The study of stories people tell about their lives is no longer a promising new direction for the future of personality psychology. Instead, personal narratives and the life story have arrived. In the first decade of the 21st century, narrative approaches to personality have moved to the center of the discipline. Building on broadly based narrative theories of personality and identity (e.g., McAdams, 1985; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Tornkins, 1979) and incorporating insights regarding life stories and autobiographical memory to be found in cognitive science, developmental and clinical psychology, life-course sociology, anthropology, communications studies, and education, a new generation of personality psychologists has established psychological laboratories and research programs dedicated to the empirical study of personal narratives (see Singer, 2004). Hypothesis-testing studies of the structure, content, and dynamics of life stories now regularly appear in mainstream psychological journals. Moreover, narrative approaches to the study of individual lives are reviving personality psychology’s historical commitment to idiographic research (Nasby & Read, 1997). Narrative theories and concepts offer a strong alternative to the tired dogmas of psychoanalysis for the interpretation of case studies, biographies, and the intensive study of the single life over time and in society (Josselson, 2004; McAdams, 2005; Wiggins, 2003).

This chapter brings together the best research being done in personality psychology today on personal narratives and the life story. A key concept in much of this work is narrative identity, which refers to an individual’s internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self. A growing number of theorists and researchers agree that people begin to construct narrative identities in adolescence and young adulthood and continue to work on these stories across the adult life course (Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Shroots, & Svendson, 1996; Cohler, 1982; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1985). The stories people fashion to make meaning out of their lives serve to situate them within the complex social ecology of modern adulthood. It is within the realm of narrative identity, therefore, that personality shows its most important and intricate relations to culture and society (McAdams, 2006; Rosenwald, 1992). Put differently, the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of
family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large. *The self comes to terms with society through narrative identity.*

**THE NARRATIVE STUDY OF LIVES: SIX COMMON PRINCIPLES**

Freud (1900/1953) wrote about dream narratives; Jung (1936/1969) explored universal life myths; A. Adler (1927) examined narrative accounts of earliest memories; Murray (1938) identified recurrent themes in the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) stories and autobiographical accounts. But none of these classic personality theories from the first half of the 20th century explicitly imagined human beings as storytellers and human lives as stories to be told. The first *narrative* theories of personality emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Tomkins (1979) proposed a _script theory_ of personality that conceived of the developing individual as akin to a playwright who organizes emotional life in terms of salient scenes and recurrent scripts. In Tomkins’s view, the most important individual differences in psychological life had little to do with basic traits or needs but instead referred to the particular kinds of affect-laden scenes and rule-generating scripts that individuals construct from their experiences as they move through life. In a somewhat similar vein, I (McAdams, 1985) formulated a *a life-story model of identity*, contending that people living in modern societies begin, in late adolescence and young adulthood, to construe their lives as evolving stories that integrate the reconstructed past and the anticipated future in order to provide life with some semblance of unity and purpose (see also Kohler, 1982). Among the most important individual differences between people are structural and content differences in their narrative identities, I argued, apparent in the story’s settings, plots, characters, scenes, images, and themes. Singer and Salovey (1993) identified _self-defining memories_ as representations of vivid and emotionally intense events in one’s life that reflect recurrent life concerns. They asserted that self-defining memories are key components of narrative identity.

The original formulations of Tomkins, McAdams, and Singer viewed life stories as *autobiographical projects* (Thorne, 2006). Much like playwrights or novelists, people work on their stories in an effort to construct an integrative and meaningful product. As psycholiterary achievements, life stories function to make lives make sense by helping to organize the many different roles and features of the individual life into a synthetic whole and by offering causal explanations for how people believe they have come to be who they are (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). A rival perspective in life narrative studies emerged in the 1990s with the postmodern and social-constructionist approaches offered by Gergen (1991) and others (e.g., Bamberg, 1997; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Developing out of communications studies and literary theory, these perspectives tended to view personal narratives and life stories as _situating performances_ (Thorne, 2006). According to Gergen, for example, people tell and enact as many different kinds of stories in social life as there are social situations within which to tell and enact them. Each performance may be imagined as a text to be deconstructed so as to reveal the shifting dynamics involved, but no larger life patterns or meanings are likely to be found. Personal narratives reveal multiple and conflicting self-expressions, a point emphasized, as well, in Hermans’s (1996) influential theory of the _dialogical self_. In Hermans’s view, narrative identity is akin to a polyphonic novel that is authored by many different voices within the person, all of whom engage in dialogue with each other and with flesh-and-blood characters in the external world.

In recent years, theories of life narrative have tried to steer a middle course between the personal and the social, viewing narrative identity as both an autobiographical project and a situated performance (see McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006, for a range of current views). Nonetheless, psychologists who study life stories represent a wide range of theoretical perspectives and corresponding methodological preferences. No single theory or research paradigm integrates all the work being done. Still, certain broad themes emerge again and again in the scholarly literature on the narrative study of lives. Across the many different approaches, there would appear to be general agreement on the validity of the following six common principles.
**Principle 1: The Self Is Storied**

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) wrote: “Consciousness begins when brains acquire the power, the simple power I must add, of telling a story” (p. 10). This simple power may reflect a human universal: Human beings are storytellers by nature (Bruner, 1986). In a multitude of guises—as folktales, legend, myth, history, epic, opera, motion picture, novel, biography, joke, personal anecdote, and reality television—the story appears in every human culture. Stories are the best vehicles known to human beings for conveying how (and why) a human agent, endowed with consciousness and motivated by intention, enacts desires and strives for goals over time (Ricoeur, 1984). Invoking William James’s (1892/1963) famous distinction, the self encompasses a subjective storytelling “I” whose stories about personal experience become part and parcel of a storied “me.” The self is both the storyteller and the stories that are told.

From an early age, children tell stories about life, casting their personal experiences into the structure of setting, character, scene, and plot. As they move into adolescence and adulthood, they collect together remembered episodes from the past into an autobiographical storehouse that may be organized in terms of lifetime periods (e.g., “when I was in grade school,” “before my father left my mother”), general events (“high school football games I enjoyed,” “job interviews”), and event-specific knowledge (“my 7th birthday,” “senior prom”) (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Rather than representing a veridical recording of life as lived, autobiographical memories are highly selective and strategic. Although they may convey certain objective facts about a life, storied recollections of the past are more noteworthy for their expression of personal meaning (Schacter, 1996). Autobiographical memories, furthermore, are encoded and later retrieved in ways that serve the person’s goals. As such, life strivings and ongoing projects influence how personal narratives about the past are organized in the first place, and goals for the future generate retrieval models to guide the search for memories later on (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Singer & Salovey, 1993). Life stories, therefore, are always about both the reconstructed past and the imagined future.

**Principle 2: Stories Integrate Lives**

Stories do many things: They entertain, educate, inspire, motivate, conceal and reveal, organize and disrupt. Among their most important functions, however, is integration (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001). Stories often bring together into an understandable frame disparate ideas, characters, happenings, and other elements of life that were previously set apart. Psychologically speaking, life stories may provide integration in two ways (McAdams, 1985). First, people’s stories about themselves may bring together different self-ascribed tendencies, roles, goals, and remembered events into a synchronic pattern that expresses how the individual person, who seems to encompass so many different things in a complex social world, is, at the same time, one (complex and even contradictory) thing as well.

A life story may explain, for example, how a person who describes herself as “gentle” and “caring” and who claims to avoid conflict in her personal life manages still to be a successful litigator for her law firm. Second, people’s stories provide diachronic integration, that is, in time. They provide causal accounts regarding how a person moved from A to B to C in life, showing, for example, how a rebellious teenager at age 20 became a respectable stakeholder in society by the time he was 35; or how a successful 60-year-old entrepreneur believes he evolved, step by step, from an impoverished childhood to his current state of affluence.

The formulation of an integrative narrative identity is an especially salient challenge for individuals living in modern societies, who seek personal integration within an ever-changing, contradictory, and multifaceted social world that offers no clear guidelines, no consensus on how to live and what life means (Giddens, 1991). Whereas some approaches to narrative identity examine integration at the broad level of one’s life as a whole (McAdams, 1985), others focus on particular scenes and settings in everyday life (Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000). Whether talking about the full life story or a personal narrative of a single event, nonetheless, people typically engage in a process of autobiographical reasoning, wherein they seek to derive general/semantic meanings from particular/episodic experiences in life (Hab-
eramas & Bluck, 2000; McLean, 2005; Pals, 2006b). People may conclude, for instance, that a particular event in their lives (episodic knowledge) illustrates something general about themselves (semantic knowledge) or that a particular sequence of events helps to explain how they came to be who they are today. Whether aimed at finding meaning in yesterday's conversation around the water cooler or in a 15-year marriage that ended two decades ago, autobiographical reasoning is an exercise in personal integration—putting things together into a narrative pattern that affirms life meaning and purpose.

Principle 3: Stories Are Told in Social Relationships

A simple but profound truth about stories is that people tell them. People tell stories to other people. As such, stories are social phenomena, told in accord with societal expectations and norms. Underscoring the discursive and performative aspects of life storytelling, many investigators argue that any narrative expression of the self cannot be understood outside the context of its assumed listener or audience, with respect to which the story is designed to make a point or produce a desired effect (Pasupathi, 2001). Autobiographical narrators anticipate what their audiences want to hear, and these expectations influence what they tell and how they tell it (Wortham, 2001).

Research suggests that people frequently share their most memorable events with others soon after the event occurs and on multiple occasions (Rime, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991). Telling the story of the event again and again may help the teller to clarify the event's emotional meaning. Thorne and McLean (2003) suggest that the clarification may occur because audiences push storytellers to tell what the story means. "Interlocutors often demand meanings; sooner or later, they insist on knowing why the speaker is telling them the story" (Thorne & McLean, 2003, p. 170). Meaning is expressed not only in what the storyteller says but also in the way he or she says it. Storytellers adopt particular emotional and social positions vis-à-vis their audience, and as protagonists in their own personal narratives, they position themselves vis-à-vis other characters in the story (Bamber, 1997). Thorne and McLean found that students who told stories of traumatic events in their lives typically positioned themselves, as both narrators and protagonists, in one of three different ways: as brave and courageous (John Wayne), caring and concerned (Florence Nightingale), or weak and vulnerable. Because audiences responded more positively to the John Wayne and the Florence Nightingale stances, and because these two stances were so common, Thorne and McLean depict these as examples of master narrative positioning in personal storytelling, at least among young American people.

Pasupathi and colleagues have conducted a number of studies examining how the different conditions under which personal stories are told influence how storytellers feel about themselves and how they recall those stories later (Pasupathi, 2001, 2006; Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). In one experiment, Pasupathi and Rich (2005) asked participants to tell a good friend the story of a positive autobiographical event. In each case, the close friend (listener) was assigned to either an attentive role ("We'd like you to listen to your friend the way you typically do when you're being a good listener") or a distracted role. For the distracted role, the listener was asked to keep track (surreptitiously) of how many times the storyteller used a word beginning with "th." Storytellers reacted to the distracted role by providing accounts that were only half as long as those given in the attentive condition. Furthermore, they tended to rate the typicality of the event they described as significantly lower than did the storytellers in the attentive condition. Pasupathi and Rich concluded that distracted listeners tend to undermine the storyteller's confidence that what he or she is describing represents a true expression of the self. In a second experiment, Pasupathi and Rich showed that inattentiveness has more deleterious effects on experience sharing than even disagreeableness. When people are talking about important events in their lives, any kind of reaction—even a hostile one—is preferable to no reaction at all.

People narrate personal events in different ways for different listeners, and they may switch back and forth between different modes of telling. McLean (2005) showed that younger adolescents tend to tell self-defining memories to their parents, but as they get older they prefer peers as audiences
for self-telling. Adolescents and young adults often tell personal stories in a humorous mode, aiming to entertain as much as explain (McLean & Thorne, 2006). They may switch back and forth between what Pasupathi (2006) calls dramatic and reflective modes of storytelling. In the dramatic mode, the storyteller makes frequent use of nonverbal signals, employs vivid quotes and dialogue, and attempts to reenact the original event in the telling. In the reflective mode, the storyteller spends relatively little time describing what happened in the event and focuses instead on what the event may mean or how the event made the person feel. Reflective modes more efficiently communicate information, especially interpretive information. Dramatic modes make for vivid and entertaining stories.

**Principle 4: Stories Change over Time**

Autobiographical memory is notoriously unstable. Although people typically remember well the gist of an important life event as time passes, they often misremember the details (Schacter, 1996). Factual errors in autobiographical recollection increase substantially as the temporal distance from the to-be-remembered event increases. For example, Talarico and Rubin (2003) found that accuracy in recollections of how people heard the news of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City decreased substantially over an 8-month period. Research on flashbulb memories—personal recollections of dramatic historical events—suggests that, despite people’s beliefs to the contrary, accuracy for memories of the John F. Kennedy assassination (November 22, 1963) or the 9/11 attacks may be no greater than for memories of any other events in life.

The temporal instability of autobiographical memory, therefore, contributes to change in the life story over time. But many other processes are also at play, and many of these reflect changes in how the person comes to terms with the social world. Most obviously, people accumulate new experiences over time, some of which may prove to be so important as to make their way into narrative identity. As people’s motivations, goals, personal concerns, and social positions change, furthermore, their memories of important events in their lives and the meanings they attribute to those events may also change (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Singer & Salovey, 1993). People’s autobiographical priorities change as well. Some events may increase in personal salience over time whereas others fade into the background. In a 3-year longitudinal study that asked college students to recall and describe 10 key scenes in their life stories on three different occasions, I and my colleagues (2006) found that only 28% of the memories described at Time 1 were repeated 3 months later (Time 2), and 22% of the original (Time 1) memories were chosen and described again 3 years after the original assessment (Time 3). (Despite change in manifest content of stories, however, we also documented noteworthy longitudinal consistencies in certain emotional and motivational qualities in the stories and in the level of narrative complexity.)

Over the 3 years, students’ life story accounts became more complex, and they incorporated a greater number of themes suggestive of personal growth and integration (McAdams, Bauer, et al., 2006). Consistent with the general idea that life stories change with personality development, a number of studies have documented significant associations between age, on the one hand, and various structural and content dimensions of personal narratives, on the other (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005b; Pratt & Fiese, 2004).

**Principle 5: Stories Are Cultural Texts**

Life stories mirror the culture wherein the story is created and told (McAdams, 2006). Stories live in culture. They are born, they grow, they proliferate, and they eventually die according to the norms, rules, and traditions that prevail in a given society, according to a society’s implicit understanding of what counts as a tellable life (Rosenwald, 1992). Habermas and Bluck (2000) contend that before a person can formulate a convincing life story, he or she must become acquainted with the culture’s concept of biography. Indeed, Rubin (2003) argues that much of what people “remember” as part of their life story is really shared cultural knowledge about the life course. Denzin (1989) and I (McAdams, 1996) suggest that narrative accounts of the life course in modern Western cultures are expected to begin in the family, to involve growth and expansion in the early years,
to trace later problems back to earlier conflicts, to incorporate epiphanies and turning points that mark changes in the protagonist's quest, and to be couched in the discourse of progress versus decline. But other societies tell lives in different ways and have different views regarding how a person should come to terms with the social world through narrative (Gregg, 1991).

In recent years, psychologists have noted strong differences in autobiographical memory and self-construction between East Asian and North American societies. For example, North American adults typically have an earlier age of first memory and have longer and more detailed memories of childhood than do Chinese, Japanese, and Korean adults (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemper, 2003). In addition, several studies have noted that North Americans' personal memories tend to be more self-focused than are the memories of East Asians (e.g., Wang, 2001). The differences are consistent with the well-known argument that certain Eastern societies tend to emphasize interdependent constructions of the self, whereas Western societies emphasize independent self-conceptions (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). From an early age, Westerners are encouraged to think about their own individual exploits and to tell stories about them. In a more collectivist culture that incubates interdependent self-constructions, by contrast, children may be encouraged to cultivate a listening role over a telling role and to construct narratives of the self that prioritize other people and social contexts.

Wang and Conway (2004) asked European American and Chinese midlife adults to recall 20 autobiographical memories. Americans provided more memories of individual experiences and one-time events, and they focused their attention on their own roles and emotions in the events. In contrast, Chinese adults were more inclined to recall memories of social and historical events, and they placed a greater emphasis on social interactions and significant others in their stories. The Chinese subjects also more frequently drew upon past events to convey moral messages than did Americans. Wang and Conway suggested that personal narratives and life stories fulfill both self-expressive and self-directive functions. European Americans may prioritize self-expressive functions, viewing personal narratives as vehicles for articulating the breadth, depth, and uniqueness of the inner self. By contrast, Chinese people may prioritize the self-directive function, viewing personal narratives as guides for good social conduct. Confucian traditions and values place great deal of emphasis on history and respect for the past. Individuals are encouraged to learn from their own past experiences and from the experiences of others, including their ancestors. From a Confucian perspective, the highest purpose in life is ren—a blending of benevolence, moral vitality, and sensitive concern for others. One method for promoting ren is to scrutinize one's autobiographical past for mistakes in social conduct. Another method is to reflect upon historical events in order to understand one's appropriate position in the social world. It should not be surprising, then, that personal narratives imbued with a Confucian ethic should draw upon both individual and historical events in order to derive directions for life.

Within any society, different stories compete for dominance and acceptance. Feminists such as Heilbrun (1988) argue that, in Western societies, many women "have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control over—their lives" (p. 17). It is painfully clear that life stories echo gender and class constructions in society and reflect, in one way or another, prevailing patterns of hegemony in the economic, political, and cultural contexts wherein human lives are situated. Power elites privilege certain life stories over others. At the same time, people may resist dominant cultural narratives, give voice to suppressed discourses, and struggle to bring marginalized ways of imagining and telling lives to the cultural fore (Gjerde, 2004). Bamberg and Andrews (2004) describe the effort to make sense of lives outside of, and in opposition to, dominant cultural modes as the construction of counter-narratives. Counter-narratives can be found in many different cultural venues and are especially salient among minorities, the economically disadvantaged, and other marginalized groups in society.

Principle 6: Some Stories Are Better Than Others

A life story always suggests a moral perspective, in that human characters are intentional, moral agents whose actions can always
be construed from the standpoint of what is "good" and what is "bad" in a given society (MacIntyre, 1981). Furthermore, stories themselves can be evaluated as relatively good or bad from a psychological standpoint, though these evaluations also suggest moral perspectives and reflect the values and norms of the society within which a story is evaluated. The past decade has witnessed an upsurge of interest among narrative researchers in what exactly constitutes a good life story (e.g., King, 2001). Researchers have examined narrative coherence and complexity, as well as the extent to which certain features of life stories are associated with psychological maturity, mental health, and professional and marital satisfaction (e.g., J. Adler, Kessel, & McAdams, 2006; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005a).

A growing number of clinical and counseling psychologists are beginning to see psychotherapy as fundamentally a process of story reformulation and repair (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004; Singer, 2003). From the viewpoint of narrative therapy, clients often present disrupted and disorganized life stories that contribute to their symptoms and underlie poor mental health (Dimaggio & Seemariani, 2004; Neimeyer & Tschudi, 2003). Narrative therapists help clients transform their faulty life narratives into new stories that affirm growth, health, and adaptation. Narrative interventions have also been developed for the penal system, wherein counselors work to rehabilitate offenders through the development of life stories that acknowledge wrongdoing, manage shame, and point the way to a reformed life (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004).

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

NARRATIVE IN PERSONALITY: TRAITS, ADAPTATIONS, AND STORIES

Where does narrative identity fit within the big picture of personality? Drawing on narrative studies, the Big Five traits, and other recent trends in the field, we (McAdams & Pals, 2006) proposed an integrative conceptual framework for personality psychology that views the big picture in terms of five broad and interrelated concepts (see also Hooker & McAdams, 2003; Sheldon, 2004; Singer, 2005). The five concepts are evolution, traits, adaptations, life narratives, and culture. We (McAdams & Pals, 2006) conceive of personality as (1) an individual's unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a developing pattern of (2) dispositional traits, (3) characteristic adaptations, and (4) self-defining life narratives, complexly and differentially situated in (5) culture and social contexts. Figure 8.1 illustrates these five concepts and shows their relations to each other.

Evolution provides the general design for psychological individuality against which socially consequential variations in human lives can be conceived. Human beings have evolved, furthermore, to take note of those variations that were most important for group life in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, many of which continue to play an important role in social life today. Among the most notable psychological variations are a small set of broad dispositional traits, such as extraversion, neuroticism, and other general dimensions to be found within the Big Five and related trait taxonomies. Beyond dispositional traits, human lives vary with respect to a wide range of motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental adaptations, contextualized in time, place, and/or social role. Characteristic adaptations include motives, goals, plans, strivings, strategies, values, self-schemas, mental representations of significant others, developmental tasks, and many other aspects of psychological individuality that speak to motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental concerns. If traits sketch the outline, characteristic adaptations fill in many of the details of personality.

Beyond dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations, human lives vary with respect to the integrative life stories and personal narratives that individuals construct to make meaning and identity in the modern world. Life stories draw from, and are layered upon, dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations, but they cannot be reduced to traits and adaptations. If traits sketch the outline and adaptations fill in details, then stories give individual lives their unique and culturally anchored meanings. Culture exerts different effects on different levels of personality. It exerts modest effects on dispositional traits by setting ground rules and demand characteristics for phenotypic trait expres-

sion. It exerts moderately strong effects on characteristic adaptations by influencing the timing and content of goals, motives, values, and the like. Culture exerts its strongest effects, however, on life stories by providing the canonical narrative forms—a menu of life narrative choices—out of which people make meaning in, and out of, their lives (McAdams, 2006). Culture and personality interact in their most intricate and profound ways in the fashioning of narrative identity.

Personality researchers have conducted many studies examining linkages between life narratives and characteristic adaptations. For example, studies have shown that social motives concerning power and intimacy (viewed as characteristic adaptations in Figure 8.1) are systematically related to recurrent narrative themes in life stories (e.g., McAdams, 1982; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996; Woike, 1995; Woike, Gershkovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999). People with strong power motives tend to construct personal narratives and life stories that feature such agentic life themes as self-mastery, status and victory, achievement and responsibility, and empowerment; those high in intimacy motivation tend to construct more communal life narratives, emphasizing love and friendship, dialogue, caring for others, and belongingness. People with strong power motivation also tend to use an analytic and differentiated narrative style when describing agentic events, perceiving more differences, separations, and oppositions, compared to people lower in power motivation. By contrast, people with high intimacy motivation tend to use a synthetic style when describing communal events, detecting similarities, connections, and congruence among different elements in significant life story scenes.

Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial stages has framed inquiries into the relations between developmental adaptations and life stories. Conway and Holmes (2004)
asked older adults to recall important autobiographical memories from each decade of life. They found that the content of these important life-story scenes tends to reflect stage-related themes corresponding to the age at which the scene was encoded. For example, themes of identity (vs. role confusion) tend to predominate in memories from the teenage and emerging adult years, themes of intimacy (vs. isolation) are highest in the 20s, and themes of generativity (vs. stagnation) tend to show up in the midlife decades. Young, Stewart, and Miner-Rubino (2001) found that divorced women tend to frame the stories of their failed marriages in terms of the Eriksonian stages that were relevant at the time of the divorce.

Research has also examined relations between life narratives and dispositional traits. Sutin and Robins (2005) documented relations between content themes in self-defining memories and self-report measures of narcissism and self-esteem. Blagov and Singer (2004) found that the specificity of self-defining memories was inversely related to self-report measures of repressive defensiveness. Studies examining life narratives and the Big Five traits have found significant, though statistically modest, relations between the two (McAdams et al., 2004; Raggatt, 2006). Individuals high in neuroticism tend to construct stories with more negative emotional tones; agreeableness tends to be associated with communal themes (e.g., nurturing and caring for others) in life narratives; and people high in openness to experience tend to tell structurally complex stories about themselves that emphasize their creative and artistic tendencies.

Although some predictable relations between the content and structure of life stories, on the one hand, and measures of characteristic adaptations and dispositional traits, on the other, have been documented, the correlations are not so strong as to suggest that these are all interchangeable constructs. Narrative accounts are not merely methodological alternatives for getting at the same dimensions of personality that can be accessed through self-report scales. We (McAdams & Pals, 2006) conceive of traits, adaptations, and stories as three separate domains of personality—three separate categories of self-knowledge, three separate discourses for making sense of self. Assessments of each of the three account for substantial variance in predicting important life outcomes (Bauer et al., 2005b; Pals, 2006c) and contribute unique information to understanding the person as a complex and developing whole (Wiggins, 2003).

THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Stories are fundamentally about the vicissitudes of human intention organized in time (Bruner, 1986). In virtually all intelligible stories, humans or humanlike characters act to accomplish intentions upon a social landscape, generating a sequence of actions and reactions extended as a plot in time. Human intentionality is at the heart of narrative, and therefore the development of intentionality is of prime importance in establishing the mental conditions necessary for storytelling and story comprehension. Research on imitation and attention suggests that by the end of the first year of life, human infants recognize that other human beings are intentional agents who act in a goal-directed manner (Kuhlmeier, Wynn, & Bloom, 2003). They implicitly understand that a story's characters act in accord with goals.

The second year of life marks the emergence of a storytelling, autobiographical self. By 24 months of age, toddlers have consolidated a sense of themselves as agentic and appropriating subjects in the social world who are, at the same time, the objects of others' observations (as well as their own). The 2-year-old self is a reflexive, duplex, 1-me configuration: a subjective I that observes (and begins to construct) an objective me. Among those elements of experience that the I begins to attribute to the me are autobiographical events. Howe and Courage (1997) argue that children begin to encode, collect, and narrate autobiographical memories around the age of 2—my little stories about what happened to me—stories the I constructs and remembers about me.

With development and experience in the preschool years, the storytelling, autobiographical self becomes more sophisticated and effective. The burgeoning research literature on children's theory of mind shows that in the 3rd and 4th years of life most children come to understand that intentional human
behavior is motivated by internal desires and beliefs. Interpreting the actions of others (and oneself) in terms of their predisposing desires and beliefs is a form of mind reading, according to Baron-Cohen (1995), a competency that is critical for effective social interaction. By the time children enter kindergarten, mind reading seems natural and easy. To most schoolchildren, it makes intuitive sense that a girl should eat an ice-cream cone because “she wants to” (desire) or that a boy should look for a cookie in the cookie jar because “he believes the cookies are there.” But autistic children often find mind reading to be extraordinarily difficult, as if they never developed this intuitive sense about what aspects of mind are involved in the making of motivated human behavior. Characterized by what Baron-Cohen calls mindblindness, children with autism do not understand people as intentional characters, or do so only to a limited degree. Their lack of understanding applies to the self as well, suggesting that at the heart of severe autism may reside a disturbing dysfunction in “I-ness” and a corresponding inability to formulate and convey sensible narratives of the self (Brunner, 1994).

Autobiographical memory and self-storytelling develop in a social context. Parents typically encourage children to talk about their personal experiences as soon as children are verbally able to do so (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). Early on, parents may take the lead in stimulating the child’s recollection and telling of the past: by reminding the child of recent events, such as this morning’s breakfast or yesterday’s visit to the doctor. Taking advantage of this initial conversational scaffolding provided by adults, the young child soon begins to take more initiative in sharing personal events. By the age of 3 years, children are actively engaged in co-constructing their past experience in conversations with adults. By the end of the preschool years, they are able to give a relatively coherent account of their past experiences, independent of adult guidance. Yet individual differences in how parents converse with their children appear to have strong impacts on the development of the storytelling self. For example, when mothers consistently engage their children in an elaborative conversational pattern, asking children to reflect and elaborate upon their personal experiences, children develop richer autobiographical memories and tell more detailed stories about themselves. Conversely, a more constricted style of conversation on the part of mothers is associated with less articulated personal narratives in children (Reese & Farrant, 2003).

By the time children are able to generate their own narrative accounts of personal memories, they also exhibit a good understanding of the canonical features of stories themselves. Five-year-olds typically know that stories are set in a particular time and place and involve characters that act upon their desires and beliefs over time. They expect stories to evoke suspense and curiosity and will dismiss as “boring” a narrative that fails to live up to these emotional conventions (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). They expect stories to conform to a conventional story grammar (Mandler, 1984) or generic script concerning what kinds of events can occur and in what order. Stories are expected to have definite beginnings, middles, and endings. The ending is supposed to provide a resolution to the plot complications that developed over the course of the story. If a story does not conform to conventions such as these, children may find it confusing and difficult to remember, or they may recall it later with a more canonical structure than it originally had.

As children move through the elementary school years, they come to narrate their personal experiences in ways that conform to their implicit understandings of how good stories should be structured and what they should include. Importantly, they begin to internalize their culture’s norms and expectations concerning what the story of an entire human life should contain. As they learn that a telling of a single life typically begins, say, with an account of birth and typically includes, say, early experiences in the family, eventual moves out of the family, getting a job, getting married, and so on, they acquire what Habermas and Bluck (2000) term a cultural concept of biography. Cultural norms define conventional phases of the life course and suggest what kinds of causal explanations make sense in telling a life story. As children learn the culture’s biographical conventions, they begin to see how single events in their own lives—remembered from the past and imagined for the future—might be sequenced and linked together to create their own life story.
Still, it is not until adolescence, according to Habermas and Bluck (2000), that individuals craft causal narratives to explain how different events are linked together in the context of a biography. What Habermas and Bluck call *causal coherence* in life narratives is exhibited in the increasing effort across the adolescent years to provide narrative accounts of one's life that explain how one event caused, led up to, transformed, or in some way was/is meaningfully related to other events in one's life. An adolescent girl may explain, for example, why she rejects her parents' liberal political values, or why she feels shy around boys, or how it came to be that her junior year in high school represented a turning point in her understanding of herself in terms of personal experiences from the past that she has selected and reconstrued to make a coherent personal narrative. Furthermore, she may now identify an overarching theme, value, or principle that integrates many different episodes in her life and conveys the gist of who she is and what her biography is all about—a cognitive operation that Habermas and Bluck call *thematic coherence*. Studies reported in Habermas and Bluck suggest that causal and thematic coherence are relatively rare in autobiographical accounts in early adolescence but increase substantially through the teenage years and into early adulthood (see also Habermas & Paha, 2001).

The formulation of a narrative identity is the central psychosocial challenge of emerging adults in modern societies. Equipped now with the cognitive software to construct causally and thematically coherent narratives of the self, and motivated to do so by cultural demands, ranging from parental pressure to economic necessity, that proclaim the time “to get a life” is now (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1985), young men and women begin to put their lives together into full life stories that make sense of the reconstituted past and position them to move forward with purpose into an unknown future. It is time to make some decisions about the future, about school, the armed services, work, and (for some) marriage and family. In general, modern societies “expect” adolescents and young adults to begin to examine the occupational, interpersonal, and ideological offerings of society and, eventually, to make commitments, even if only temporarily, to personalized niches in the adult world. This is to say that both the society and the emerging adult are ready for the individual’s experiments in narrative identity by the time he or she has, in fact, become an emerging adult.

If the formation of a narrative identity, then, emerges as a psychosocial problem in late adolescence and young adulthood, it should not be expected to fade away quickly once the individual resolves an identity “stage.” The common reading of Erikson’s (1963) theory to suggest that identity is a well-demarcated stage to be explored and resolved in adolescence and early adulthood is, from the standpoint of narrative theory and recent life-course research in psychology and sociology (e.g., Arnett, 2000), an increasingly misleading reading of how modern people live and think about their lives. More accurate, it now appears, is this view: *Once narrative identity enters the developmental scene, it remains a project to be worked on for much of the rest of the life course*. Into and through the midlife years, adults continue to refashion their narrative understandings of themselves, incorporating into their ongoing, self-defining life stories developmentally on-time and off-time events, expected and unexpected life transitions, gains and losses, and their changing perspectives on who they were, are, and may be (Birren et al., 1996; Cohler, 1982). Adults continue to come to terms with society and social life through narrative. The autobiographical storytelling self continues to make narrative sense of life, and its efforts may even improve with age. Recent empirical evidence suggests that as they move from adolescence up through midlife, adults use increasingly sophisticated forms of autobiographical reasoning and produce increasingly coherent narrative accounts of their personal experiences (Bluck & Gluck, 2004; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006).

**NARRATING SUFFERING, GROWTH, AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION**

Life stories contain accounts of high points, low points, turning points, and other emotionally charged events (Singer & Salovey, 1993; Tomkins, 1979). Positive events involve emotions such as joy, excitement, and love; negative events are about experiences
of distress, sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, guilt, shame, and the like. In his script theory of personality, Tomkins (1979) suggested that people tend to organize emotionally positive and negative scenes in their life stories in correspondingly different ways. Scenes built around the positive affects of joy and excitement tend to be construed and organized as variants, Tomkins argued. People accentuate variation in their positive scenes, and, in so doing, their stories affirm the notion that people can be happy in many different ways. By contrast, scenes built around negative affects tend to be construed and organized as analogs. People accentuate the similarities among their negative events, perceiving common patterns and repetitive sequences, as if to suggest that unhappiness tends to happen in the same old way, over and over again. Positive scenes in narrative identity feel like this: "Wow! This is cool!" For negative scenes, it is more like, "Oh no! Here we go again."

There are many reasons to believe that emotionally positive and negative events present correspondingly different challenges and fulfill different functions in life stories (Pals, 2006a). At a general level, many theories in psychological science link positive emotions to a behavioral approach system (BAS) in the brain, designed to regulate reward-seeking activities. By contrast, negative emotions may signal avoidance behaviors in response to threat or uncertainty, regulated by a behavioral inhibition system (BIS). In her mobilization–minimization theory, Taylor (1991) underscored the asymmetrical effects of positive and negative events. Negative (adverse or threatening) events evoke strong and rapid physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social responses, Taylor argued. The organism mobilizes resources in order to cope with, and ultimately minimize, the adverse effect of a negative event. Negative events produce more cognitive activity in general and more efforts to engage in causal reasoning, compared to positive events. At the level of the life story, negative events seem to demand an explanation. They challenge the storyteller to make narrative sense of the bad thing that happened—to explain why it happened and perhaps why it may not happen again, to explore the consequences of the negative event for later development in the story.

Many researchers and clinicians believe that the cognitive processing of negative events leads to insight and positive consequences for psychological well-being and health. Pennebaker’s (1997) landmark studies show that writing about (and presumably working through) negative events in life produces positive effects on health and well-being. Whether reviewing and analyzing positive life events produce the same kinds of effects remains an open question (Burton & King, 2004), but at least one study suggests that extensively processing positive events may lead to reduced well-being (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoff, 2006). It may be better simply to savor positive life-story scenes, to reexperience the positive emotions involved rather than trying to make cognitive sense of them (Burton & King, 2004). Negative scenes, however, seem to demand more storytelling work. In recent years, narrative research has examined the nature of that work: How do people process negative events in their life stories? And what are the psychological consequences of telling different kinds of stories about personal suffering and adversity?

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) argued 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 the story make sense. 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. "I may be sick, but I am not nearly as sick as my good friend's wife" or "God is testing my resolve, and I will rise to the challenge." Bonanno (2004) showed 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 argued. Rather
than ruminate over the bad things that hap-
pen in their lives, they put it all behind them
and move forward.

In many situations, however, people
cannot or choose not to discount negative
life events. Instead, they try to make mean-
ing out the suffering they are currently expe-
riencing, or experienced once upon a time.
For example, McLean and Thorne (2003)
showed that adolescents often find it neces-
sary to discern lessons learned or insights
 gained in self-defining memories that involve
conflict with others. Pals (2006a) argued that
autobiographical reasoning about negative
events ideally involves a two-step process. In
the first step, the narrator explores the nega-
tive 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 his or her overall understanding of self. In
the second step, the narrator articulates and
commits the self to a positive resolution of
the event. Pals warned that one should not
pass lightly over the first step. When it comes
to narrative identity, Pals suggested, the un-
examined life lacks depth and meaning.

Consistent with Pals (2006a), a number
of studies have shown that exploring nega-
tive life events in detail is associated with
psychological maturity. For example, King
and her colleagues have conducted a series
of intriguing studies wherein they ask people
who have faced daunting life challenges to
tell stories about “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 syn-
drome reflected upon what their lives might
have been like had they given birth to ba-
bies not afflicted with 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 Loewinger’s (1976)
measure of ego development than did moth-
ers who discounted what might have been
(King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000).

In a study of how midlife women re-
spond to divorce, the elaboration of loss in
narrative accounts interacted with time since
divorce to predict ego development (King
& Raspin, 2004). Among women who had
been divorced for an extended period of
time, vivid and highly elaborate accounts of
the married life they had lost were associated
with higher ego development at the time of
their life telling, and narrative elaboration
predicted increases in ego development mea-
sured 2 years later. In a methodologically
similar study, King and Smith (2004) found
that the extent to which gay and lesbian in-
dividuals explored what might have been
had their lives followed a more conventional
(heterosexual) course predicted high levels
of ego development at the time of their life-
narrative accounts and increases in ego de-
velopment 2 years later.

Narrative studies of life transitions
have also shown that self-exploration and
elaboration are associated with higher lev-
els of ego development. Bauer and McAd-
ams (2004b) examined narrative accounts
from people who had undergone major life
changes in either work or religion. People
high in ego development tended to con-
struct accounts of these difficult transitions
that emphasized learning, growth, and posi-
tive personal transformation. The extent to
which personal narratives emphasizing self-
exploration, transformation, and integration
are positively correlated with ego develop-
ment has also been documented in studies
of life goals (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a)
and narrative accounts of life’s high points,
low points, and turning points (Bauer et al.,
2005b). In another study linking develop-
ment to narrative processing, McLean and
Pratt (2006) found that young adults who
used more elaborated and sophisticated
forms of meaning making in narrating turn-
ning points in their lives tended also to score
higher on an overall identity maturity index.
Analyzing data from the Mills Longitudinal
Study, Pals (2006c) found that the extent to
which women at age 52 explored the ramifi-
cations of negative life events mediated the
relationship between age 21 exploring coping
style and age 61 psychosocial maturity. Women
who in early adulthood scored high on self-report
scales assessing an open and nondefensive
coping style constructed more elaborate and
exploratory narrative accounts of difficult
life events at age 52, and narrative explo-
ration at age 52 predicted (and accounted for
the relationship of coping openness to) clinical
ratings of maturity at age 61.

If the first step in making narrative sense
of negative life events is exploring and elab-
orating upon their nature and impact, the second step involves constructing a positive meaning or resolution (Pals, 2006a). Numerous studies have shown that deriving positive meanings from negative events is associated with indicators of life satisfaction and emotional well-being. In their studies of mothers of children with Down syndrome, divorced women, and gay and lesbian adults who reflected on what might have been in life, King and colleagues demonstrated that attaining a sense of closure regarding negative experiences from the past and/or lost possible selves predicts self-reported psychological well-being (see King & Hicks, 2006, for an overview). In her analysis of longitudinal data from the Mills study, Pals (2006c) found that coherent positive resolutions of difficult life events at age 51 predicted life satisfaction at age 61 and were associated with increasing ego resiliency between young adulthood and midlife.

Finding positive meanings in negative events is the central theme that runs through my (McAdams, 2006) conception of the **redemptive self**. In a series of nomothetic and idiographic studies conducted over the past 15 years, I and my colleagues have consistently found that midlife American adults who score especially 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 (Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). 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. In addition, highly generative American adults are 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 adolescence that remains a source of unwavering conviction through the adult years; (4) experiences significant conflicts between desires for agency/power and desires for communion/love; and (5) looks 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. For highly productive and caring midlife American adults, the redemptive self is a narrative model of the good life.

The redemptive self is a life-story prototype that serves to support the generative efforts of midlife men and women. Their redemptive life narratives tell how generative adults seek to give back to society in gratitude for the early advantages and blessings they feel they have received. In every life, generativity is tough and frustrating work, as every parent or community volunteer knows. But if an adult constructs a narrative identity in which the protagonist’s suffering in the short run often gives way to reward later on, he or she may be better able to sustain the conviction that seemingly thankless investments today will pay off for future generations. Redemptive life stories support the kind of life strivings that a highly generative man or woman is likely to set forth.

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. I (McAdams, 2006) argued that the life-story themes expressed by highly generative American adults recapture and couch in a psychological language especially cherished, as well as hotly contested, ideas in American cultural history—ideas that appear prominently in (1) spiritual accounts of 17th-century Puritans, (2) Benjamin Franklin’s 18th-century autobiography, (3) slave narratives and Horatio Alger stories from the 19th century, and (4) the literature of self-help and American entrepreneurship from more recent times. 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 con-
temporary narratives of success, recovery, development, liberation, and self-actualization that so pervade American talk, talk shows, therapy sessions, sermons, 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 for worse, the most ardent narrators of a general life-story format as American as apple pie and the Super Bowl.

NOMOTHEtic AND IDIcOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

When some psychological scientists see the word “narrative,” they immediately think: “qualitative methods and case studies.” However, most of the narrative-based research published in personality journals (and nearly all of the research reviewed above) consists of quantitative studies designed to test hypotheses. Over the past two decades, researchers have developed structured protocols for obtaining life-narrative data and have validated a large number of procedures for coding psychological dimensions of life stories. For example, I and my colleagues have designed a variety of life-story interview protocols and a guided autobiography questionnaire, and we have developed objective coding systems for assessing narrative tone, themes of agency and communion in life-narrative accounts, redemption and contamination sequences, and goal articulation (see www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley). Singer and colleagues have developed quantitative procedures for assessing the specificity, meaning, content, and affective quality of self-defining memories (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Singer, 2005). Pennebaker and colleagues have employed computer-based word-count systems to assess many different features of narrative text (e.g., Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Although no single compendium or clearing house has yet been established to organize and disseminate all of the many different coding schemes that narrative researchers use, Smith (2000) and King (2003) have written useful review chapters that lay out basic procedures for designing nomothetic studies of life narratives.

Following Allport (1937) and Murray (1938), a small but vocal contingent of personality psychologists has always argued strenuously for the idiographic approach, wherein subtle and complex patterns of human individuality can be exposed (e.g., Elms, 2007; Runyan, 1990; White, 1952). Case studies and other idiographic approaches are invaluable in the derivation of hypotheses, the construction of new theories, and the illustration of complex patterns of psychological individuality. In recent years, narrative theories, concepts, and methods have provided new tools for the psychological study of the single case. What Josselson and Lieblich (1993) first called the narrative study of lives has begun to revitalize personality psychology's historical, if hesitant, commitment to idiographic, case-based research.

When personality psychologists and the public at large thought about psychological case studies in the 20th century, they typically thought about Freud. Psychoanalytic theories—from Freud and Jung to Kohut and the object-relations theorists—provided compelling frameworks for making psychological sense of the individual human life, especially when the life presented interesting conflicts or mysteries to be resolved. As psychoanalytic theory has lost favor in scientific circles, however, personality psychologists have begun to turn to narrative theories for guidance in understanding the single case. For example, Nasky and Read (1997) applied my life-story theory of identity (and the five-factor model of traits) in an in-depth, in vivo case study of Dodge Morgan, a middle-age man who circumnavigated the globe in a small boat. Wiggins (2003) compared life-narrative approaches to other assessment strategies in the case study of “Madeline G.,” a flamboyant young lawyer who volunteered to be the subject of an in-depth assessment protocol. Singer (1997, 2005) has employed narrative theories in elegant case studies of alcoholics and other patients in psychotherapy. De St. Aubin (1998) drew upon narrative theories, including Tomkins's (1979) script theory, in his psychobiography of the architect Frank Lloyd Wright. I (McAdams, 2005) developed a new set of guidelines for psychobiography, drawn from narrative theories of personality and from contemporary personality research.

Over the past 15 years, the narrative study of lives has inspired a wealth of case-based, idiographic research that continues to provide personality psychology with some of
its freshest new ideas. For example, Schultz (2003) developed the concept of the prototypical scene in life stories, in order to illustrate a new method for deriving psychobiographical hypotheses. Landman (2001) and Maruna (2001) examined the dynamics of shame, confession, and rehabilitation in narrative studies of reformed criminals. Cohler and Hammack (2006) explored how gay men have struggled to construct coherent narrative identities at different points in American history, teasing out the intricate interrelationships of historical events, social movements, birth cohorts, and individual biographies. Halbertal and Koren (2006) showed how highly religious (Jewish) gays and lesbians construct multiple and contradictory life stories that run along parallel narrative tracks. In a line-by-line exegesis of interview transcripts, Gregg (2006) showed how multiple images of the self are related to each other in terms of structural oppositionality, like thesis and antithesis in a dialectic. Based on a reading of selected case studies, we (McAdams & Logan, 2006) derived a new theory of how certain creative adults, such as academic researchers in the arts and sciences, narrate the development of their passion for work, and how their narratives of creative work may relate to the stories of their personal lives. J. Adler and I (2007) analyzed autobiographical memories from former psychotherapy patients to derive an initial conception of “the good therapy story.” In another study of psychotherapy narratives, Alon and Omer (2004) called into question the idea that progressive and redemptive life stories are always “good” psychological stories and made a compelling argument for the value of tragedy in narrative identity. All of these idiographic efforts put the complex relation between self and society at the center of the inquiry.

Idiographic, case-based studies of life narratives have proven to be especially valuable in generating new methods, concepts, and hypotheses for personality research. Examinations of the single case have also illustrated the sweep and power of narrative theories of personality. As documented in the current chapter as well, nomothetic research on personal narratives and life stories has begun to build up an impressive corpus of empirical findings on the relations between life narratives and other dimensions of personality, the development of narrative identity, the construction of meaning in the face of adversity, and the interpersonal and cultural shaping of the self. More than is true for any other realm of personality psychology today, narrative studies show how idiographic and nomothetic approaches to personality research can complement and enrich each other.

CONCLUSION

Once upon a time, personality psychologists viewed life stories as little different from fairy tales: charming, even enchanting on occasion, but fundamentally children’s play, of little scientific value for understanding human behavior and experience. Today, the empirical study of personal narratives and the life story has moved to the center of personality psychology. Building on broad theories of narrative identity developed in the 1980s and 1990s, researchers have set up laboratories and developed ambitious programs to study the expression, development, function, and meaning of the stories people tell about their lives. Internalized and evolving narratives of the self provide people’s lives with some measure of integration and purpose. Life stories speak directly to how people come to terms with their interpersonal worlds, with society, and with history and culture. As such, life stories make up a domain of personality structure and functioning that is separate from, though related to, the well-established domains of dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations. Empirical studies have begun to chart relations between stories, traits, and adaptations in human personality, and they have shown how measures of all three domains are needed if the personality psychologist is to provide a full and dynamic account of psychological individuality, an account that pays special attention to the ways in which lives and their social contexts make each other up.

A large and growing body of research traces the development of narrative identity from the infant’s first glimmerings of human intentionality to the reworking of life stories in late middle age. Many studies address how people construct stories to make sense of suffering and setbacks in life, and how these redemptive narratives of the self con-
tribute to psychological health, well-being, and maturity. Coming out of social psychology and communication studies, a parallel literature examines the co-construction of personal narratives and life stories in social interaction, in personal relationships, and in the complex cultural and societal contexts wherein narrative identity finds its ultimate meanings. Furthermore, narrative theories and methods have inspired new approaches to psychological case studies and revitalized personality psychology's efforts to build theory and derive new hypotheses through idiographic studies. No realm of personality psychology today so effectively blends the idiographic and the nomothetic as does the narrative study of lives.

In the year 1900, Sigmund Freud published what is arguably the most famous book ever written on the interpretation of personal narratives. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud argued that dream stories are the "royal road to the unconscious." Freud surely promised too much, and he placed too much faith in but one kind of story that people tell. But he had it right when he surmised that stories hold psychological truth. Over 100 years later, personality psychologists have finally taken on the task of exploring systematically the wide range of stories that people create, tell, and enact about their lives, from childhood through old age, in social interactions and in culture. The study of personal narratives and life stories may not be the *only* royal road to understanding psychological individuality. But until recent years it was the road less traveled. As more and more personality psychologists and other social, behavioral, and cognitive scientists are drawn down the narrative path, researchers will continue to develop new insights and build up systematic bodies of knowledge on how people make sense of their lives in society and culture and how the stories they tell largely determine who they are and affect what they do.

REFERENCES


Blagov, P. S., & Singer, J. A. (2004). Four dimensions of self-defining memories (specificity, meaning, content, and affect) and their relationship to self-restraint, distress, and repres-


Howe, M. L., & Courage, M. L. (1997). The emergence and early development of autobiographical...
II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES


