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# CHAPTER 7

# Charting the Life Story's Path

## Narrative Identity Across the Life Span

Jenna Baddeley and Jefferson A. Singer

Erik Erikson (1959, 1963, 1968, 1982), more than any of the great pioneers in personality psychology, understood that the construction of a coherent and purposeful self-concept, or what he called *identity*, is a *psychosocial* process. The individual, a conflux of psychological and biological processes, is embedded in a sociocultural context. Only through the process of "triple bookkeeping" (Erikson, 1963, p. 46), an analysis of biological, psychological, and social dimensions of the individual, might we come to a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of a given person's identity. According to Erikson (1963), we gain access to this understanding by studying how individuals move through "crises" that accompany eight distinct phases of the human life cycle from birth to death. Despite certain dated assumptions about sexuality and gender roles (Josselson, 1996), the enduring legacy of Erikson's work is his emphasis on the psychosocial struggle for self-understanding and self-development in a life over time.

In the 1980s, building on recent developments in the study of narrative as both a mode of thought and a method of psychological investigation (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Spence, 1982; Tomkins, 1979), Dan McAdams offered a major extension of Erikson's work on identity. McAdams's (1987, 1988, 1990) life story theory of identity argued that the coherent, albeit often complex, narrative that we forge of our life experiences is in fact our identity. This life story is not simply an expression of the underlying construct of identity, but it is *the* fundamental way in which we know ourselves and to a large extent are known by

others. In keeping with Erikson's psychosocial emphasis, McAdams argued that the stories we create of our lives are forged from the available repertoire of cultural myths, images, symbols, settings, and plotlines that we learn from family, community, literature, art, and media.

Singer (2004b) noted a variety of research in personality, clinical, and cognitive psychology that bears the influence of McAdams's life story theory of identity. He suggested that a new generation of researchers was converging around the concept of *narrative identity*. These narrative identity researchers share certain common principles, including an emphasis on cognitive models of autobiographical memory, a commitment to the study of sociocultural factors in identity, the adoption of a life span developmental perspective, and an openness to multimethod forms of investigation.

This chapter reviews the innovative methods employed by these narrative researchers in the service of understanding how identity develops and changes over the life course. By documenting the psychosocial construction of narratives at different developmental junctures, the chapter also demonstrates how narrative research is an ideal vehicle for illustrating the inherent tension between self and society that Erikson and later McAdams understood to be the essence of identity. Narrative research is examined from the following periods of the life cycle: birth, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and older adulthood. Across these life span periods, social influences on narrative range from the most intimate interpersonal influences to community, institutional, and political pressures.

From birth to death, individuals struggle to define a unique self while simultaneously drawing on social influences that provide much of its raw material and often play a sculpting hand in its expression. Narrative research documents how parents, peers, and intimate partners in combination with societal scripts and templates guide individuals' life stories in certain normative directions. At the same time, individuals give familiar cultural tales a fresh voice filtered through their idiosyncratic life experience and personal memory. Despite this strong current of individuation, personal stories are inevitably relinquished at death and become legacies, merged with other similar stories, which belong to surviving generations and a larger historical record. As this chapter reviews narrative methods that help to chart the progress of the life story across the life span, we specifically highlight these social and developmental factors that influence narrative formation and expression.

The development of a healthy narrative identity leads individuals, as Erikson noted in the eighth and final stage of his theory, to a capacity for reflection and review. As individuals continually revise their life stories over the life span, they are not simply narrators but critics who apply an interpretive knowledge and accumulated wisdom about the narratives that they share. One other important theme of the application of narrative methods to the study of identity over the life span is to look for evidence of what Bluck and Habermas (2001) call *autobiographical reasoning*—the capacity of individuals to step back and draw inferences and lessons from the stories they tell of their lives.

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# Birth

The tension between self and other in narrative identity is present at our origins. The moment the umbilical cord is cut, we assume our separate identity in the world. Yet while our life story begins with our birth, our birth story does not begin as our own. We hear our birth story, perhaps multiple times over the years, before we can tell it as our own story. Accordingly, our literal first moments of existence as separate entities in the world are invariably defined through stories told by others.

To examine how these inherited birth stories might contribute to later narrative identity, Hayden, Singer, and Chrisler (in press) studied the sharing of birth stories between mothers and daughters and the relationship of this sharing to the daughters' self-esteem and attachment to their mothers. Sixty-one female college students gave written narratives of their own birth stories, indicating whether they had heard the story many times, a few times, or never. Thirty-three of these students' mothers agreed to participate as well. Each gave a narrative account of her daughter's birth and indicated the frequency with which she had shared this story with her daughter.

An innovation in this study was the use of raters, blind to the identity of mothers and daughters, who attempted to match the mothers' stories with their daughters' stories. Daughters whose stories were judged most similar to their mothers' stories of the same event and daughters who had heard their birth stories more times demonstrated higher self-esteem and indicated closer relationships with their mothers.

Furthermore, a high level of positive affect and detail in the mothers' and the daughters' stories was also linked to high self-esteem in daughters and to strong mother-daughter attachment. Although this study could not assess causal relationships between mothers' positively toned stories and daughters' positively toned stories and daughters' positive self-image, the results illustrated that these birth stories, despite their secondhand origins, had been incorporated into these young adults' self-concept. These findings highlight the idea that as individuals slowly assemble the narrative components that will become their comprehensive life story, their story commences with a self-conception that was initially mediated by the consciousness and language of others. With the emergence of their own words, toddlers begin to develop a coherent private consciousness along with the means to narrate the thoughts, feelings, and activities of their nascent self. When this process begins, narrative identity is no longer constructed in the "third person" but becomes a "first-person" account of individuals' unique autobiographical memories. Shifting gradually from reliance on parents as their amanuensis, individuals learn to tell their own stories (Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

# Childhood

Much of the early development of autobiographical memory occurs within parent-child conversations about the shared personal past, also known as joint reminiscing (Fivush & Hudson, as cited in Nelson & Fivush, 2000). Joint reminiscing begins as soon as children begin to talk, at around 12 to 18 months of age (Haden, 2003).

It is not until the age of 3 or 4 that a child begins to initiate reminiscence talk and make independent contributions. By the age of 5 or 6, a child has begun to influence her mother's reminiscing style, even as the mother influences the child's reminiscing style (Reese & Farrant, 2003). Although the ability to produce single-episode autobiographical memories emerges in childhood, the ability to integrate autobiographical memories into an extended life story does not fully emerge until adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Research into the development of children's narrative skills in the context of joint reminiscing is frequently done longitudinally, so that researchers can determine predictive factors that influence the emerging story. Farrant and Reese (2000) observed the interactions of mother-child pairs at four different points in time (19, 25, 32, and 40 months) over a 1-year period. At all points, the mothers talked about selected past events with their children. These conversations took place in the participants' homes and were audiotaped, videotaped, and transcribed verbatim. The tapes and transcripts were coded for three types of behaviors: mothers' memory elaboration questions, children's memory elaborations (new information provided by the child), and children's placeholders (child taking a turn in the conversation but not offering new content).

This research found that starting at about 25 months of age children begin to influence their mothers' engagement in reminiscing conversations. Children contribute to joint reminiscing in small ways, either through articulating events and details that they remember (children's memory elaborations) or just through indicating interest and engagement in the conversation without contributing anything of substance (placeholders). However, none of these contributions has as much predictive weight as the guiding maternal contribution (mothers' memory elaboration questions) (Farrant & Reese, 2000; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Reese & Fivush, 1993).

The "elaborativeness" of a mother's reminiscing style in conversations with her young child is a major determinant of that child's future capability for generating detailed autobiographical memories (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999). Elaborative mothers provide detailed questions to elicit their children's recollections of the event under discussion, and they are responsive to new and unexpected input from the child. In the course of a conversation between an elaborative mother and her child, the pair talks about an event in depth and detail. Here is an example in which an elaborative mother discusses a treasure hunt with her 3-year-old:

*Mother:*   There was [sic] a whole lot of people at the beach, and everyone was doing something in the sand.

*Child:*   What was it?

*Mother:*   Can't you remember what we did in the sand? We were looking for something.

*Child:*   Umm, I don't know.

*Mother:*   We went digging in the sand.

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*Child:* Umm, and that was when um the yellow spade broke.

*Mother:* Good girl, I'd forgotten that. Yes, the yellow spade broke, and what happened?

*Child:* Um, we had to um dig with the other end of the yellow one.

*Mother:* That's right. We used the broken bit, didn't we?

*Child:* Yeah. (Fivush & Reese, 2002, pp. 111–112)

In joint reminiscing, parents model for their children how to tell stories of events in the personal past—what elements to include, delete, and emphasize. The nature and implicit aims of joint reminiscing are significantly shaped by cultural values. Gender roles prescribe male-female differences, and parents begin to construct those differences in joint reminiscing. Mothers and fathers alike discuss the personal past more elaborately with daughters than with sons. Girls report more detailed memories than boys from as young as 3 years of age, a gender difference that persists into adulthood (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Reese & Fivush, 1993). In joint reminiscing, parents are preparing their children to be the bearers of their culture's and their family's stories.

Joint reminiscing differs in significant ways across cultures. European American parents tend to use a child-centered and highly elaborative style of reminiscing, thereby teaching children how to be the kinds of individual and unique selves valued in this society (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer, 2003; Wang, 2004). Chinese parents, in contrast, use a didactic, hierarchically organized and low-elaborative approach to reminiscing with their children, promoting in children an understanding that the self's place is within a larger social order (Wang, 2004).

The audiotaping, transcription, and coding of parent-child conversations about narrative memory highlight how narrative methodology can indeed capture the subtle negotiation process between self and social influence that Erikson saw as the crucible of identity. The addition of longitudinal and cross-cultural samples provides further evidence for the multiple contributions of social factors to individuals' emerging narrative identity.

Even as children provide more independent autobiographical memories, parents and the surrounding society by and large shape the memory structure and content that forms the initial groundwork of these recollections. Because the capacity of children to narrate their lives is dependent on their parents' style of eliciting these narratives from them in joint reminiscing, children cannot yet be considered independent narrators.

One might employ the following analogy: In the kinds of theatrical dramas that were presented before Shakespeare's development of protagonists with interior psychological lives, characterization relied on convention, simple moral lessons, and rigidly defined parts. In a similar way, children are initially guided to construct stories that correspond to societal molds. Although they have become clearly identified characters with their own lines, they are not in the fullest sense speaking their own minds. However, as they continue to gain cognitive sophistication and

accumulate idiosyncratic experiences with the world, children grow into adolescents who increasingly learn to tell a unique narrative that draws on an interior world and expands on as well as conforms to conventional molds.

# Adolescence

The social and cognitive changes that occur in adolescence herald an opportunity for adolescents to begin to narrate the story of their own lives. By the end of childhood, individuals have learned how to tell stories, but it is not until adolescence that they learn how to organize memories and other self-relevant information coherently into a life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). It is through the creation of a life story that adolescents begin to tackle what Erikson (1968) considered the major psychosocial task of their life stage: the exploration and formation of a mature identity (Bluck & Habermas, 2001). Established in adolescence, this narrative identity evolves over the course of adulthood, reflecting the person's changing concerns, roles, priorities, and self-conceptions (Singer, 2004b).

The basic form of the life story is shaped by the powerful cultural influences that define the normative course of an autobiography. Autobiographical reasoning, the process by which the life story is constructed and applied, relies on the ability to understand and to produce coherent narratives. Habermas and Bluck (2000) identified four types of story coherence. Two of these types of coherence, *temporal coherence* and the *cultural concept of biography,* are social conventions for organizing narrative information. Temporal coherence is the ability to chronologically organize events that have occurred over an extended period of time (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In one study (Friedman, 1992, as cited in Habermas & Bluck, 2000), 4-, 6-, and 8-year-olds could all accurately remember in which order the events of yesterday, last weekend, and last summer happened; however, only 8-year-olds could accurately recall the order of four annually occurring events such as Christmases or birthdays.

An understanding of the cultural concept of biography entails a grasp not only of the normative sequence of life phases or events (e.g., starting school comes before one's first job, which comes before retirement) but also of the kind of information that is and is not appropriate to include in the life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In one study (Strube et al., 1985, as cited in Habermas & Bluck, 2000), preadolescent (11 years old), adolescent (19 years old), and adult (35–40 years old) participants selected normative life events from a possible array and organized these events into a probable chronological sequence. The preadolescents' ordering of the events deviated slightly from a strictly normative course; the adolescents' sequences of events adhered tightly to a normative course; and the adults' sequences of events again showed some variation from the expected sequence. These findings suggest that adolescents hold a stereotyped concept of the normative life course, whereas adults have more flexible concepts of how life unfolds. On the other hand, it is a testament to the power of cultural scripts that none of the groups' sequences varied widely from the normative life script.

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Cultural scripts influence not just the ways we live our lives but also the ways that we remember and feel about our pasts. For example, Rubin and Berntsen (2003), in a study of the phenomenon known as the *reminiscence bump*, found that individuals recall the majority of their positive memories as having happened in their adolescent and young adult years. Berntsen and Rubin (2004) demonstrated that life scripts provide a compelling explanation for this phenomenon. They asked some of their participants to estimate the ages at which the happiest, saddest, most important, and most traumatic events would occur for the typical person and the ages at which the typical person would feel most in love and most afraid. The same bump was present in people's accounts of the distribution of negative and positive memories in the typical life and in people's accounts of negative and positive events in their own lives. An explanation for this bump in the scripts and in people's lives is that many events that are considered significant and positive in our culture occur in young adulthood or late adolescence, for example, falling in love for the first time, finishing one's education, getting a first job, getting married, having a first child. Negative events, in contrast, do not fit so clearly into cultural scripts.

The life story does not attain all its coherence from adherence to culturally pre-scribed event sequences. Social expectations for a story to be coherent do, however, prescribe that an individual must recognize and explain moments of discontinuity in her life story. Disparate events can be held together by *causal coherence* and *thematic coherence*. Causal coherence explains individual episodes in the life story by drawing links between these episodes or by connecting episodes to personal beliefs, traits, and preferences. For example, an adolescent might offer as an explanation of her fear of dogs an account of a time when she, as a young child, had been bitten by a dog, or she might link her victory at her school's swim meet to the love of swimming she developed as a child or to memories of being recognized for earlier athletic achievements.

Thematic coherence pulls together multiple episodes of the life story under the auspices of an overarching value or principle. This is perhaps the most sophisticated form of coherence—it requires the ability to summarize and interpret and synthesize multiple episodes from one's life story. Themes that might run through a person's life include valuing and manifesting kindness to others, adhering to the principles of one's religion, and facing the continual disappointment of one's hopes.

Adolescents not only have the sociocognitive skills to form a life story, they also have the motivation to create one. Friends, family, and institutions expect adolescents to give coherent accounts of themselves to explain themselves in terms of their past and to anticipate their future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). For example, adolescents are asked to write personal statements for college admission or to give accounts of their interests and activities during job interviews. School assignments may ask them to write about the family traditions, religious ceremonies, and cultural practices that have been meaningful in their lives and to express their personal reflections on their own experiences in relation to the academic material they are learning.

Elkind (1967) also posited a central role for social influences in the development of the adolescent's narrative identity. For Elkind, though, instead of promoting the construction of a new life story out of existing autobiographical

memories, social pressures encourage the adolescent to modify an existing narrative of the self, the "personal fable" or private, internal story about the adolescent and his special qualities, into a more realistic form. The egocentric personal fable is, according to Elkind (1967), developed for an "imaginary audience," an audience who finds everything about the adolescent important, special, and unique and for whom the adolescent can spin anticipatory tales of glorious struggles and accomplishments. The sharing of personal stories within the context of intimate relationships begins the process wherein the imaginary audience is modified in the direction of the real audience and the personal story begins to resemble more closely the ways in which others perceive the adolescent.

Thorne (2000) emphasized the pivotal role of friends and family members to whom the adolescent tells his personal stories in the shaping of his life story. She argued that self-telling happens more often in adolescence and early adulthood than at other times in the life cycle, as do the kinds of highly emotional events that are most likely to be recounted. Thorne, Cutting, and Skaw (1998) found that the basic *plotlines* of personal stories tend to remain constant over time. On the other hand, the *meanings* of personal stories shift over time. In conversations with others, the meanings of personal stories are negotiated and reconstructed.

Having outlined the sociocognitive developments in adolescence that prepare individuals to craft an initial life story of identity, let us turn to the narrative methods researchers employ to track this emerging narrative capacity. Several studies have examined adolescents' identity development through looking at adolescents' representations of parental voices within autobiographical narratives (Arnold, Pratt, & Hicks, 2004). During an interview, each participant was asked to tell a story on one of the following topics: a value lesson learned from their parents, a difficult decision made with parental help, an influential experience. Raters coded each narrative as a whole on a five-point scale for the degree to which the parental voice is "assimilated within" versus "detached from" the adolescent's voice. On the low end of the scale, the parental voice is absent or summarily dismissed; on the high end, the parent's voice has been assimilated and rearticulated in the adolescent's own terms. Adolescent participants also completed measures of self-esteem, dispositional optimism, depression, and loneliness.

Adolescents who had assimilated and internalized parental teachings had higher concurrent self-esteem and optimism and were less lonely and depressed. Longitudinal studies showed that over the 4-year time span from age 16 to 20, adolescents who had assimilated parental voices in their narratives at age 16 had increased in self-esteem and decreased in loneliness by age 20. The 16-year-olds who had assimilated the parental voice also displayed a greater sense of social responsibility at age 20 (Arnold et al., 2004).

The most common way in which adolescent and young adult narrative memories have been studied is through the collection of "self-defining memories" (Blagov & Singer, 2004; McLean, 2005; McLean & Thorne, 2003; Moffitt & Singer, 1994; Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Sutin & Robins, 2005; Thorne & McLean, 2002; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004; Wood & Conway, 2006). Self-defining memories are a particular type of autobiographical memory. They are

> highly significant personal memor[ies] that . . . evoke strong emotion, [are] vivid in the mind's eye, and to which we return repeatedly . . . [they] revolve around the most important concerns and conflicts in our lives: unrequited loves, sibling rivalries, our greatest successes and failures, our moments of insight, and our severest disillusionments. (Singer, 2004a, p. 195)

In these studies, individuals receive a request to write down narrative memories that fit these emotional and thematic criteria. Generally participants are asked to write down anywhere from 3 to 10 memories. After recording the memories, participants rate the memories for their current emotional responses, as well as the memories' vividness and importance. Reliable and validated scoring manuals (Singer & Blagov, 2002; Thorne & McLean, 2001) have been developed for coding the memories for narrative structure, meaning making, and thematic content. The memories can also be coded for motivational themes, such as agency and communion (McAdams, 2002).

Studies of self-defining memories have demonstrated that adolescents and young adults do indeed accumulate autobiographical memories that pertain to their most important ongoing goals (Moffitt & Singer, 1994) and that reflect relatively stable features of their personality (Sutin & Robins, 2005). In addition, these memories are recruited in efforts at meaning making that highlight the role of narrative memory in self-understanding and healthy adjustment (Blagov & Singer, 2004; McLean, 2005; Thorne et al., 2004).

As adolescents and young adults fashion their incipient life stories from the raw material of self-defining memories, they are simultaneously telling these memories to audiences of family, friends, and newly made acquaintances. Pasupathi (2003) investigated the effects of telling others about emotional experiences on one's own feelings about these events. Specifically, she looked at whether and under what circumstances telling an emotional experience helps a person feel better. Participants in her study wrote two narratives: (1) a narrative of the original experience and (2) a narrative of a time they told another person about the event. They rated each account on the extent to which it elicited each of 8 positive emotions (happiness, joy, contentment, excitement, pride, accomplishment, interest, and amusement) and 11 negative emotions (anger, sadness, fear, disgust, guilt, embarrassment, shame, anxiety, irritation, frustration, and boredom). Participants also selected the two motivations that were most important to them from a list of possible motivations for retelling the story and answered questions about their listener's responsiveness and the extent to which the listener agreed with the teller's version of events. A motivation to feel better was associated with decreases in negative emotion over time, and a high level of listener agreement was associated with an increase in positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotions over time (Pasupathi, 2003). That one's feelings about a remembered event are shaped by others' responses highlights the importance of social influences in the continual formation of our internalized life story. Clearly, adolescents and young adults engaged in the fragile enterprise of defining an independent narrative identity are likely to be particularly prone to these interpersonal influences on the memories they share.

Not only do others influence the stories we tell, the stories we tell also power-fully shape others' impressions of us. If we care how others perceive us, we are likely to be motivated to control what our stories convey. One way in which people can control the meanings that others hear in their stories is through "positioning" themselves in socially acceptable ways vis-à-vis their narratives. In a study of late adolescents' self-defining memories of life-threatening events, Thorne and McLean (2003) found that the bulk of their participants fit into one of just three positions in telling these emotionally charged narratives: the "Florence Nightingale" position of displaying empathy and concern for others; the "John Wayne" position of courage or bravery in the face of adverse events; and the "vulnerability" position of preoccupation with one's own fear or sadness. Of these three positions, the first two were more often accepted than rejected by listeners. The vulnerability position, on the other hand, met with rejection more than half the time. This suggests that there are a handful of dominant, broadly acceptable scripts or "master narratives" for how to relate traumatic events (e.g., the Florence Nightingale or John Wayne script) and that if one is motivated to secure listener approval, one will likely adopt one of these more widely acceptable positions.

In considering the social factors that coalesce to influence the adolescent's emerging narrative identity, one should not lose sight of the developmental jour-ney that is only beginning with this initial effort at a life story. During adolescence or at any point during adulthood, we may reconfigure the narrative trajectory on which we had launched ourselves. Josselson (1996) studied college-age women during the first leg of a longitudinal study of women's identity development from college to midlife. When she first interviewed these women in their late adoles-cence, she used two different interview protocols. The first was an interview proto-col that elicited the participants' and their parents' views and practices within four domains: occupation, religion, politics, and sexual values and standards. She also used a "personal history interview," with questions that allowed the participants to articulate the kinds of ideas, dreams, and values that were most salient to them rather than to give their views on an issue that the experimenter had chosen.

Josselson's (1996) participants were having a new kind of experience—they were the first generation of women to have had the broad range of opportunities from which women have benefited since the feminist revolution. Their lives did not fol-low the patterns of the male lives that had served as the basis for Erikson's identity theory and other related identity frameworks. She grouped the late adolescents into four categories, according to whether they had searched for an identity and whether they had chosen one. The "guardians" had settled on an established iden-tity already, usually the one that their parents had envisioned for them. The "path-makers" had searched for and found an identity and a set of values different from those with which they had grown up. The "searchers" were still earnestly exploring different possible life paths. The "drifters" had not settled on an identity nor were they actively searching for one.

Josselson (1996) explored how these women's identity making process in late adolescence affected their stories at midlife. Those women who had been perfec-tionistic and tightly self-controlled at the end of college began to be able to admit

their imperfections and become more open to their own feelings and experiences. For example, one woman who had been very career oriented since college launched into a period of exploration of herself and her sexuality in midlife, when her husband of many years (he had been her college boyfriend) divorced her. Women who had been less certain of their identities and direction at the end of college ended up in midlife seeking and often finding structures with which to anchor their lives.

For Josselson (1996), these women's stories were shaped by their desires, inchoate as they often were, to "be someone" or to "do something" with their lives. The articulation and realization of this desire in women's lives may be on a timetable different from that in men's lives and may take different forms at different times. Ultimately, many of the changes in women's identity over the life course are not so much about introducing new elements into identity as discovering old ones that had been overlooked. Josselson (1996) wrote, "Like slowly turning kaleidoscopes, the shifts in a woman's identity involve rearrangement of pieces, now accenting one aspect and muting another, now altering the arrangement once more" (p. 243). Although the fundamental pieces may be identified in adolescence, they are unlikely to maintain the same configuration over the ensuing decades.

## Young Adulthood

In Erikson's model, as late adolescents grow into adults in their midtwenties and thirties, they have forged a working identity and are ready to pursue mature intimacy, a step that begins a new chapter in the life story. Self-disclosing discussions in which two people share and respond to each other's highly detailed and emotional memories foster and maintain intimacy (Alea & Bluck, 2003). In some sense, this intensive exchange of stories facilitates the process by which the partners begin to negotiate a shared identity. As Bridges (1980, as cited in Randall, 2001) put it, "to become a couple is to agree implicitly to live in terms of another person's story" (p. 71). Thus, a shared identity is also a shared and co-constructed narrative. Within established relationships such as marriages, partners continue to build, revise, and reinforce a mutually understood set of values and meaning systems "as [they] carry on the endless conversation that feeds on nearly all they individually or jointly experience" (Berger & Kellner, 1964, pp. 13–14). Increasingly, narrative researchers are realizing that an emphasis on individuals' personal life stories may overlook these shared stories and understandings, which reflect the interdependent dimension of adult identity.

Couples' stories of intimacy are unique on the one hand and on the other hand heavily shaped by cultural scripts. In our culture, the choice of an intimate partner is deeply reflective of the individual personality: we often choose partners who balance out our personalities, mesh with our styles of interacting, and who form the complementary part of our story (Belove, 1980). On the other hand, we have been learning since we were children about the expected plotline of romance. Cultural scripts for romance appear all over—in nursery rhymes and popular ditties, in books, and on television programs. When both the authors were growing up, they

used to hear (and sing) the following rhyme: "____ and ____, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage." This rhyme encapsulates the bare bones of our culture's dominant relationship script, which consists of three consecutive elements: (1) heterosexual love, (2) marriage, and (3) children.

Gergen and Gergen (1995) have explored this romantic script as it has evolved historically in our culture. They have identified two opposing discourses of love that inform our enactment and narration of courtship: romantic love and modernist love. Romantic love is an intense, spiritual passion that reason cannot touch, that emanates from the lover's innermost depths, and whose ultimate goal is unity with the beloved. Modernist love is practical and skeptical, rational and self-analytical. It emphasizes the exchange value and performative qualities of relationships. Compatible with a culture of consumerism, romantic relationships are one form of life choice or self-expression that we can select or reject. The cultural relativism of our post-modern era makes these and other discourses available for us to sample, albeit with an ironic attitude, as we enact emotional scenarios within our relationships.

Despite this putative freedom to choose, we remain actors in romances that have been played out over and over again, with variations, by many people in our culture (Scheibe, 2000). Popular culture certainly reinforces traditional romantic plots. Wedding ceremonies and high school proms are among the most elaborately scripted events in our culture. Popular music is dominated by the clichés of love songs, and St. Valentine's Day holds a familiar niche in the national calendar of holidays.

More to the point of our concern with narrative identity, individuals' courtships and relationships not only follow cultural scripts, but the stories that they internalize are linked to cultural formulae about how to develop and maintain intimacy. Storytelling for this purpose becomes more frequent in young adulthood and beyond (Alea & Bluck, 2003). Memories that foster intimacy development and maintenance tend to be rich in detail and emotion (Tannen, 1990, as cited in Alea & Bluck, 2003). Women generally produce more of these types of memories (Alea & Bluck, 2003), and they reminisce more often than men for the purpose of maintaining intimacy in relationships.

Responsiveness affects how much intimacy is achieved when detailed, emotional autobiographical memories are told in conversation. Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco (1998) asked participants to log their interactions for 7 days, during which they completed the Rochester Interaction Record after each of their daily interactions lasting more than 10 minutes, while rating the interaction for self-disclosure, partner disclosure, partner responsiveness, and intimacy. Participants who rated their partners higher in responsiveness experienced stronger intimacy in their interactions.

Wamboldt (1999) studied the process of couples' interactions in the co-construction of relationship narratives. Couples were interviewed jointly about their current relationship and the influence of their family of origin on the current relationship. Each interview was videotaped and then coded for several aspects of

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the couple's interaction. Couples who were more coordinated in their efforts at constructing their narrative were more satisfied with their current relationship; women who actively confirmed what their partner was saying were more satisfied with their relationship; and disconfirmation of one's partner's opinions was related to relationship instability. Thus, a couple's interaction pattern during the process of narrative co-construction is a valuable indicator of the quality of the relationship.

Interaction patterns within a romantic relationship are, in part, derived from the correspondence between the partners' implicit stories about the relationship. Sternberg (1998) takes the view that we all enter into romantic relationships hoping to live out our own unique preconscious ideal love story, which is influenced by life experience and cultural discourse. Romantic partners' long-term compatibility is largely based on the extent to which they have a shared understanding of the "story" they are enacting together. Sternberg, Hojjat, and Barnes (2001) proposed a list of 25 different story types based on analysis of love stories in literature, psychological research, and informally gathered case material. These stories range from the "horror story," in which one partner enjoys being taken charge of and terrorized by the other partner, while the other partner in turn likes to take charge and terrorize; to the "business story," in which the partners aspire for their relationship to operate like a well-run business, with each partner expected to perform his or her designated responsibilities; to the popular, romantic "fantasy story," in which one finds a perfect match and lives happily ever after.

Sternberg et al. (2001) developed a love story scale comprising several statements pertaining to each story type. Respondents read each statement and indicated on a Likert scale the extent to which the statement applied to their own view of and experience in romantic relationships. Couples who had been together for at least 1 year were recruited, and each partner completed a set of questionnaires, including a brief version of the love story scale along with a measure of relationship satisfaction. The results indicated that a higher degree of similarity between two partners' story types was associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Story type was related to relationship satisfaction, but only for maladaptive stories (e.g., the horror story), which were related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Thus, although adaptive stories may not ensure a good relationship, maladaptive stories may ensure a bad one (Sternberg et al., 2001).

In narrative couples therapy, the therapist helps clients to change their shared story by identifying the elements of personal and cultural stories that underlie the current, maladaptive story and to build a new story of the relationship that grows in strength as both members of the couple recruit previously overlooked memories from their past to support it (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993). Sometimes, a shared self-defining memory can symbolize the dominant story that is causing conflict within a couple's relationship and can be leveraged to "re-story" the relationship and resolve the conflict (Singer, 2004a).

In one example, a husband and wife remembered a car ride home from a facility at which the husband had been treated for alcohol abuse, a long-standing source of tension between his wife and him. After a lengthy treatment, the husband had felt ready to leave, but the wife had initially agreed with the psychiatrist's judgment

that he should stay longer. During their car ride home, the wife (who was not usually expressive) reached out her hand to the husband and he pulled away. She then pulled away too and did not reach out again. In this series of gestures, they were each playing out separate, painful inner stories. For her, reaching out to him made her vulnerable, and his rebuff reawakened the familiar message that she had internalized from the loss of her father, who had died when she was 13: "Losses never heal and this gap will not close" (Singer, 2004a, p. 200). He, on the other hand, had pulled away out of fear. His sense of free will was vulnerable, and his wife's initial agreement with the authority (the psychiatrist) had dealt a blow to his autonomy, against which his most familiar defense was silence. Aside from drinking, mute withdrawal had been his previous primary weapon against oppressive and rigid authorities all his life (Singer, 2004a).

Both partners identified this moment and returned to it repeatedly as the starting point of a 17-year period in which they were never again physically intimate and remained emotionally distant from each other. The memory of this moment was indeed self-defining, symbolizing the rift between them. Toward the end of the husband's life, the couple sought psychotherapy and was able to revisit the memory through conversation and role playing. As they revisited the scene, they were gradually able to rewrite their story of disconnection as one of reconnection and affection.

Aside from the shared, couple-defining moments over the length of the relationship, couples usually have a shared story of their first encounter, which Belove (1980) called FECK (first encounters of the close kind) narratives. In most cases, according to Belove (1980), the members of a couple remember the same incident even when asked separately. Their tellings of the incident reflect their understanding of their complementary roles in the relationship, roles that they continue to play in their current relationship.

As mentioned earlier, women tend to remember and describe relationship events more clearly and vividly than their male partners do. Ross and Holmberg (1990) set up a study in which men and women would reminisce, either together or separately, about a preselected event from their relationship (a first date, for example), and then they each answered self-report questions about the clarity and vividness of their memory of the chosen event as well as their own and their spouse's ability to remember details of past events. The women were consistently rated higher on the clarity, vividness, and detail aspects of memory. Additionally, men were more likely to report forgetting aspects of the selected event when they recalled events in the presence of their female partners than when they recalled them alone, whereas women's recall was not significantly influenced by the presence of their partners. The evidence suggests that men tend to rely on their female partners to be the keepers of their shared interpersonal history (Ross & Holmberg, 1990).

So far we have focused our discussion of intimacy narratives on studies of heterosexual relationships. Western culture is still in the process of accepting homosexual relationships, let alone bringing stories of these relationships into mainstream culture (the recent phenomenon of the film *Brokeback Mountain*, which depicts two cowboys' tortured love for each other, is a case in point). However, narrative researchers have begun to explore and identify the varying ways in which

homosexual men and women narrate their relationship stories. There even exists a cultural scheme for the expected elements of the gay or lesbian life story, including the order and the timing of these elements (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2000) have also emphasized the impact of cohort effects, such as the unavailability of role models for gay men and lesbians during most of the last century, and sociohistorical events, such as the AIDS pandemic. These pervasive influences on gay lives shift their cultural scripts of intimacy. The use of gay participants' stories of relationships and self-discovery to illustrate these cohort effects once again demonstrates how narratives are a powerful methodological tool for tracking social contributions to individual identity. Stories of intimacy, whether heterosexual or homosexual, help to remind us of the relational dimension that defines most adults' self-understanding in their twenties and thirties. Analysis of these stories shows how each romantic relationship recombines existing cultural scripts in a way that is both derivative and unique.

## Middle Adulthood

As individuals reach middle adulthood, they are likely to turn their focus to raising children or making meaningful professional and creative contributions or both. These generative actions and achievements lend a sense of purpose and meaning to adults' lives and are a means of forging a legacy of the self. Through generative tasks such as raising a family, identity also changes and grows. As Erikson (1982) proposed, generativity includes "a kind of self-generation concerned with further identity development" (p. 67).

Kotre (1999) identified four categories of generative behavior. One is biological, that is, bearing one's offspring. Another is parental, that is, raising children; another is technical, which refers to the teaching of skills and procedures; and the last is cultural, which has to do with creating, renovating, or maintaining—and ultimately passing on—a meaning system. The creation and passing on of life stories may be an integral part of generative activity in all these domains. Parents of young children frequently tell stories of their own childhood, serving the simultaneous functions of transmitting lessons about family and societal values to the children and developing and reconstructing the adults' own identities from the perspective of current parenting roles (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995).

Psychobiography, the intensive study of individual lives and the developmental and psychological themes that run through them, has been a major method in the narrative study of generativity. Psychobiographical approaches range from intensive studies of one person whose life exemplifies generative accomplishment to studies of multiple people; data for psychobiographical research can include interviews with the subject, the subject's public or private creative output (art, music, writing), and biographies written by others about the subject (de St. Aubin, 1998).

Alexander (1990) contended that often psychobiographical studies were performed to demonstrate the way that a life fits either the Freudian or neo-Freudian (Eriksonian) theoretical framework. Two psychobiographical studies that

investigate lives with reference to an Eriksonian framework, and in particular the Eriksonian construct of generativity, are discussed below.

De St. Aubin's (1998) study of American modernist architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1869–1959) was motivated by what Alexander (1990) considered a typical goal of psychobiographical inquiry: an attempt to "explain through appeal to psychological means the controversial or unexplained aspects of a subject's life experience" (p. 52). De St. Aubin (1998) explored Frank Lloyd Wright's generativity in different domains (fatherhood, mentorship, and architecture) and the development of his generativity over time, with special attention to the extremes of generativity that Frank Lloyd Wright embodied. On the one hand, Wright was a prolific and brilliant architect who transformed his discipline, and on the other hand he was a negligent and destructive father and teacher. De St. Aubin took as his sources of data biographies of Wright, including one written by a son and one by a former apprentice; Wright's autobiography; Wright's letters; tabloid reports; and Wright's architectural work.

Although de St. Aubin (1998) did not precisely articulate his research method, he did articulate the theoretical foundations of his conceptual process, the difficulties inherent in psychobiographical work, and some of his ways of dealing with these difficulties. Specifically, he mentioned the need to avoid pathologizing or idealizing, villainizing or deifying the subject; the need to try to encounter the subject as impartially as possible; and finally, the difficulty of using source materials (other biographies) that are subjective. He acknowledged that some of these difficulties, especially the third one, are insurmountable obstacles to full objectivity, which amounts to a disclosure that his product too will be somewhat subjective, although guided by reasoned, theoretically informed efforts at objectivity.

Peterson and Stewart (1990) employed psychobiographic methods to study longitudinally the psychosocial development of a single subject, Vera Brittain (1893–1970), from when she was 29 to when she was 54 years of age. Both World War I and World War II had directly affected Brittain's life, and the psychosocial themes reflected in her writings are strongly shaped by her sociopolitical context. Brittain became a pacifist on witnessing the devastation wrought by World War I, in which her fiancé, her brother, and two friends were killed, while she had served as a nurse to wounded soldiers. She passed on a generative legacy of pacifism in her novels and diaries, and these writings were Peterson and Stewart's (1990) data source.

Peterson and Stewart (1990) used the Stewart, Franz, and Layton (1984) coding manual (as cited in Peterson & Stewart, 1990) to analyze sections of Brittain's diaries and novels for psychosocial themes of identity, intimacy, and generativity. They analyzed randomly selected passages from each diary and novel. In all, they analyzed about 20 percent of each novel (29,753 words on average) and 10,000 words per year from the diaries. They coded the written material with meaningful phrases as the coding units. Analyses of the diaries and novels revealed an increase in generative concerns and a decrease in identity and intimacy themes over time. In this way, Brittain's psychosocial development was consistent with Erikson's idea that generativity increases over the course of adulthood.

However, analyses did not reveal a unitary concern with one generative agenda but a fluctuation over the adult years in her generative concerns: During the years in which she was gaining recognition for her writing, she largely expressed productivity themes; during the years of World War II, when she focused more on her children, she largely expressed themes of generative caring.

Surprisingly, identity concerns remained more prevalent throughout Brittain's adult years than either generativity or intimacy concerns. Peterson and Stewart (1990) offered several speculative explanations for this finding: Brittain's concern with identity may have been a function of her occupation, of her feminist awareness of her gender as a marginalizing factor, or of the social and political disruption she and others in her birth cohort faced as adolescents during World War I. In short, analyses of Brittain's written works revealed that her psychosocial development roughly followed Erikson's psychosocial stage theory, and yet it departed from the theory as well. In all phases of her life, her writings reflected not simply her personal voice but influences of sociopolitical and cultural forces that made her narrative emblematic of cultural trends as well as a highly distinctive life story.

Other researchers have used narrative methods to form a better picture of the elements that distinguish generative adults from less generative adults. McAdams, Hart, and Maruna (1998) discussed several studies that relied on intensive interviews conducted by McAdams and his colleagues with 40 generative and 30 less-generative adults. Members of the generative group were school teachers or community volunteers. The less-generative group was matched demographically with members of the generative group, but none of them taught or volunteered in the community. The generative group had higher scores compared with the less-generative group on the Loyola Generativity Scale (a measure of generativity concern) and the Generative Behavior Checklist (a measure of generative action).

Researchers conducted a 2-hour interview with each participant using McAdams's life story protocol, which elicits from participants an outline of the major chapters in their life stories and detailed descriptions of eight scenes in their life stories, including a high point, a low point, a turning point, and the earliest memory. Participants also described important people, values, beliefs, and the major theme from their lives. These interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and reliably coded for themes of agency (self-mastery, achievement, status, and empowerment) and communion (love, friendship, dialogue, communication, caring for others, feelings of community). Generative adults' stories contained more themes of communion than did less-generative adults' stories; however, the two groups did not differ in their inclusion of themes of agency.

Most interestingly, generative and less-generative adults did not differ in terms of the range or type of emotion expressed in their stories but did so in terms of the basic emotional sequences that the events in their stories tended to follow (i.e., good to bad or bad to good). Compared with the stories of less-generative adults, the stories of highly generative adults contained more "redemption sequences," in which a bad event is followed by a good outcome. For example, a person goes through a painful divorce (bad event) but is able to maintain a close relationship with his or her children (good outcome). Conversely, compared with the stories

of highly generative adults, the stories of less-generative adults contained more "contamination sequences," in which a good event is followed by a bad outcome. For example, a person starts a great new job (good event) only to find that she or he does not get along with her or his boss (bad outcome) (McAdams et al., 1998).

Additionally, McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) identified a storyline that was common in the life stories of highly generative adults. The "commitment story," as it is called, was as follows: The protagonist benefits from early advantage, becomes attuned early in life to the suffering of others, feels called on to care for others, and is guided by a clear, compelling, and steadfast ideology or purpose. The life stories of generative adults vary in terms of the degree to which they emphasize each of the pieces of the prototypical commitment story. Indeed, although this prototypical story seems to support generative strivings, some generative adults had entirely different life stories.

As the case of Vera Brittain illustrated, historical and political upheavals exert powerful effects on individuals' life stories and their capacity for integrating generativity into their narrative identity. Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2000) described the effects of a watershed moment in the gay liberation movement, the resistance to the police raid on a New York City gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, on the possibilities for gays and lesbians to tell their life stories. Inspired by the larger civil rights movement and the resistances and struggles it comprised, this act of resistance signaled the emergence of the gay liberation movement and constituted an act of cultural generativity on the part of the resisters. Whereas the stories of gay men and lesbians who had come of age before Stonewall told of isolation, shame, and desperation, Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2000) wrote that

> for the cohort of youth coming of age in the 1970s aware of same-gender desire, gay liberation made it possible to find others facing similar struggles. There were places to go and opportunities to read and talk about the gay experience. (p. 92)

Those who fought for gay liberation were providing for those growing up gay and lesbian in future generations the opportunity for life stories less fraught with secrecy and pain. Not only do the stories of midlife adults in our culture reflect the extent and nature of their contributions to society, these stories are in some cases generative contributions in and of themselves.

## Older Adulthood

Although researchers on aging and clinicians who work with older adults have explored the role of reminiscence and life review in later life for many decades (e.g., Butler, 1963), narrative identity researchers have only recently taken more systematic steps to incorporate older adults' narrative memories into their models of adult identity. Much of this initial work has focused on reminiscence and the functions it serves for older adults. On the basis of interviews with 460 seniors between 65 and 95 years of age, Watt and Wong (1991) developed a taxonomy of reminiscence

types. This taxonomy was theoretically derived but was ultimately shaped and validated empirically (Watt & Wong, 1991). The taxonomy identified six distinct functions of reminiscence: *integrative reminiscence,* whose main purpose is the achievement of a sense of coherence, meaning, and reconciliation with one's past; *instrumental reminiscence,* in which one draws on one's past experiences to help solve a current problem; *transmissive reminiscence,* which involves teaching others a lesson one has derived from one's own life experience; *narrative reminiscence,* the telling of descriptive accounts of the past to convey biographical information or simply for pleasure; *escapist reminiscence,* which involves exaggerating the happiness and success one had in the past and devaluing one's present situation; and *obsessive reminiscence,* which involves preoccupation with problematic or disturbing past experiences and the negative feelings associated with those experiences.

Using this taxonomy, Wong and Watt (1991) content-analyzed data from interviews with 65- to 95-year-olds, some of whom were aging successfully and some of whom were aging less successfully. Successful aging was operationally defined as higher than average ratings in mental and physical health and adjustment. All respondents were asked to talk about an important or influential event in their past. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded. Transcripts were content-analyzed, with paragraphs as the unit of analysis.

Those participants who were aging successfully engaged more frequently in integrative and instrumental reminiscing but less frequently in obsessive reminiscing than their less successfully aging counterparts (Wong & Watt, 1991). These types of reminiscence can be taught in therapy, resulting in significant improvements in symptoms of depression. In a treatment study using both integrative reminiscence therapy and instrumental reminiscence therapy for older adults with moderate to severe depression, follow-up studies showed significant improvements in the majority of participants in both reminiscence therapy conditions (Watt & Cappeliez, 2000). These results, suggesting that integrative reminiscence is beneficial, lend support to Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick's (1986) contention that reviewing the personal past to come to terms with it enhances psychosocial development and well-being in the elderly.

Webster (1993) developed the Reminiscence Functions Scale (RFS), a psychometrically sound self-report inventory that assesses the frequency and functions of reminiscence in which a person engages. Developed in pilot studies with adults of a broad age range (18–76 years), the scale has been used to determine the differences in the functions of reminiscence in older and younger adults. Older individuals are more likely to use their memory narratives for purposes of death preparation, the sharing of life lessons, and remembering a lost loved one, whereas younger individuals are more likely to use narrative memories for boredom reduction, problem solving, and establishing an identity (Webster, 1999).

That older adults have been found to reminisce less for the purpose of bitterness revival is consistent with other empirical and theoretical work suggesting that older adults tend to have happier memories than younger adults do. In a study of older adults' and college students' self-defining memories, Singer, Rexhaj, and Baddeley (2006) found that older adults' memories were not only more integrative but also

more affectively positive than college students' memories. Erikson et al. (1986) noted that many of the elders they interviewed expressed an overall satisfaction with their lives despite having lived through periods of hardship. Erikson et al. (1986) offered the following explanation for these elders' satisfaction with their lives: "Perhaps . . . these omissions reflect a lifelong process of reintegration and recasting, whereby events and circumstances that were once experienced as painful have, over the years, taken on new meanings as part of the whole life cycle" (p. 71).

It is consistent with the cultural stereotype of the older person as a wise story-teller that elders tend to tell their stories to teach and inform people of younger generations. In old age, the life story spans many decades. Elderly people's stories embody cultural and family history, and to tell these stories is to pass on this history. Elders' stories are often rich in content, but they need not be considered finished. On the contrary, they are still evolving as these elders take on new roles and shed old ones. In response to the new challenges of aging, the elderly may model their own stories of aging on the stories of friends or relatives whose graceful aging they admired (Erikson et al., 1986). Yet at the same time, their stories are often not primarily stories of being old but of being themselves in old age (Kaufman, 1986).

Becker (2001) pointed out that growing old is assumed in our culture to follow a narrative path of decline. There are multiple declines and losses associated with old age: the loss of physical strength, sensory acuity, and energy; the loss of friends and age-mates; the realization that time is running out (Erikson et al., 1986). Becker (2001) pointed out that many elderly people consider pain an "ordinary" part of aging but to do so may in some sense submit people to a maladaptive dominant narrative. Having collected the narratives of 17 people who live with pain, she presented two narratives that manifest their narrators' struggle between, on the one hand, normalizing their pain by accepting it as an "ordinary" part of aging and, on the other hand, evocatively and poetically telling their lived experiences of pain in ways that resist the dominant discourse of decline (Becker, 2001).

Growing older is certainly not only a story of dealing with decline. Indeed, elders gain great satisfaction from taking on new roles, including, and especially, roles as grandparents. Grandchildren are a source of pride and delight and are a major part of the life stories of their grandparents (Erikson et al., 1986; Norris, Kuiack, & Pratt, 2004). As the children of their children, grandchildren are, in a sense, a validation of elders' generativity (Erikson et al., 1986). In addition to being a part of elders' life stories, grandchildren are an audience for elders' stories. In telling their stories to grandchildren, grandparents enhance familial bonds, contribute to their own and the grandchild's self-understanding, and further the grandchild's understanding of historical events (Ryan, Pearce, Anas, & Norris, 2004).

Narrative identity researchers, by collecting the stories of older adults and studying the functions served by these narratives, have once again helped to delineate the dynamic psychosocial tensions within individual identity. Older adults tell stories that are embedded in historical contexts and therefore transmit knowledge of past worlds as well as personal events. As their reminiscences knit together previous eras

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and draw on landmark events as memorial touchstones, their stories transcend their personal identities and become social records that define a given culture. If the birth stories that began this review showcased the role of others' voices in the creation of narrative identity, then older adults' narratives demonstrate how individuals' own voices can shape our perception and understanding of common culture.

Finally though, older adults entrust these life stories to the care of younger generations. With illness or death, their stories belong only to those who choose to perpetuate them in oral or written form. Despite all the lifelong efforts to gain purchase on a unique narrative identity, individuals ultimately return their handiwork to the larger society from whence they came.

# Conclusion

This review has showcased the powerful ability of narrative methods to demarcate the shifting contributions of self and society while charting identity across the human life span. Erikson's original formulation of identity required this complex understanding of psychosocial dynamics. McAdams's reconceptualization of Erikson's ideas into a theory of narrative identity provided a bridge for operationalizing these dynamic processes. Within each period of the life span, narrative identity researchers have applied narrative techniques that track the emergence of a reciprocal relationship between individuals' distinct voices and the voices of their parents, peers, partners, and social institutions. Parent-child conversations, self-defining memories, life story interviews, collections of couples' memories, analyses of autobiographical and biographical documents, and the study of life review and reminiscence have all yielded invaluable information about the role of different facets of identity in self-understanding, meaning making, social communication, and generativity.

Future research needs to present narratives of self and identity as embedded in interpersonal contexts that are sensitive to both cultural and developmental influences. As social-cognitive and developmental research begin to evolve new models of narrative memory (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Nelson & Fivush, 2004), narrative researchers can begin to look at the microprocesses of narrative development and exchange that reflect social functions, including the building of intimacy, transmission of life lessons, and explanation of self to others.

For example, Baddeley and Singer (2006), drawing on Alea and Bluck's (2003) model of the social functions of autobiographical memory, conducted two studies to look at the intrapersonal and interpersonal functions of bereavement narratives. Alea and Bluck's (2003) model posits that the characteristics of a narrator and a listener, and the quality of their interpersonal interaction, will affect what kind of narrative is told and what functions that narrative serves. Baddeley and Singer's (2006) first study found significant relationships between narrators' personality traits and the characteristics and functions of their narratives. Narrators higher in Conscientiousness tended to tell briefer and less self-focused narratives, whereas

individuals higher in Neuroticism tended to tell more self-focused narratives. People high in Extraversion and Openness were more likely to tell their stories for interpersonal reasons such as explaining themselves to other people and getting closer to other people. People high in Neuroticism were more likely, and people high in Conscientiousness were less likely, to tell their stories for intrapersonal reasons such as validating their feelings and gaining a better understanding of the memory.

Baddeley and Singer's second study showed that a narrative's characteristics influence how listeners receive it and its teller and, therefore, how well it serves social functions. In this study, a new group of participants read 12 of the narratives collected in Study 1. Six of these narratives were contamination sequences and 6 were redemption sequences. Compared with redemption sequences, contamination sequences garnered more sympathy and concern for the narrator's well-being but generated less acceptance and more social discomfort in participants. Additionally, participants reported feeling less close to, familiar with, and similar to contamination narrators than redemption narrators.

This research provides one example of the ways in which narrative methods in the study of identity can begin to integrate the personal and social functions of narratives told in interpersonal contexts. As the rest of this review has documented, narratives at each phase of the life cycle reflect a narrator's unique personal concerns but never in isolation from interpersonal and sociocultural contexts.

At the start of our lives, we inherit a story given to us by our culture through our parents. Our life is in some sense an effort to forge our unique version of this inherited story. We fill it in and embellish it with our lived experiences as we understand them. Because we and our stories are embedded in a social matrix, we are motivated to develop our stories in coherent forms that are understandable to ourselves and can be understood by others in our culture (Singer & Rexhaj, 2006). The presence of other people as coauthors is constant throughout life. Prototypically, children coauthor their stories with their parents; adolescents coauthor their stories with their friends; young adults coauthor their stories with their partners. In middle adulthood and beyond, our life story is adopted as part of others' stories: those of our children and others for whom we have cared or those with whom we have shared pursuits to which we have dedicated our life.

By the time we are ready to leave this world, we have returned our story, now made in our own image and filled with unique variations, back to the culture from which it began. We return it not only to our children but also to a larger community through our relations to institutions, such as churches, mosques, or synagogues and organizations, both social and political. We began life with a story that was not our own and slowly crafted it to be our unique possession, but in the end, we return it to the vast library of shared stories that constitute our culture.

*Consulting Editors:* Avril Thorne and Jennifer Pals

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