives, Pals (2006) described two dimensions along which stories may be assessed. One was labeled coherent positive resolution, or a sense that the story of an episode is adequately wrapped up at the end with a sense of closure. This dimension, which bears strong relationship to the types of coherence discussed earlier, was associated with positive subjective well-being. The other dimension was labeled exploratory processing, or a sense that the narrator was actively engaged in reflecting upon and analyzing challenges and changes in his or her life. This exploratory dimension was uniquely associated with psychological maturity (as assessed by Loewinger’s [1976] construct of ego development). Pals’s data indicated that narratives espousing a combination of coherent positive resolution and exploratory processing were those that best supported positive self-transformation for the narrator after difficult life experiences. This suggests that a glossing over of potentially incongruous details, or a rigid adherence to a tight story line, may be detrimental to the narrator, much as low levels of coherence may be.

It is worth noting that within the tradition of narrative approaches there are disagreements concerning the privileged status of coherence. The editors of a recent volume titled Beyond Narrative Coherence wrote that their book challenges [the centrality of narrative coherence] theoretically (positioning it historically; indicating its problems), methodologically (in showing its often problematic consequences, finding new methods with which to approach broken narratives), and ethically (by showing how the coherence paradigm privileges middle-class conventionality and marginalizes the experiences of artistically creative as well as politically traumatized people). (Hyvärinen et al., 2010, p. 2, original emphasis)
The very assertion that coherence ought to be the standard by which narratives are evaluated is contentious among some scholars operating from a hermeneutic approach. Yet in the afterword to the volume, after concurring with the spirit of the preceding chapters and many of their conclusions, Freeman (2010) adroitly points out that "this 'anti-coherence'—or even anti-narrativism—bespeaks a coherence of its own, that it is the inverted image of, and is thus parasitic upon, the very coherence it rejects and replaces" (pp. 167–168). In other words, there is an implicit coherence in the rally cry against coherence put forth by many of the authors in this volume. Coherence, it seems, is inescapable to a certain degree. Within the narrative tradition the debate about the role of coherence in evaluating the quality of narratives is likely to continue for some time, but for the moment, it convincingly remains central.

The Two Approaches

The paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode of thought are distinct epistemological traditions. These represent two fundamentally different ways of organizing knowledge; one approach is not reducible to the other, nor is one approach an emergent property of the other. The two approaches are not arranged hierarchically but stand beside each other with unique contributions and unique limitations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are internal tensions among psychologists studying personal narratives that are grounded in the seeming incompatibility of these two epistemological approaches (e.g., Bakan, 1966; Craik, 1996; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). On the one hand, positivists studying narratives from the paradigmatic mode can be dismissive of narrative epistemological approaches, suggesting that because the insights they provide are not necessarily grounded in the scientific method and therefore do not obviously generalize, they are not valid sources for the study of truth. On the other hand, hermeneutic researchers working in the narrative mode criticize paradigmatic approaches as overly reductionist, as failing to capture adequately the vibrant diversity of individual human experience and violating the beauty of narratives as data. Both positions are fair, sound, and appropriate, yet both are also wholly informed by their particular epistemological traditions. In the remainder of this chapter I hope to offer insights about self-knowledge gleaned from both paradigmatic and narrative perspectives, and to consider the potential for a pluralistic approach.

Accuracy in Self-Knowledge from Two Approaches

A fundamental issue facing the emerging field of research on self-knowledge is the accuracy of the knowledge under question. Embedded in the central proposition "What do people know about themselves?" is the assumption that certain knowledge is to be considered more accurate than other knowledge. For example, Vazire (2010) has recently developed a model of self-knowledge that capitalizes on the documented asymmetries in accuracy of self-reports compared to other-reports to assess when the individual is a better or worse informant about him- or herself than others. The matter of accuracy in self-knowledge is approached quite differently by paradigmatic and narrative epistemological traditions.
Vazire and Mehl (2008) provide a nice review of the scholarly research on accuracy of self-knowledge from a paradigmatic perspective. They highlight the importance of identifying criterion measures for evaluating the accuracy of various perspectives (traditional self-report and other-report). Some social-psychological traditions, such as the study of naive realism (e.g., Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002) and attributional theory (e.g., Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986) focus on the scientific assessment of people’s explanations for the world and their role in it. Studies in this vein often identify a disconnect between participants’ perceptions and an externally validated measure of reality. Elegant research designs have produced criterion measures separate from either self- or other-report, such as ratings of behavior in the laboratory by trained and reliable experts, or by using ecological criterion measures that attempt to assess a representative sample of the target’s behavior (Vazire & Mehl, 2008). In the typical paradigmatic approach to studying accuracy of self-knowledge, the individual’s ability to predict his or her behavior is pitted against the perspective of someone else (typically a close friend or family member) and the established criterion measure, and stronger associations between the prediction and the behavior are taken as most accurate. The underlying assumption of research in this mold is that individuals’ conscious constrictual of themselves may or may not align with an objective, externally assessed measure of them, and that the external criterion is to be privileged. In such research the typical scientific concerns are of utmost importance: the reliability and validity of the measures used, the rigor of the study design, and so forth. The array of creative approaches to studying self-knowledge from across the paradigmatic spectrum is on display in the other chapters in this volume.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, narrative approaches to self-knowledge also value accuracy, but the definition of accuracy is different than that embraced by paradigmatic approaches. Narrative perspectives challenge the privileged status of external criterion measures, asserting instead that the self is a fundamentally internal and subjective phenomenon, not subject to external validation. From a narrative epistemological approach, the story one tells may include both conscious and unconscious elements, but the story itself is to be regarded as the privileged focus of inquiry. To say that a story is accurate from a narrative perspective therefore implies that it is believable (e.g., McAdams, 2006). While paradigmatic approaches seek to identify objective accuracy criteria, narrative approaches regard accuracy as fundamentally relational—there is always an audience that is evaluating the story. Indeed, if narrative accuracy is to be understood as believability, one must always question, “Believable by whom?”

What then makes for a believable story? Once again, coherence is a major standard by which narrative believability can be assessed. Stories that deviate widely from the types of coherence described earlier—temporal, causal, thematic, and cultural—biographical—are less believable. Consider a hypothetical story wherein the temporal sequencing of events is dramatically inconsistent: The protagonist gets married, then learns to walk, then raises her granddaughter, and then is born. The temporal incoherence leads the audience simply to dismiss the story (and potentially the narrator) as unbelievable. Yet, in addition to these types of coherence, McAdams (2006) advances an additional component by which we ought to evaluate stories. He suggests that personal narratives must reflect the actual lived experience of the narrator. Indeed, stories may be highly coherent in their temporal sequencing, causal connections,
thematic elements, and adherence to cultural standards for biography, but may be complete confabulation. Without a doubt, narratives themselves are fundamentally interpretative in nature and cannot be taken as accurate accounts of one's experience. Spence (1982) distinguished between "historical truth and narrative truth," the distinction between what actually happened and the individual's interpretation of what happened (pp. 27-28). Given that all narratives are the products of reconstructed and biased perceptions, it simply does not make sense to assess personal stories primarily by their veracity. Yet despite the interpretive leap, for stories to be believable they must conceivably adhere to the historical events of a person's life.

There may be an inherent tension between the coherence of a narrative and its believability. Narratives that are not sufficiently coherent are, at worst, not interpretable by the audience and, at best, evidence of disruptions in psychological well-being and maturity. Yet narratives that are overly coherent may be exaggeratedly divorced from the nuances of lived experience. At this point, whether believability ought to be considered an additional criterion by which narratives are to be evaluated is far from settled, and the vast majority of research on the topic has focused on the primary dimensions of coherence.

I would like to suggest that beyond the dominance of coherence in evaluating narratives and the additional suggestion that "good" narratives are those that are believable, narratives may also be judged by their ability to support the psychological well-being of their narrator. As I describe in more detail below, there has been significant scholarship on narratives that strives to identify those components of personal stories that are associated with various features of mental health. I assert that this emphasis reveals a deeper belief that narratives are created and told in the service of supporting the well-being of the narrator. Coherence may be thought of as a definitional criterion for narratives; a collection of statements cannot be properly labeled as a "narrative" without an internal coherence. Believability may be understood as fundamental to narratives as they are communicated to others; the success of a story is grounded in its believability. Yet supporting the well-being of the narrator undergirds the psychological function of narratives for the storyteller. Wilson (2002) refers to this as the "peace-of-mind" criterion (p. 221). He suggests that effective narratives recede into the background of the individual's consciousness rather than dominating his or her daily thoughts, and that narratives that are successful in doing so provide a sense of peace with themselves. Thus, rather than focusing on accuracy, narratives ought to be evaluated by their coherence, believability, and ability to support the psychological well-being of the narrator.

**Walking the Epistemological Line**

Thus far, I have described some of the differences between paradigmatic approaches and narrative approaches to self-knowledge and highlighted the divergence in their grappling with the accuracy of self-knowledge. I now turn to ways in which scholars have worked to bring together the strengths of these epistemological traditions.

While the range of scholarship broadly subsumed under the label *the narrative study of lives* (e.g., Josselson & Lieblich, 1993) spans the epistemological spectrum, a growing body of work within this tradition has embraced methods that incorporate
both narrative and paradigmatic approaches. It is first important to clarify the distinction between epistemology and methodology: Epistemology provides the broader philosophical approach to knowledge that grounds a particular inquiry, while methodology is the set of techniques a scholar uses in pursuing a particular question (e.g., Grecco, 1999). It is not appropriate to reduce the paradigmatic tradition to quantitative methods and the narrative tradition to qualitative methods, although in practice this is the most common distinction in their approach. Research that attempts to walk the epistemological line between paradigmatic and narrative traditions often draws on mixed methodological designs, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative elements.

The primary way such epistemologically blended studies are accomplished is by collecting personal stories as a vehicle for conducting scientific research. In a typical study, extensive narratives are collected from a group of participants, and other variables of interest, such as mental health or psychological maturity, are also assessed. The narratives are coded using reliable and valid systems by raters who have demonstrated statistical reliability in using the coding system with a subset of narratives drawn from the dataset. This coding process is the method by which rich individual stories are digested, such that they can be empirically compared with each other, and such that themes across participants’ narratives may be assessed with respect to other variables (see King, 2004, for a more in-depth overview of typical research methods). I provide some examples of research using this approach in the next section.

Whether this method succeeds in walking the epistemological line between narrative and paradigmatic approaches is up for debate. Certainly within mainstream personality and social psychology, research conducted in this manner often takes the guise of paradigmatic science when it is published. Reports of such studies often include descriptive and inferential statistics alongside lengthy narrative excerpts. In doing so, research in this vein runs the risk of satisfying no one. Paradigmatic scholars sometimes find such research deficient, as it is still grounded in personal stories that cannot aspire to present veridical accounts of what actually took place. Paradigmatic accuracy is nowhere to be found in such data. Narratives are fundamentally subjective and, while they can be an excellent source for investigating meaning-making processes, mainstream paradigmatic researchers still have somewhat mixed feelings about their value. On the other hand, hermeneutic scholars working in the narrative mode are also sometimes put off by research that seeks to blend an emphasis on personal stories with quantitative approaches to data analysis. Such endeavors can be seen as an affront to the narrative epistemology, disregarding or underprivileging the value of the contributions qualitative narratives can make. Scholarship that blends approaches is surely restricted in its ability both to fulfill narrative aspirations of capturing the idiosyncratic and the personal in rich and nuanced ways, and to achieve the experimental control privileged by paradigmatic traditions.

In spite of these legitimate mutual objections, there is much to be gained for research on self-knowledge from attempting to walk the epistemological line. Scholarship in this vein manages to provide research participants with a phenomenological experience that embraces the ethos of narrative research, treating the individual as the expert on his or her own life. Research practices that include the collection of personal narratives strive to cultivate a feeling of empowerment and authority in
participants (e.g., Fivush & Marin, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Doing so alleviates some of the skepticism and fear that permeate the subjective experience of potential participants in psychological research studies (e.g., Marshall et al., 2001). For example, one widely used instrument for collecting narratives within the field of personality psychology, the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008) directs the researcher to say to participants: “Please know that my purpose in doing this interview is not to figure out what is wrong with you or to do some kind of deep clinical analysis... [my] main goal is simply to hear your story.” Such instructions put the participant at ease and suggest that the specifics of his or her own story will be most privileged. In my own experience conducting this type of research, participants often find the act of participating to be rewarding in and of itself. For example, a participant in one of my studies of psychotherapy noted, “Just describing these feelings now makes me feel better and more enthusiastic about therapy. This step in the research I think actually helps my therapy. Thank you.” At the same time, epistemologically pluralistic studies are able to obtain data that may be analyzed in the service of identifying generalities across participants, the primary goal of paradigmatic social science. Thus, such approaches can foster the collection of empirical data, while preserving the open and welcoming research experience for participants that is deeply and justly prized by narrative researchers.

Self-Knowledge on the Epistemological Line

What follows are several examples of research on the self that strives to blend narrative and paradigmatic approaches. In each case, personal narratives were collected alongside other data. The aim of this research was to illustrate the relationship between meaning-making processes best captured in the stories of individuals and outcomes or correlates that generalize across a group of participants. The research described below provides a few examples of work that embraces personal narratives as a unique and vital vehicle for assessing self-knowledge, while operating in a fundamentally paradigmatic mode of inquiry. They demonstrate how the individual meaning instantiated in personal narratives can be stable, reliably assessed, and predictive of important outcomes.

A pair of longitudinal studies offers insight on how people view their own personality development during the often tumultuous college years. In one study, McAdams and colleagues (2006) collected personal narratives and other data concerning personality traits from two groups of college students, half freshmen and half seniors. The participants were asked to reflect on 10 key moments in their lives and to provide rich narrative accounts of these experiences. Narratives were collected 3 months after the initial time point and again 3 years after that. The authors found that the thematic continuity of the narratives was high—equivalent to that of personality traits—especially in terms of their emotional tone and overall complexity. This study established that the thematic ways in which college students made sense of their lives remained relatively stable, despite the developmental challenges associated with this period of emerging adulthood. In doing so, it suggests that the process of constructing a self-story engages particular narrative styles that remain fairly consistent over time.
In another study, Lodi-Smith, Geise, Roberts, and Robins (2009) collected personality trait data from college students during their freshman year of college and again in their senior year. At the second time point, the researchers also asked participants to provide detailed narratives reflecting on the ways in which their own personality had changed over the course of college. The results of the study indicated that two aspects of the narratives—affective processes that involved positive valence, and exploratory processes that involved coherent causal explanations for change—were associated with increases in emotional health over the 4 years, independent of changes in personality traits. This study suggests that narrative processes have unique predictive value above and beyond the contribution of other, non-narrative constructs, such as personality traits.

Each of these two studies demonstrates the distinct benefits of blending narrative and paradigmatic approaches. The particular constellation of findings indicate that subjective, idiosyncratic meaning-making processes stand alongside objective, generalizable measures of personality in understanding students' development over the college years. In each case, the narratives provide rich, detailed accounts that could not be adequately assessed by answers on Likert-type scale items. For example, in reflecting on her time in college, one of the participants in the study by Lodi-Smith and colleagues (2009, p. 686) stated, "My personality has not changed much, but my perception of life has changed." This brief excerpt demonstrates the disconnect between actual personality change as assessed by trait measures given at several time points and the individuals' insight into her own development. While the questionnaire data can tell researchers whether this individual's trait profile evolved during 4 years, this young woman has her own take on her growth. By virtue of its design, such research implicitly values both paradigmatic and narrative perspectives on the self. Research such as that represented by these longitudinal studies demonstrates how the study of self-knowledge may benefit from perspectives that blend paradigmatic and narrative approaches in investigating identity development.

In another set of studies, researchers have employed paradigmatic and narrative approaches to assess the relationship between meaning-making processes and mental health. As mentioned earlier, narrative researchers have been particularly interested in determining the distinct features of personal stories that differentially relate to high levels of subjective well-being versus psychological maturity, or the complexity and nuance of meaning-making processes (typically measured via Loevinger's [1976] concept of ego development). The ways in which these two dimensions of psychological functioning are associated with narrative strategies of self-making have been explored in a variety of ways. For example, a series of studies by King and colleagues investigating people's adaptations to significant life transitions (King & Raspin, 2004; King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; King & Smith, 2004) reveals that different approaches to storytelling relate differently to subjective well-being and psychological maturity. When individuals undergo a significant transition, they are faced with the psychological task of grappling with the self they will no longer become, what King calls "lost possible selves" (e.g., King & Raspin, 2004; King & Smith, 2004). For instance, when people get divorced, they must make sense of the married self they can no longer be (King & Raspin, 2004). In studies focused on transitions ranging from divorce, to the coming-out process in gay men and lesbians, to the
discovery that the child one is about to have will be born with Down’s syndrome, King and her colleagues have found that the salience of the lost possible self—how often participants thought about it—was negatively related to subjective well-being. In contrast, the elaboration of the lost possible self—the amount of vivid detail in people’s narratives about this self—was related to psychological maturity, both concurrently at the time of the narrative and years down the road. In this work, the rich, ideographic meaning instantiated in personal stories is blended with widely accepted scientific measures of subjective well-being and psychological maturity, leading to a mixed-methods window into the importance of narratives.

In a different example, Bauer, McAdams, and Sakaeda (2005) found that individuals high in subjective well-being tended to frame their stories of personal growth in terms of intrinsic concerns dealing with humanistic interests, such as fostering meaningful relationships and contributing to society. In contrast, individuals high in psychological maturity framed their stories of personal growth in terms of integrative concerns fostering social-cognitive development, such as the desire for new perspectives or learning to understand one’s life in terms of even greater richness of meaning. Both relationships between the personal memories and the mental health outcomes remained significant when the impact of personality traits was statistically controlled. As in the program of research by King and colleagues, this study by Bauer and colleagues demonstrates the ways in which different perspectives on self-knowledge differentially relate to aspects of psychological health.

Finally, in some of my own research I have investigated the ways in which different approaches to narrating one’s experience in psychotherapy relate to uneven outcomes among clients. In a pair of studies, one qualitative (Adler & McAdams, 2007a) and one quantitative (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008), the characteristics of clients’ therapy stories were differentially related to subjective well-being and psychological maturity following treatment. In both studies, participants who described their experiences in therapy by heavily incorporating the theme of personal agency—a sense that one is in control of his or her circumstances—were more likely to have high levels of subjective well-being. In contrast, participants high in psychological maturity framed the experience as a coherent story of personal growth. In a third longitudinal investigation (Adler, 2012), increases in the theme of agency were observed over the course of treatment and these increases temporally preceded improvements in participants’ mental health. This relationship between changes in the narratives and subsequent changes in mental health remained consistent across a variety of demographic differences in participants and their therapists, as well as when dispositional personality traits were statistically controlled. In addition to the quantitative results, Adler (2012) also featured an in-depth case study of one participant’s story as it unfolded over time. These studies further illustrate the contribution of mixed-methods narrative research to the understanding of self-knowledge as it relates to psychological health.

In each of these examples, the researchers have sought to blend the benefits afforded by obtaining rich qualitative narratives from participants as they describe some of the major impacts on their sense of self, from divorce to periods of significant personal growth, to psychotherapy, with the strengths of comparative paradigmatic science. There is no question that the methodological pluralism each study espoused
represents an innovative approach to tapping the personal experience of the individual participant, while simultaneously deriving rigorous scientific conclusions that generalize beyond the specific samples under investigation. Whether these studies and others like them are equally successful in embracing two truly distinct epistemological traditions is less clear. Each of the specific studies described earlier certainly conforms to the standards of paradigmatic inquiry. I contend that, at least in terms of the phenomenological experience the study provided to the research participants, one that elicited mostly unconstrained accounts of personal experiences, scholarship in this vein does achieve at least some of the goals of narrative epistemological approaches. As such, study designs that incorporate personal narratives but ultimately use these data to answer scientific questions about the nature of self-knowledge can be understood as walking the epistemological line.

**Conclusion: The Case of “Tim” and Epistemological Pluralism**

In conceptualizing a topic as multifaceted and important as self-knowledge, one epistemological approach cannot be considered sufficient. The emerging tradition of scientific research on self-knowledge, elegantly brought together for the first time in this handbook, provides an excellent foundation for paradigmatic perspectives on who we are and how we come to know ourselves. This tradition of research aspires to answer some of the most vital questions concerning self-knowledge; to explore the limits of self-knowledge, the methodological challenges in evaluating self-knowledge, and the implications for different ways of knowing the self. At the same time, a distinct epistemological approach, one that embraces the personal, idiosyncratic, and fundamentally subjective nature of the storied self, stands as a valuable counterpoint. Indeed, scientifically documenting “glaring inaccuracies in self-perception” (Vazire & Mehl, 2008, p. 1202) is absolutely vital to combating reliable misperceptions. But the meaning that individuals ascribe to their experiences and instantiate in personal narratives, however flawed or inaccurate, ought to be treated with care.

Much of this handbook focuses on the distinction between what is true about self-knowledge and what people believe is true based on their privileged status as interpreters of their sense of self. From the perspective of certain philosophers of science, this distinction can be conceptualized as one between causal and meaningful explanations (e.g., Brendel, 2000). Causal explanations seek to explain the true underlying connections between phenomena. In contrast, meaningful explanations seek to describe the relationship between phenomena in terms of the ways humans make sense of them, whether these ways are accurate or not. Causal explanations, operating in the paradigmatic mode of thought, are evaluated by their validity, reliability, and precision. In contrast, meaningful explanations, operating in the narrative mode of thought, are evaluated by their ability to capture coherently and believably the shifting motivations of their characters and to support the narrator’s well-being.

It may appear self-evident that causal explanations are to be privileged over meaningful explanations; if we are able to determine what was really going on, why would we choose to value someone’s potentially flawed and certainly biased stories
about what happened? Yet Brendel (2000) provides an elegant example of these two approaches that illustrates their surprising interdependence. This example does as much to affirm the contribution of both paradigmatic and narrative perspectives as it does to further complicate the picture, thus demonstrating the benefits of adopting both approaches.

Brendel (2000) presents a brief case study of a man named “Tim” who suffered from the delusion that he was put on this planet to atone for Adolf Hitler’s sins. This belief led to intense suffering for Tim, and his days were spent in anguish. Yet, despite the unremitting agony, Tim refrained from committing suicide out of the conviction that his continued existence was responsible for sparing humanity from the otherwise imminent consequences of Hitler’s havoc. Brendel makes clear that a causal explanation of Tim’s condition would refer to the evident disruptions in his neurophysiology. Nevertheless, the idiosyncratic explanation that Tim ascribes to his condition “cannot be understood in causal terms. It can be made intelligible only in terms of Tim’s life story and the meaningful connections that constituted his subjectivity” (p. 188). Tim’s meaningful explanation had itself become causal—the individual and subjective narrative he wove about his experience was responsible for keeping him alive. From any paradigmatic perspective, Tim’s explanation cannot be considered accurate. But from the perspective of his personal narrative, the story was a matter of life and death. Writing specifically about the context of psychiatric treatment, Spence (1982) suggested, “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 [psychotherapeutic] cure” (p. 31). Once fully articulated, the narrative can impact and shape experience in a way that can be validly and reliably assessed using paradigmatic science. Tim’s story might conform to the standards of coherence but would certainly fail to achieve the criterion of believability. At the same time, it served a vital purpose (in the full sense of the word *vital*). Tim’s case reveals the limits of valuing accuracy in self-knowledge above all else, and it also suggests there is more to good stories than their believability. As for supporting his well-being, Tim’s case is highly nuanced. On the one hand, his day-to-day existence was quite painful. On the other hand, he found some existential peace in the notion that he was fulfilling his ultimate purpose. From a narrative perspective, Tim’s story was successful in achieving the coherence and well-being criteria of good narratives, but it failed to be believable and could not be considered accurate from a paradigmatic perspective. This case study illustrates how both paradigmatic and narrative perspectives have their flaws, and it suggests that bringing them together offers many benefits to the study of self-knowledge.

As the field of scholars working on self-knowledge continues to coalesce, it is vital that they adopt epistemologically pluralistic approaches to their pursuit. One of the great philosophers of science, Karl Popper (1963), wrote, “It is imperative that we give up the idea of ultimate sources of knowledge, and admit that all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes; that all we can do is grope for truth even though it is beyond our reach. There is no authority beyond the reach of criticism” (p. 39). This perspective of humility is most likely to promote a vibrant and prolific emerging field focused on explaining self-knowledge.
NOTES

1. It is worth noting that in regard to the study of the self, the word knowledge often connotes beliefs that have been externally validated (e.g., Vazire, 2010). In light of the epistemological conflict about the centrality of such externally verifiable truths within the field of research on personal stories, I will continue to use the term self-knowledge. I recognize that positivists may regard the work I am going to review as more accurately characterized as being focused on “self-views,” whereas hermeneutic scholars may regard the conflation of knowledge and truth as meaningless.

2. Note that it is possible to impose a temporal coherence even to this seemingly incoherent sequence of events: Perhaps the protagonist is wheelchair-bound until after her wedding, at which point she learns to walk, which leads her to embrace this new phase of her life by having children and ultimately a granddaughter whom she raises, after which she feels like such a completely new person that she considers herself “born” as a new person. This illustration reveals the seductive pull of temporal coherence—the reader wants to impose some logic to the sequence of events. It also demonstrates the standard of causal coherence: Without offering explanatory connections between the events in the life, the story cannot be considered coherent and therefore believable.

REFERENCES


