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The Psychology of Life Stories

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Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest among theorists and researchers in autobiographical recollections, life stories, and narrative approaches to understanding human behavior and experience. An important development in this context is D. P. McAdams's life story model of identity (1985, 1993, 1996), which asserts that people living in modern societies provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self. The idea that identity is a life story resonates with a number of important themes in developmental, cognitive, personality, and cultural psychology. This article reviews and integrates recent theory and research on life stories as manifested in investigations of self-understanding, autobiographical memory, personality structure and change, and the complex relations between individual lives and cultural modernity.

Once upon a time, 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. Psychoanalysts might ponder the dream stories their clients told (Freud, 1900/1953) and a few maverick researchers might ask a participant to tell a story in response to a picture cue now and again (H. A. Murray, 1938), but serious scientists did not concern themselves with fantasies, stories, and myths. The notion of a "life story" might conjure up associations with case studies (e.g., Allport, 1965), psychobiographies (Erikson, 1958), and other highly suspect ventures in idiographic speculation. Although there might be nothing wrong, in principle, with a scientist's trying to understand the story of an entire human life (Runyan, 1982; R. White, 1952), what should a scientist do next once he or she understood one? Everybody knows that the idiosyncratic vagaries of the single case cannot be generalized to a population (Holt, 1962). In sum, stories are too soft and human lives too big, as well as too singular. One should not be surprised, therefore, if life stories attracted only the most romantic of psychological investigators.

But things began to change in the 1980s. After a series of searching critiques (e.g., Carlson, 1971; Mischel, 1968), the field of personality psychology began to look beyond the vicissitudes of the single, narrowly defined trait to explore broader issues of central concern for human lives. This shift was evidenced in research on the structural organization of all traits (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1990), personalized motivations and intrinsic goals (e.g., Cantor & Zirkel, 1990; Emmons, 1986), social–cognitive contingencies and dynamics of human behavior (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995), and the role of autobiography and life narrative in understanding lives in general (e.g., McAdams & Ochberg, 1988; Singer & Salovey, 1993) and the single case in particular (e.g., McAdams & West, 1997; Nasby & Read, 1997). As personality psychologists began to turn their attention to people's lives, they found notions such as "story" and "narrative" to be especially useful in conveying the coherence and the meaning of lives. Tomkins (1979), McAdams (1985), and Hermans and Kempen (1993) articulated new narrative theories of personality, adapting concepts from dramaturgical and literary discourses to the psychology of persons.

At the same time, scientists in developmental (McCabe & Peterson, 1991), social (S. L. Murray & Holmes, 1994), cognitive (Schank & Abelson, 1995), clinical (Howard, 1991), counseling (Polkinghorne, 1988), and industrial–organizational (Pondy, Morgan, Frost, & Dandridge, 1983) psychology became increasingly

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interested in story concepts and narrative methodologies. Psychotherapists began using narrative therapies (M. White & Epston, 1990), especially in clinical work with families. Eventually, the psychological lexicon became filled with such terms as *life scripts, self-narratives, story schemas, story grammars, personal myths, personal event memories, self-defining memories, nuclear scenes, gendered narratives, narrative coherence, narrative complexity,* and the like. Today, psychologists investigate stories of individual lives (McAdams, 1999), stories of intimate relationships (Sternberg, 1998), and family stories (Fiese et al., 1999), and they are newly sensitized to the power of societal myths and cultural narratives in shaping human behavior in social contexts (Gregg, 1991). The proliferation of methods and concepts related to stories and narratives suggests that Sarbin (1986) may have been correct when he predicted that the general idea of *narrative* could provide a new root metaphor for the field of psychology as a whole.

In his life story model of identity, McAdams (1985, 1993, 1996) has argued that identity itself takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme. In late adolescence and young adulthood, people living in modern societies begin to reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future in terms of an internalized and evolving self-story, an integrative narrative of self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose. Life stories are based on biographical facts, but they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful. Life stories are psychosocial constructions, coauthored by the person himself or herself and the cultural context within which that person's life is embedded and given meaning. As such, individual life stories reflect cultural values and norms, including assumptions about gender, race, and class. Life stories are intelligible within a particular cultural frame, and yet they also differentiate one person from the next.

People differ from each other with respect to their self-defining life stories in ways that are not unlike how they differ from each other on more conventional psychological characteristics such as traits, motives, intelligence, and so on. For example, life stories may be compared and contrasted with respect to the salience of such thematic lines as agency versus communion (Bakan, 1966; Singer, 1997) and redemption versus contamination (Maruna, 1997, 2001; McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Life stories differ from each other with respect to their structural complexity (McAdams, 1985; Woike, Gersekovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999) and their coherence and intelligibility (Baerger & McAdams, 1999). A person's evolving and dynamic life story is a key component of what constitutes the individuality of that particular person, situated in a particular family and among particular friends and acquaintances (Thorne, 2000) and living in a particular society at a particular historical moment (Gregg, 1991).

The purpose of this article is to more fully articulate the concepts and implications of the life story model of identity in the contexts of contemporary research and theory in developmental, cognitive, personality, and cultural psychology. The idea that identity is an internalized life story resonates with a number of important themes in these subdisciplines of psychology and dovetails in synergistic ways with research on the development of self-understanding, autobiographical memory, personality structure and change, and the complex relations between individual lives and cultural modernity. No longer a fanciful notion, the psychology of life stories may be well situated today to play an important integrative role in the scientific study of human behavior and experience.

Developmental Psychology: From Self to Identity

What Is Identity?

The point of departure for McAdams's (1985) life story model is Erikson's (1963) developmental concept of *ego identity.* It is in late adolescence and young adulthood (the fifth of eight stages in his developmental scheme), Erikson maintained, that people first confront the problem of identity versus role confusion. It is at this time in the human life course that people first explore ideological and occupational options available in society and experiment with a wide range of social roles, with the aim of eventually consolidating their beliefs and values into a personal ideology and making provisional commitments to life plans and projects that promise to situate them meaningfully into new societal niches (Marcia, 1980). It is during this developmental period that people first seek to integrate their disparate roles, talents, proclivities, and social involvements into a patterned configuration of thought and activity that provides life with some semblance of psychosocial unity and purpose (Breger, 1974).

Identity, then, is an integrative configuration of self-in-the-adult-world. This configuration integrates in two ways. First, in a synchronic sense, identity integrates the wide range of different, and probably conflicting, roles and relationships that characterize a given life in the here and now: "When I am with my father, I feel sullen and depressed; but when I talk with my friends I feel a great surge of optimism and love for humankind." Identity needs to integrate those two things so that although they appear very different, they can be viewed as integral parts of the same self-configuration. Second, identity must integrate diachronically, that is, in time: "I used to love to play baseball, but now I want to be a social psychologist," "I was a born-again Christian but now I feel that I am agnostic." Identity needs to integrate these kinds of contrasts so that although self-elements are separated in time (and in content quality), they can be brought meaningfully together into a temporally organized whole. Put starkly, identity becomes a problem when the adolescent or young adult first realizes that he or she is, has been, or could be many different (and conflicting) things and experiences a strong desire, encouraged by society, to be but one (large, integrated, and dynamic) thing. Of course, perfect unity and purpose in life is only an ideal and may itself not be fully desirable anyway (K. J. Gergen, 1992; McAdams, 1997). But Erikson's concept of identity underscores an integrative tendency in selfhood that becomes especially salient for the first time in that period of life (late teenage years through the mid-20s) that Arnett (2000) has recently labeled *emerging adulthood.* Before this developmental period, there is no identity.

But this is not to say that there is no "self." Nor is it to say that people do not "know who they are" before late adolescence. Ask any 10-year-old or 3-year-old. They can tell you who they are. They will tell you their name. They may list traits, roles, relationships, favorite foods, things they do not like, and on and on. It would be absurd to suggest that children have no sense of self. But, in Erikson's terms, children typically have no identity because the integration of selfhood is not yet a psychosocial problem for them. Erikson's (and McAdams's) use of the term *identity,* therefore, is rather more technical and delimited than its common usage in psychology, sociology, and everyday parlance. In McAdams's life story model, identity is not synonymous with the "self" or the "self-concept" or even with "who I am"; rather, it refers to a particular quality or flavoring of people's self-understandings, a way in which the self can be arranged or configured. To the extent that a person's self-understanding is integrated synchronically and diachronically such that it situates him or her into a meaningful psychosocial niche and provides his or her life with some degree of unity and purpose, that person "has" identity. Identity, then, is not something people begin to "work on" and have until the emerging adulthood years. At this time, McAdams has argued, people begin to put their lives together into self-defining stories. It is an internalized and evolving story of self that integrates the self synchronically and diachronically, explaining why it is that I am sullen with my father and euphoric with my friends and how it happened—step by step, scene by scene—that I went from being a born-again Christian who loved baseball to an agnostic social psychologist.

Why does identity wait so long? Why is it not until the emerging adulthood years that people first construct life stories to provide their lives with unity and purpose? Showing his Freudian roots, Erikson suggested that the timing is linked to sex. The eruption of genital sexuality in adolescence helps to launch the identity project, Erikson maintained, because it signals the coming of full-fledged adult status in love and work. As a qualitative change in how the body looks and feels, furthermore, puberty may usher in a realization that one is no longer a child and, with it, a new apprehension of one's personal history: "I don't know what I am now, but I am no longer what I was" (McAdams, 1985). Childhood becomes the remembered past and adulthood the anticipated future. Just as important, Erikson (1959) asserted, are changing social relationships and societal expectations: "It is of great relevance to the young individual's identity formation that he be responded to, and be given function and status as a person whose gradual growth and transformation make sense to those who begin to make sense to him" (p. 111). Parents, high school teachers, siblings, friends, college admissions counselors, the business world, the media, and many other aspects of modern society explicitly and implicitly urge adolescents and young adults to "get a life" (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). It is time to make some decisions about the future, about school, the armed services, work, and (for some) marriage and family. In general, Western 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 temporary, to personalized niches in the adult world. This is to say that both society and the emerging adult are ready for the individual's identity experiments by the time he or she has in fact become an emerging adult. Accordingly, Erikson (1959) wrote:

> The period can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him. In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community's recognition of him. (p. 111)

Instrumental for the emergence of identity at this time in the life course, furthermore, may be advances in cognitive development. Following Breger (1974) and Elkind (1981), McAdams (1985) argued that formal operational thinking in adolescence helps to supply the cognitive wherewithal for identity exploration. With the advent of formal operations, the young person is able to engage in hypothetico-deductive thinking and to entertain systematically an infinite range of hypothetical scenarios and ideals as they might apply to his or her own life. Identity becomes an especially engaging abstraction for the abstract thinker. According to Breger (1974),

> The idea of a unitary or whole self in which past memories of who one was, present experiences of who one is, and future expectations of who one will be, is the sort of abstraction that the child simply does not think about. [But] with the emergence of formal operations in adolescence, wholeness, unity, and integration become introspectively real problems. (p. 330)

The idea that one's life, as complex and dynamic as it increasingly appears to be, might be integrated into a meaningful and purposeful whole may represent, therefore, an especially appealing possibility to the self-reflective emerging adult. In McAdams's view, the emerging adult begins to work on such an integration by putting his or her life together into a culturally meaningful story. Accordingly, Habermas and Bluck (2000) argued that the construction of integrative life stories requires cognitive tools to which people do not have full access until adolescence and young adulthood. According to Habermas and Bluck, the full articulation of an integrative life story requires the understanding and use of four types of coherence: temporal, biographical, causal, and thematic coherence. The four begin to emerge in childhood, but they emerge at different points and develop at different rates, and it is not until adolescence that they are fully achieved and ready to be used in the service of identity formation.

Development of the Life Story

Stories are fundamentally about the vicissitudes of human intention organized in time (Bruner, 1986; Ricoeur, 1984). In virtually all intelligible stories, humans or humanlike characters act to accomplish intentions, 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 in humans is of prime importance in establishing the mental conditions necessary for storytelling and story comprehension. Recent research with infants suggests that, by the end of the 1st or early in the 2nd year of life, humans come to understand other persons as intentional agents and so engage in joint attentional interactions with them (Stern, 1985; Tomasello, 2000). For example, 16-month-old infants will imitate complex behavioral sequences exhibited by other human beings only when those activities appear intentional. As Tomasello (2000) wrote, "Young children do not just mimic the limb movements of other persons; rather, they attempt to reproduce other persons' intended, goal-directed actions in the world" (p. 38). With the emergence of what Dennett (1987) has called the *intentional stance,* children in the 2nd year of life can experience the world from the subjective standpoint of an intentional, causal agent. At this time, the individual is able to assume the existential position of a motivated human subject who appropriates experience as his or her own (Kagan, 1994; McAdams, 1997). In the most general sense, what is being consolidated in the 2nd year of life is what William James (1892/1963) referred to as the subjective self, that is, the sense of "self-as-I." This existential sense of "I-ness" is tacitly and immediately grasped in and through intentional action (Blasi, 1988).

As intentional agents, human beings act on their desires and their beliefs to accomplish goals. Stories organize and convey these motivated action sequences extended in time. A basic understanding of motivated human action appears to develop in early childhood, as documented in the empirical literature on children's *theory of mind* (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Wellman, 1993). Theory of mind refers to the ability of normal children to attribute mental states (such as beliefs, desires, and intentions) to themselves and to other people as a way of making sense of and predicting behavior. In the 3rd and 4th years of life, children come to understand that people (like themselves) formulate desires and beliefs in their minds and then translate those mentalistic phenomena into motivated action. Our simple folk theory of people's minds says that people act for the sake of what they want and what they believe. 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. Indeed, 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 that the cookies are there." But autistic children often find mind reading to be extraordinarily difficult, as if they had never developed this intuitive sense about what aspects of mind are involved in the making of motivated human behavior. Characterized by what Baron-Cohen (1995) called *mindblindness,* children with autism do not understand people as intentional agents 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 (Bruner, 1994; Sacks, 1995).

Human selfhood is reflexive. With the consolidation of the agential "I" comes the formulation of the "me." What James called the objective self, or the "self-as-me," consists of all of those features and aspects that the I attributes to itself: how the self (as a knower) sees (knows, imagines, conceives, formulates) the self (as known). In the 2nd year of life, children begin to attribute various distinguishing characteristics to themselves, including their names, their favorite toys, their likes and dislikes, and so on. With the development of language, the self-as-object grows rapidly to encompass a wide range of things "about me" that can be verbally described. To be included in the mix eventually are memories of events in which the self was involved. According to Howe and Courage (1997), *autobiographical memory* emerges toward the end of the 2nd year of life when children have consolidated a basic sense of I and reflexively begun to build up a primitive understanding of the me. Although infants can remember events (basic episodic memory) before this time, it is not until the end of the 2nd year, Howe and Courage contended, that episodic memory becomes personalized and children begin to organize events that they experience as "things that happened to me." From this point onward, the me expands to include autobiographical recollections, recalled as little stories about what has transpired in "my life."

Autobiographical memory emerges and develops in a social context (Nelson, 1988; Welch-Ross, 1995). Parents typically encourage children to talk about their personal experiences as soon as children are verbally able to do so (Fivush & Kuebli, 1997). 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 narrative account of their past experiences independent of adult guidance (Fivush, 1994). In conversations with adults about personal memories, young children become acquainted with the narrative structures through which events are typically discussed by people in their world. The sharing of personal experiences functions as a major mechanism of socialization (Miller, 1994) and helps to build an organized personal history from a growing base of autobiographical memories (Fivush, 1994).

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 on their desires and beliefs over time. They expect stories to entail 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* (Applebee, 1978; Mandler, 1984) or generic script concerning what kinds of events can occur and in what order. In a simple goal-directed episode, for example, an initiating event may prompt the protagonist to attempt some kind of action that will be followed by a consequence of some sort and then a reaction to the consequence on the part of the protagonist (Mandler, 1984). 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 own personal experiences in ways that conform to their implicit understandings of how good stories should be structured and what they should include. In this way, they imbue their personal experience with a sense of *temporal coherence.* But Habermas and Bluck (2000) maintained that between the ages of 5 and about 10 years, temporal coherence applies mainly to single autobiographical events rather than to the causal connections between different events. During this time, children begin to internalize their culture's norms concerning what the story of an entire life should itself contain. As they learn, for example, that a telling of a single life typically begins with, say, an account of birth and typically includes, say, early experiences in the family, eventual emergence out of the family, geographical moves, and so on, they acquire an understanding of what Habermas and Bluck (2000) called *biographical coherence.* Cultural norms define conventional phases of the life course and suggest what kinds of causal explanations make sense in the telling of a life (Denzin, 1989). As children learn the culture's biographical conventions, they begin to see how single events in their own lives might be sequenced and linked to conform to the culture's concept of biography.

Still, it is not until adolescence, according to Habermas and Bluck, that individuals craft causal narratives to explain how different events are linked together in the context of a biography. *Causal coherence* is exhibited in the increasing effort across adolescence to provide narrative accounts of one's life that explain how one event caused, led to, transformed, or in some other way is meaningfully related to other events in one's life. Traits, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences may now be explained in terms of the life events that may have caused them. An adolescent girl may, for example, explain why she rejects her parents' liberal political values, or why she feels shy around members of the opposite sex, 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 have been selected and, in many cases, reconstructed to make a coherent explanation. In *thematic coherence,* furthermore, she may 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. Studies reported by Habermas and Bluck (2000) suggest that causal and thematic coherence are rare in autobiographical accounts in early adolescence but increase substantially through the teenage years and into young adulthood. By the time individuals have reached the emerging adulthood years, therefore, they are typically able and eager to construct stories about the past and about the self that exhibit temporal, biographical, causal, and thematic coherence. Autobiographical memory and narrative understanding have now developed to the level whereby they can be called into service in the making of identity.

The Life Story and the Life Course

Although the cognitive and psychosocial prerequisites for full life story making may not be in place until late adolescence and early adulthood, it is not as if the individual suddenly begins working on the story at this time, with no preparation or background. Versions of the life story may emerge earlier, as documented by Elkind (1981) in work on the *personal fable.* As indicated in diaries and other personal sources, young adolescents may construct fantastical autobiographical stories about their own potential greatness or uniqueness that embody a high degree of coherence but that may have little relation to the reality of their lives. Elkind suggested that personal fables fade over the course of adolescence, but they may be viewed as initial rough drafts of life stories (McAdams, 1985). Long before adolescence, moreover, children relate personal memories in story form, as studies of parent–child conversations show (Fivush, 1994), and children are collecting and processing experiences of all kinds that will eventually make their way or have some important influence on the integrative life stories they later construct to make sense of their lives. McAdams (1993) argued that even early attachment patterns with caregivers may ultimately be reflected in the overall narrative tone and quality that adult life stories show. Children are not explicitly making identity, in the sense of constructing integrative life stories that provide their lives with unity and purpose and position them meaningfully within psychosocial niches in the modern world, but they are still implicitly gathering material for the identities they will someday make. The dominant images and themes of adult life stories, therefore, may reflect influences from the earliest years of life.

Although full-fledged life stories may begin to reveal themselves as identity formats in the adolescent and young adult years, identity construction does not end when this developmental epoch is over. Erikson's (1963) original stage model confined identity formation to a single psychosocial stage (emerging adulthood), but McAdams's life story model emphasizes the continuation of identity work across the adult years. Life stories develop and change across the life course, reflecting various on-time and off-time happenings and transitions (Cohler, 1982). McAdams (1993) has argued that people may work on different facets or qualities of the story at different times in life. For example, individuals in late adolescence and young adulthood are likely to focus some of their identity work on crystallizing the basic values and beliefs that ground their stories within an ideological setting (Erikson, 1958; Perry, 1970). Being able to identify a clear and compelling belief system that organizes a person's life proves to be a powerful mechanism for establishing what Habermas and Bluck (2000) called thematic coherence in the life story.

In early to middle adulthood, many American men and women appear to focus their identity work on articulating, expanding, and refining the story's main characters, or personal *imagoes.* An imago is an idealized personification of the self that functions as a protagonist in the narrative (McAdams, 1984). Akin to what Markus and Nurius (1986) called "possible selves," imagoes personify important motivational trends in the life story, such as strong needs for power, achievement, or intimacy (McAdams, 1985). The construction of imagoes helps to integrate a life by bringing into the same narrative format different personifications of the me: the self-as-loving-wife, the self-as-ardent-feminist, the self-as-devoted-mother, the self-as-the-young-girl-who-longed-to-escape-the-suburbs, the self-as-future-retiree-who-will-escape-to-that-country-home, and so on. By constructing a single life story that integrates a wide range of self-characterizations as imagoes, the adult can resolve what William James first identified as the "one-in-many-selves paradox" (Knowles & Sibicky, 1990, p. 676).

The midlife years may be occasioned by considerable identity work for many modern adults. Life span theorists have written about how the realization that one's life is more than half over can bring to the psychological fore concerns about loss and mortality and can stimulate the actualization of long-suppressed tendencies, such as traditionally masculine tendencies among women and feminine tendencies among men (Gutmann, 1987; Levinson, 1978). Life course theories emphasize changing social roles and relationships in the midlife years and shifting contingencies in the ecology of everyday life (Elder, 1995). Theorists of different stripes tend to agree that midlife can be the psychosocial prime of life for many people, because it is during this period that they assume their most influential roles in families, the workplace, and society. In Erikson's (1963) view, adults ideally realize their greatest powers of generativity during the midlife years, as they focus time, attention, and resources on caring for and contributing to the well-being of the next generation. A recent flurry of empirical research documents the psychological and social importance of generativity in midlife (e.g., McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998; Peterson & Klohnen, 1995).

In two different but related senses, generativity becomes an increasingly important issue in life story making during the midlife years. First, as men and women move into and through midlife, themes of caring for the next generation, of leaving a positive legacy for the future, of giving something back to society for the benefits one has received, and other generative motifs become increasingly salient in life stories (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Second, as adults move into and through midlife, they may become more and more concerned with the "endings" of their life stories. It is in the nature of stories that beginnings and middles lead inevitably to endings and that endings provide a sense of closure and resolution (Kermode, 1967). The imagery and rhetoric of generativity provide adults with an especially appealing way to conceive of "the end," even as they are deeply immersed in the middle of the life course. By suggesting that one's own efforts may generate products and outcomes that will outlive the self, by framing a life story in terms of those good things (and people) that become the self's enduring legacy, life narrations that emphasize generativity implicitly provide stories with what may be perceived as good and satisfying endings (Kotre, 1984; McAdams, 1985). These endings, in turn, feed back to influence beginnings and middles. Consequently, it should not be surprising to observe considerable revising and reworking of one's life story, even the reimaging of the distant past, in light of changing psychosocial concerns in the adult years and changing understandings of what the near and distant future may bring.

Cognitive Psychology: Autobiographical Memory and the Self

Over the past 15 years, cognitive psychologists have expressed increasing interest in how people encode, store, and retrieve information pertaining to real-life events and personal experiences (e.g., Neisser & Winograd, 1988; Pillemer, 1998; Stein, Ornstein, Tversky, & Brainerd, 1997). Much of this work falls under the rubric of autobiographical memory. Cognitive psychologists have focused their attention on the relative veridicality of remembered events, the reasons some events are remembered and others forgotten, and the organization of autobiographical knowledge. An emerging theme in this literature is that autobiographical memory helps to locate and define the self within an ongoing life story that, simultaneously, is strongly oriented toward future goals.

From the time of Bartlett (1932) to the present day, students of human memory have debated the issue of veridicality. To what extent are memories for personal events accurate renditions of what really happened or biased reconstructions of the past? The issue is important in a scientific sense, to be sure, but it has also garnered wide public attention in the past two decades with the raging controversy over repressed memories and growing concern in legal circles over the reliability of eyewitness testimony. On one side of the intellectual ledger are veridical copy theories, such as Brown and Kulik's (1977) conceptualization of flashbulb memories, which argue that certain kinds of personal events, especially those that are surprising or consequential, are remembered in vivid and accurate detail. On the other side are reconstructive theories (e.g., Barclay, 1996) that point to the many instances in which individuals misremember personal events in ways that reflect strong schema-based processing. For example, Barclay (1996) construed autobiographical memory as a form of improvisation whereby the person puts together a more or less plausible account of the past that functions primarily to maintain personal coherence rather than provide an objective report of what has transpired in that person's life. Research can be garnered to support both kinds of theories.

A number of investigators seem to adopt an intermediate position. Brewer (1986), for example, argued that

> recent personal memories retain a relatively large amount of specific information from the original phenomenal experience (e.g., location, point of view) but that with time, or under strong schema-based processes, the original experience can be reconstructed to produce a new nonveridical personal memory that retains most of the phenomenal characteristics of other memories. (p. 44)

Similarly, Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, and Betz (1996) contended that memory for recent events is largely reproductive but that memory for more distant events tends to be reconstructive. Schachter (1996) concluded that memory systems in general, and autobiographical memory in particular,

> do a remarkably good job of preserving the contours of our pasts and recording correctly many of the important things that have happened to us. [And yet,] our [autobiographical] stories are built from many different ingredients: snippets of what actually happened, thoughts about what might have happened, and beliefs that guide us as we attempt to remember. (p. 308)

Ross (1997) pointed out that society would not function effectively if people could not count on some significant degree of accuracy in their own and others' personal memories. Yet, Ross also suggested that people are sometimes too confident in the veracity of their own and others' recollections of the past. The latter was borne out in a recent study showing remarkable decline over a 32-month span in the accuracy of college students' recollections of hearing the news of the O. J. Simpson verdict (Schmolk, Buffalo, & Squire, 2000) and another study showing that midlife men's recollections of adolescent experiences were grossly inconsistent with the documented realities of those experiences, even though the midlife men insisted on the veridicality of their accounts (Offer, Kaiz, Howard, & Bennett, 2000).

How is autobiographical knowledge organized? Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) provided an integrative, hierarchical model of a self-memory system (SMS) that links an autobiographical knowledge base to personal goals. According to Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, autobiographical memories contain information at three different levels of specificity: lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge. Similar in scope to what McAdams (1985) referred to as *chapters* in a life story, lifetime periods mark off relatively large segments of autobiographical time: "when I was in elementary school," "during my first marriage," "when the kids were little," and so on. Within a lifetime period may be represented "general knowledge of significant others, common locations, actions, activities, plans, and goals" (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, p. 262), as well as evaluative attitudes toward the period (e.g., "This is a time when things did not go well for me"). At a second level of specificity are general events, which mainly represent knowledge gleaned from categories of similar events (e.g., "parties I attended in college" and "evenings I spent babysitting"). Barsalou (1988) and others have found that many autobiographical memories are summarized events, containing generalized or blended information from a number of related autobiographical episodes. One prominent feature of general event clusters is that they highlight memories of events relating to the attainment of or failure to attain goals. Finally, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) identified event-specific knowledge as particular details of specific scenes from the past. In scope and specificity, autobiographical knowledge at this third level parallels what McAdams (1985) has identified as *nuclear episodes,* or specific and consequential scenes in the life story such as high points, low points, and turning points.

Conway and Pleydell-Pearce argued that a person's goals function as control processes in the SMS, modulating the construction of memories. Autobiographical memories are encoded and later retrieved in ways that serve the self's goal agendas. As such, current goals influence how autobiographical information is absorbed and organized in the first place, and goals generate retrieval models to guide the search process later. Relatedly, the autobiographical knowledge base helps to ground the self's goals. People formulate goals for the future that are reasonably in line with the information encoded as lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge. "The idea of this grounding is that goals cannot simply be adopted on demand or be unrealistic; instead they are embedded in the SMS with representation in the working self and archival connections in the knowledge base" (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, p. 271).

The involvement of goals in autobiographical memory is a central idea in Stein's theory of understanding and remembering emotional events (Stein, Wade, & Liwag, 1997). Stein has advanced "a theory of intelligent, motivated remembering that is driven by a person's goals and desires as well as by dynamic working knowledge about external reality and the ways in which this reality constrains or facilitates goal achievement" (Stein, Wade, & Liwag, 1997, p. 15). To illustrate the point that goals affect the encoding of event memory, Stein et al. related a study conducted by Anderson and Pitchert (1978) in which participants read a passage describing the contents of a house under instructions to take the perspective of either a home buyer or a burglar. When taking the burglar's perspective, participants remembered more items that were valuable and portable, such as a color television set. When taking the perspective of the buyer, they remembered more items that affected the value of the house, such as a leak in the roof. In both cases, the rememberer provides an accurate account, but goals at the time of encoding determine what is selected as worth remembering. Goals typically link up with emotion, furthermore, and memories of emotional events typically entail the vicissitudes of goal striving. In Stein's view, the experience of emotion in a given event almost always activates a causal inference process, the outcome of which becomes part of the representation of the emotional event. In other words, when a person experiences emotion in a given life scene, he or she has already made an implicit appraisal of the scene's meaning in terms of its causes and probable consequences and the extent to which goal attainment may be furthered or frustrated. In this way, emotion lends coherence to autobiographical memory by helping to organize events as goal-based stories.

Emotions and goals may be especially salient in the construction of what Singer (1995; Singer & Salovey, 1993) called *self-defining memories.* A self-defining memory is a remembered episode from the past that is "vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories, and related to an important unresolved theme or enduring concern in an individual's life" (Singer & Salovey, 1993, p. 13). Moffitt and Singer (1994) collected narrative accounts of self-defining memories and reports of personal strivings or goals from college students. They found that students who recalled more self-defining memories relevant to the attainment of their goals expressed greater levels of positive affect about their memories. In addition, students who reported a high number of goals involving avoiding undesirable outcomes, rather than approaching desirable outcomes, recalled fewer self-defining memories with positive emotional themes. Singer (1997) also documented the role of self-defining memories in the life stories of men addicted to alcohol and drugs. He found that recovery from addiction involves recrafting a life story to include self-defining memories affirming personal agency and interpersonal connection.

Self-defining memories are one class of episodic memories that fit under Pillemer's (1998) rubric of *personal event memories.* Pillemer listed five criteria for defining a personal event memory. The personal event memory must (a) present a specific event that took place at a particular time and place, rather than a summary event or extended series of events; (b) contain a detailed account of the rememberer's own personal circumstances at the time of the event; (c) evoke sensory images or bodily sensations that contribute to the feeling of "re-experiencing" or "reliving" the event; (d) link its details and images to a particular moment or moments of phenomenal experience; and (e) be believed to be a truthful representation of what actually transpired.

Personal event memories come in many different varieties. Some are especially vivid or consequential; others may seem mundane or of little relevance for self-definition. Among the personal event memories that seem to be most instrumental in self-definition are (a) memorable messages, or memories that contain an explicit communication that has become a guiding statement or moral directive for the rememberer; (b) symbolic messages, or remembered events that are interpreted by the rememberer as providing implicit lessons or guidelines; (c) originating events, or memories that contain the genesis of an interest, vocation, relationship, life goal, and so on; (d) anchoring events, or memories that affirm and reinforce an ongoing interest, attitude, or commitment held by the rememberer; and (e) analogous events, or episodes that are readily compared with similar other events to suggest a pattern or theme that runs through the person's life story (Pillemer, 1998).

Singer's concept of self-defining memory and Pillemer's enumeration of the kinds of autobiographical recollections that are likely to occupy important positions within the life story reinforce the idea that some remembered episodes are more privileged for self-definition than are others. In this regard, Robinson and Taylor (1998) made an important distinction between autobiographical memories and self-narratives. They pointed out that people remember many episodes in life that are mundane and appear to have little relevance to their self-concepts. Autobiographical memory, therefore, comprises a vast range of personal information and experience. Self-narratives, in contrast, "consist of a set of temporally and thematically organized salient experiences and concerns that constitute one's identity" (Robinson & Taylor, 1998, p. 126). It is not even clear, according to Robinson and Taylor, that self-narratives are a true subset of all that exists in autobiographical memory. Self-defining events and certain other salient episodes may be viewed as part of the self-narrative, but the self-narrative may also include knowledge that is not technically part of the autobiographical knowledge base. This position is consistent with McAdams's claims concerning identity as a life story. The internalized and evolving story that provides a person's life with some degree of unity and purpose contains within it self-defining information related to lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). But the life story does not encompass all of the vast storehouse that makes up autobiographical memory, and it contains material that would not explicitly exist in the autobiographical knowledge base, such as the individual's imagined future: "how I see myself in 10 years," "what events I believe I will experience one day," "what I will leave behind."

Still, there is significant overlap between the episodic knowledge that cognitive psychologists position within autobiographical memory and the personal scenes and chapters that McAdams includes within the life story as identity. Like many cognitive psychologists, McAdams (1985) has adopted a moderately reconstructive view of autobiographical recollections. Personal goals and other concerns shape the encoding and recollection of self-defining memories and other important features of the life story. Reconstruction exerts a distorting effect, especially with regard to memories from long ago. But for life stories the greatest degree of reconstruction may involve selection and interpretation rather than outright distortion of the truth (Bluck & Levine, 1998). People select and interpret certain memories as self-defining, providing them with privileged status in the life story. Other potential candidates for such status are downgraded; relegated to the category of "Oh yes, I remember that, but I don't think it is very important"; or forgotten altogether. To a certain degree, then, identity is a product of choice. We choose the events that we consider most important for defining who we are and providing our lives with some semblance of unity and purpose. And we endow them with symbolic messages, lessons learned, integrative themes, and other personal meanings that make sense to use in the present as we survey the past and anticipate the future.

The power of selection is apparent in the well-documented phenomenon of the memory bump (Fitzgerald, 1988; Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986). People tend to recall a disproportionately large number of autobiographical events from the ages of approximately 15 to 25 years. There is some indication, furthermore, that episodic memories from this period are especially rich in emotional and motivational content (Thorne, 2000). Fitzgerald (1988) and Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) have argued that adults are wont to select events from this particular period in the life course because it is during adolescence and young adulthood that people are most preoccupied with forming their identities (Erikson, 1963). From the standpoint of McAdams's life story model of identity, this interpretation makes good sense. As intimated by Fitzgerald (1988), it is indeed roughly during the period of the reminiscence bump that young people are first confronting the identity problem in modern society and actively formulating integrative life stories to address the psychosocial challenges they face. Consequently, they may be more likely to encode personal events occurring during these years as relevant to their psychosocial goal of formulating an identity. Furthermore, it is probably true that in adolescence and young adulthood a disproportionately large number of episodic candidates for what Pillemer (1998) identified as symbolic messages, originating events, anchoring events, and other self-defining memories are likely to emerge. It may indeed be true, moreover, that these are the kinds of autobiographical events that make for especially good stories. In this regard, it should not be surprising that the "coming of age story" is such a staple in contemporary fiction and cinema and that the *myth of the hero*—the adventurous transition from childhood innocence to young adulthood—is a timeless and universally beloved mythic form (Campbell, 1949).

Personality Psychology: Traits, Adaptations, and Stories

Among the many classic theories of personality formulated in the first half of the 20th century (e.g., Hall & Lindzey, 1957), only a few valued people's stories as windows into personality dynamics and dispositions. For example, Freud (1900/1953) used storied dream reports as cues for free association, which itself was aimed at bringing to the conscious surface the latent meanings of dreams. Adler (1927) viewed narrative accounts of earliest memories as symbolizations of a person's overall style of life. H. A. Murray (1938) used imaginative stories told in response to picture cues to assess individual differences in human motivation. But in all three of these examples, stories were viewed as methodological means to conceptual ends. Put simply, traditional approaches to personality suggested that personality psychologists might use stories to get at other (more important) things about persons, things such as traits, motives, complexes, conflicts, and the like.

Beginning with Silvan Tomkins's (1979) *script theory,* however, personality psychologists began to consider the possibility that the story itself is "the thing." Tomkins proposed that the central structural elements of human personality are internalized scenes and scripts. From the early years of life onward, Tomkins maintained, the person approaches life as a dramatist, unconsciously constructing self-defining scenes and arranging them into storied patterns guided by the rules of scripts. Individual differences might be conceptualized, then, in terms of the kinds of scenes and scripts that shape consciousness and guide behavior. Following Tomkins's lead, personologists generated new narrative-based theories of the person, highlighting life stories, myths, plots, episodes, characters, voices, dialogue, and the like (e.g., Gregg, 1991; Hermans, 1996; McAdams, 1985). Among personality psychologists, interest in narrative constructs and narrative methods increased steadily in the 1980s and 1990s (McAdams, 1999). During the same period of time, it should be noted, the field of personality psychology witnessed significant theoretical and empirical advances on a number of other fronts as well, including evolutionary approaches to studying persons, investigations into dispositional traits, and research and theory on social–cognitive schemas and goals (McAdams, 2001).

Where do life stories fit within the broad gamut of personality? McAdams (1995, 2001) has argued that personality may be viewed from three different standpoints or levels. Each standpoint or level provides its own unique discourse for understanding human individuality and specifies its own preferred methodological operations. The first level is *dispositional traits.* Traits are those global, stable, linear, and comparative dimensions of human individuality that go by such names as "extraversion," "conscientiousness," and "depressiveness." In that traits account for consistencies in behavior, thought, and feeling across different situations and over time, they are commonly and appropriately viewed as relatively decontextualized and noncontingent aspects of personality. At a second level are *characteristic adaptations,* such as personal goals and motives, defense mechanisms and coping strategies, mental representations of self and other, values and beliefs, developmental tasks and stage-related concerns, domain-specific skills and interests, and other personal characteristics that are contextualized in time, place, or social role. If traits provide a dispositional sketch for human individuality, characteristic adaptations fill in many of the details.

Neither traits nor characteristic adaptations, however, speak directly to the problem of identity as conceptualized in this article. What does a person's life mean in the overall? How is a person's psychosocial world arranged in such a way as to provide life with some modicum of unity and purpose? As has been suggested, these issues are best addressed through the language of narrative (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988). Giddens (1991) wrote: "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (p. 54). The third level of personality, therefore, is the level of integrative *life stories*. A full scientific accounting of human individuality involves the exploration and integration of psychological phenomena existing at three different levels. To understand an individual person, the personality psychologist should have some sense of (a) where that person stands on a series of dispositional traits that speak to general tendencies in behavior across situations and over time; (b) how the person is confronting and adapting to motivational, social–cognitive, and developmental tasks and concerns that are contextualized in place, time, or social role; and (c) what kind of identity the person is working on through the construction of stories about the self. Personality is a complex patterning of traits, adaptations, and stories.

As with traits and characteristic adaptations, life stories may be categorized and classified with respect to individual differences. Some people are more extraverted than other people (Level 1 of personality). Some people use denial as a defense mechanism when threatened by authority, whereas others prefer to cope through intellectualization (Level 2 of personality). And some people construct life stories that are modeled on classical tragedy, whereas others convey their identities as television sitcoms (Level 3 of personality). Although it is usually labor intensive and time consuming, research on individual differences in life stories has grown substantially in the past 10 years. Researchers have been especially interested in using narrative methods and concepts to investigate the issues of personality coherence and personality change and in examining the relations between characteristic adaptations (Level 2) on the one hand and life stories (Level 3) on the other (McAdams, 1999; Thorne, 2000).

Among the many kinds of characteristic adaptations that can be found at Level 2 of personality, social motives for power (Winter, 1973) and intimacy (McAdams, 1980) have proven especially relevant for their relations to life stories. McAdams (1982; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996) and Woike (1995; Woike et al., 1999) have conducted a series of studies demonstrating that individual differences in Thematic Apperception Test-based motives for power and intimacy are significantly related to content themes of *agency* and *communion* (Bakan, 1966), respectively, as manifest in people's life stories. People high in power motivation emphasize the agentic themes of self-mastery, status and victory, achievement and responsibility, and empowerment in self-defining memories, and they tend to conceive of the story's main characters (imagoes) in highly agentic terms relative to people low in power motivation. By contrast, people high in intimacy motivation emphasize the communal themes of friendship and love, dialogue, caring for others, and sense of community in the significant scenes in their life stories, and they formulate highly communal imagoes such as personifications of the self as "the caregiver," "the loyal friend," and "the lover." Woike (1995; Woike et al., 1999) has shown that social motives are linked not only to the content of life stories but also to the cognitive style that the storyteller displays when describing a most memorable autobiographical event. People with strong power motivation tend to use an analytic and differentiated style when describing agentic events, perceiving more differences, separations, and oppositions in the significant scenes of their life stories. By contrast, people with strong intimacy motivation tend to use a synthetic and integrated style when describing communal events, detecting similarities, connections, and congruence among different elements in significant life story scenes.

Individual differences in the structural complexity of life stories have been linked to Loevinger's (1976) concept of *ego development*, which is a Level 2 personality construct. In Loevinger's scheme, people at relatively high stages of ego development adopt a more nuanced and individualistic framework for making sense of subjective experience, whereas people low in ego development tend to view experiences in more black-and-white and conformist terms. McAdams (1985) found that, in comparison with adults low in ego development, adults high in ego development tended to include more different kinds of plots in their life stories, suggesting greater narrative complexity. Helson and Roberts (1994) found that midlife women high in ego development were more likely than those scoring low to narrate negative life scenes to suggest that they had changed considerably through the adversity. More complex life stories may involve greater levels of change in the characters. In a study of how college students narrate their own religious development, McAdams, Booth, and Selvik (1981) found that students high in ego development were more likely to articulate a story of transformation and growth, suggesting that they had gone through significant religious doubts and uncertainties and were developing toward a new and more personalized ideological perspective. In Pillemer's (1998) terms, students high in ego development centered their faith stories around originating events, making dramatic turning points in the narrative. By contrast, students low in ego development tended to deny that they had ever gone through a crisis in faith or described a period of questioning in their lives that was then abandoned as they returned to their original beliefs. The students low in ego development, therefore, tended to construct faith narratives of stability and consistency, showcasing what Pillemer (1998) called anchoring events.

McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) compared the life stories constructed by adults scoring high on objective (behavioral and self-report) indexes of generativity with those constructed by a matched sample of adults scoring in the intermediate to low range on generativity. As a developmentally anchored concern for the well-being of the next generation, generativity falls within Level 2 of personality. The investigators found that, as a group, the highly generative adults tended to formulate life narratives that more closely approximated a *commitment story* in comparison with their less generative counterparts. In the prototypical commitment story, the protagonist (a) enjoys an early family blessing or advantage, (b) is sensitized to the suffering of others at an early age, (c) is guided by a clear and compelling personal ideology that remains relatively stable over time, (d) transforms or redeems bad scenes into good outcomes (*redemption sequences*), and (e) sets goals for the future to benefit society. As an internalized narrative of the self, the commitment story may help to sustain and reinforce the generative adult's efforts to contribute in positive ways to the next generation.

Although many different kinds of life stories might be constructed by highly generative people, the adult who works hard to guide and foster the next generation may make sense of his or her strong commitment in terms of an internalized narrative that suggests that he or she was "called" or destined to do good things for others, that such a personal destiny is deeply rooted in childhood, reinforced by a precocious sensitivity to the suffering of others, and bolstered by a clear and convincing belief system that remains steadfast over time. Perceiving one's life in terms of redemption sequences (bad scenes are transformed into good outcomes), furthermore, provides the hope that hard work today will yield positive dividends for the future, a hope that may sustain generative efforts as private as raising one's child and as public as committing oneself to the advancement of one's own society (Kotre, 1999). Stories in literature, myth, and folklore that celebrate generativity often display the kinds of themes identified as part of the commitment story (McAdams, 1993).

A prominent theme in the commitment story is the transformation of bad events into good outcomes, which McAdams et al. (1997) called a redemption sequence. The theme of redemption is a powerful motif, as well, in life stories of reformed drug addicts (Singer, 1997) and ex-convicts who have renounced a life of crime (Maruna, 1997). McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman (2001) coded narrative accounts of key life story scenes among students and adults for redemption sequences and for the contrasting narrative form of *contamination sequences*. In a contamination sequence, an emotionally positive event goes suddenly bad. Their results show that redemption sequences in life stories are positively associated with self-report measures of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of life coherence and negatively associated with depression. By contrast, contamination sequences are positively associated with depression and negatively associated with the three indexes of well-being. The results are consistent with the literature in health psychology showing that people who construe benefits as having followed from their injuries, illnesses, or misfortunes tend to show faster recovery from their setbacks and more positive well-being overall (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). Therefore, whereas life storytelling functions to provide the self with ego identity, it is also instrumental in mood repair (Josephson, Singer, & Salovey, 1996) and in the overall maintenance of mental health.

Cultural Psychology: Social Context and the Problems of (Post)Modernity

In all human cultures, people tell stories to other people. The very concept of a story is inherently social in that stories exist to be told in a social context. "The narrative structure of autobiographical memory appears indistinguishable from the narrative structure of other social communications," according to Rubin (1998), "and the recall of autobiographical memories is usually a social act that can define a social group" (p. 54). As noted earlier, developmental psychologists such as Fivush (1994) and Nelson (1988) have emphasized the ways in which children and adults share personal memories in conversation, how autobiographical memory is socially constructed. Thorne (2000) argued that the term *personal memory* is a misnomer, because the majority of important memories are shared with other people. She suggested that a better term might be *intimate memories.* For Thorne (2000), the construction of self-defining memories and life stories is always a social enterprise, and "families and friends collude in self-making" (p. 45). Even when families and friends are absent, however, life stories may retain their social character. Hermans (1996) viewed the self as akin to a polyphonic novel, containing within it a multitude of internalized voices that "speak" to each other in dialogue. McAdams (1998) contended that all life stories are formulated with both external and internalized audiences in mind. Someone is always listening or watching, be it friends and acquaintances, parents and children, or be it Freud's superego, Mead's generalized other, internalized attachment objects, or God.

Life stories mirror the culture wherein the story is made and told. 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 understandings of what counts as a tellable story, a tellable life. As Rosenwald (1992) put it, "When people tell life stories, they do so in accordance with the models of intelligibility specific to the culture" (p. 265). As noted earlier, Habermas and Bluck (2000) contended that before a person can formulate a convincing life story, he or she must become acquainted with the culture's concept of biography. In modern Western cultures, Denzin (1989) and McAdams (1996) suggested biographies 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 of what constitutes a good story to tell (Gregg, 1991).

Even in a given society, furthermore, 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 in society privilege certain life stories over others, and therefore a number of narrative researchers and clinicians seek to give voice and expression to forms of life narrative that have traditionally been suppressed or marginalized (Franz & Stewart, 1994; M. M. Gergen & Gergen, 1993; M. White & Epston, 1990).

A wide-ranging and loosely coordinated movement in the social sciences, the *narrative study of lives,* has emerged in recent years as an interdisciplinary effort to write, interpret, and disseminate people's life stories, with special attention paid to the accounts of women, people of color, and representatives of other groups whose lives and stories have historically been ignored or even suppressed (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). Many of the studies undertaken by scholars in this arena use inductive and hermeneutical methods to examine in depth small samples of life stories collected from clearly defined sociodemographic and cultural groups. For instance, Modell (1992) identified common themes and narrative strategies in the stories that birth parents tell about why they gave up their children for adoption. Walkover (1992) found that married couples on the edge of parenthood crafted stories about their imagined future in which they romanticized and idealized the children they were about to have, suggesting an implicit (but irrational) belief in the perfectibility of childhood. Linn (1997) identified common life narrative types among Israeli soldiers who refused to engage in what they believed to be immoral acts of aggression. Gregg (1996) identified a hybrid life narrative form that mixes themes of modernity and traditional Islamic faith among contemporary young Moroccans. Cohler, Hostetler, and Boxer (1998) analyzed conflicts, frustrations, and potentialities in generativity in the life stories of gay couples. Crossley (2001) explored how HIV patients thematize the sense of place and the meaning of home in their life stories.

Anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists have long been interested in what stories can reveal about the similarities and differences among cultures. Folk tales, legends, sacred myths, and biographical stories have been viewed as windows into patterns of culture and into the complex (and sometimes contested) relations between culture and self (Geertz, 1973; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993). What has sometimes gone unrecognized, however, is how psychosocially crucial life storytelling is in contemporary modern cultures. Following Giddens (1991) and Taylor (1989), McAdams (1996, 1997) has argued that the unique problems that cultural modernity poses for human selfhood require modern men and women to become especially adept at assimilating their lives to culturally intelligible stories. In the modern world, the self is a reflexive project that a person is expected to "work on," to develop, improve, expand, and strive to perfect. Modern people see the self as complex and multifaceted, as containing many layers and depth, and as changing relentlessly over time. At the same time, they feel a strong urge to find some coherence in the self, to fashion a self that is more or less unified and purposeful within the discordant cultural parameters that situate their lives. From the media to everyday discourse, modern life is filled with models and examples of how to live a meaningful life and how not to. Yet, virtually every positive model has its drawbacks, nothing close to a consensus exists, and even if some modest level of cultural consensus could be reached, modern people are socialized to find their own way, to craft a self that is true to who one "really" is. As a consequence, people pick and choose and plagiarize selectively from the many stories and images they find in culture to formulate a narrative identity. Identity is not a problem unique to cultural modernity, but it is especially characteristic of it. In modern life, constructing one's own meaningful life story is a veritable cultural imperative.

As we move today into what some observers have deemed a postmodern world, the problem of fashioning an identity may become even more challenging (K. J. Gergen, 1992). On first blush, the concept of narrative is especially appealing in considering the problems of selfhood under the cultural conditions of postmodernity. The postmodern self is like a text, a narrative that continues to be written and rewritten over time. Shotter and Gergen (1989) wrote that, in the postmodern world, the "primary medium within which identities are created and have their currency is not just linguistic but textual; persons are largely ascribed identities according to the manner of their embedding within a discourse—in their own or in the discourses of others" (p. ix). Identities are ascribed by culture rather than constructed by the individual. The wild mix of cultural narratives and discourses determines a person's identity from one moment to the next. Each moment of discourse brings with it a new expression of the self. Over time, expressions are collected and patched together into a montage-like text whose development from one moment to the next can never be predicted. But what are texts? They are nothing but patterns of words, pictures, signs, and other sorts of representations. There is nothing substantive about them, nothing real; nor is there any sense in which a text can be said to be really "true" or "good." As Derrida's (1972) deconstructionist agenda would have it, texts have no inherent and stable meanings. Language is indeterminate. Every word is ambiguous in and of itself, and its particular meaning in a particular moment is dependent on its relation to other equally ambiguous words with which it is spoken or written.

Identity would appear to be a near-insoluble problem for the postmodern self. Because all texts are indeterminate, no single life can really mean a single thing, no organizing pattern of identity can be validly discerned in any single human life. K. J. Gergen (1992) made the point forcefully:

> The postmodern condition more generally is marked by a plurality of voices vying for the right to reality—to be accepted as legitimate expressions of the

> true and the good. As the voices expand in power and presence, all that seemed proper, right-minded, and well understood is subverted. In the postmodern world we become increasingly aware that the objects about which we speak are not so much "in the world" as they are products of perspective. Thus, processes such as emotion and reason cease to be real and significant essences of persons; rather, in the light of pluralism we perceive them to be imposters, the outcomes of our ways of conceptualizing them. Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to a reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold. (p. 7)

When Gergen wrote "the center fails to hold," what he meant (among other things) was that (a) the subjective "I" (human agency) is no longer central to human life and can no longer hold together and appropriate subjective experience as its own, and (b) the objective "me" (the self-concept) can no longer be held together because, as an indeterminate text, it is changing from one moment to the next. Just how true this is today is a matter of interesting cultural debate (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; McAdams, 1997). With respect to the alleged breakdown of the agential I, research in developmental psychology, reviewed earlier, shows that young children develop a strong sense of the agential I by the time they have reached their second birthday and that this generally taken-for-granted aspect of human selfhood has a considerable integrative effect on human experience. In autism and schizophrenia, the center may not hold, but it is hard to believe that most normal people do not experience life from the standpoint of a centered, integrative I, even in highly collectivist and nonindustrial societies (Holland, 1997).

With respect to the difficulty the I may have in fashioning a life story that centers the me and gives the person's life a sense of unity and purpose, the postmodern view underscores the dynamic nature of the me and provides a valuable counterpoint to the naive American view that (with hard work) a person can be anything that he or she wishes to be. Identity is not an individual achievement but a work of (and in) culture. In a sense, the person and the person's social world coauthor identity. Identity is a psychosocial construction (McAdams, 1996). Still, Gergen and other postmodern theorists may have exaggerated the extent to which contemporary Westerners believe they have little control over identity and the extent to which they experience their lives as in constant flux. And Gergen may have underestimated the integrative power of stories. "It overstates things to imply that the only stability and continuity in life narratives derives from recurrent features of [sociocultural] tasks and circumstances," wrote Robinson and Taylor (1998, p. 141). "This is not to say that self-narratives never change, only that at any given time there is some select subset of experiences that is regarded as most relevant to one's identity" (p. 141).

Another important emphasis in postmodern approaches is the multiplicity of selfhood (K. J. Gergen, 1992). The self is or can be many different things at any given point in time or period in a person's life. With respect to life stories, then, postmodern approaches suggest that there is not one integrative narrative to be found in any given life but, rather, a multiplicity of narratives. Furthermore, these narratives are likely to contradict and compete with each other and, more generally, to relate to one another in a complex and constantly changing manner. In that postmodern lives are always in flux and in that no single story can possibly bring together the many different and everchanging features of postmodern life, it would be naive to think that each person crafts an unproblematic and self-consistent grand narrative that organizes his or her entire life into a pattern of perfect unity and clear purpose.

As McAdams (1997) has shown, the postmodern emphasis on multiplicity is consistent with a number of trends in social, cognitive, developmental, and evolutionary psychology today, all emphasizing the particularity, modularity, and domain specificity of human functioning. Nonetheless, a totally modular view of selfhood would seem too extreme, given people's phenomenological experiences of, at minimum, some degree of integration in daily life and given the naturally integrative power of narrative itself (Bruner, 1986; Gregg, 1991; McAdams, 1997; Robinson & Taylor, 1998; Sacks, 1995). McAdams's life story model of identity tends to emphasize the integrative nature of stories, how it is that any given narrative can bring together disparate features and tendencies in a given life into a more or less unifying and purpose-giving whole. Nonetheless, it would certainly be wrong to maintain that such integration in identity is fully and unproblematically captured in one large story for each life. People carry with them and bring into conversation a wide range of self-stories, and these stories are nested in larger and overlapping stories, creating ultimately a kind of anthology of the self. Although no single story may encompass all of the many narratives that any given person can use to make sense of his or her life, some stories are larger and more integrative than others and come closer, therefore, to functioning as identity formats for a given person. Thus identity may not be captured in a single grand narrative for each person, but identity nonetheless is accomplished through narrative. People create unity and purpose in their lives, and they make sense of the psychosocial niches they inhabit in adulthood through stories, even if they must rely on more than one story to do so.

Despite disagreements, then, over the degree of integration that characterizes contemporary social life in the industrialized West and the extent to which any single story can integrate a single life, postmodern approaches to selfhood share with the life story model of identity (as well as a number of other approaches reviewed in this article) a strong and abiding belief in the importance of human narratives. Human life is storied, conceived in terms of settings, scenes, characters, plots, and themes. Stories are ideally suited to capture how a human actor, endowed with consciousness and motivated by intention, enacts desires and beliefs and strives for goals over time and in social context (Barresi & Juckes, 1997). Life stories are psychosocial texts that are jointly crafted by the individual himself or herself and the culture within which the individual's life has meaning. Our autobiographical stories reflect who we are, and they also reflect the world in which we live.

Conclusion

The idea that identity is an internalized and evolving life story ties together a number of important theoretical and empirical trends in developmental, cognitive, personality, and cultural psychology. In late adolescence and young adulthood, people living in modern societies begin putting their lives together into integrative narratives of the self, reconstructing the past and imaginatively anticipating the future in such a way as to provide their lives with some sense of unity and purpose. It is at this time in the life course that young men and women are first motivated by cultural demands and encouragement to embark on the identity project and first able to construe their lives as full-fledged narratives expressing temporal, biographical, causal, and thematic coherence. Nonetheless, the developmental precursors to life story making can be traced all the way back to the 1-year-old's emergent understanding of intentionality, the development of the agential "I" and the objective "me" in the 2nd year of life, the maturation of a theory of mind in Years 3 and 4, and the early conversations that children enjoy with their parents, siblings, and friends as they co-construct the remembered past. On the other end of the spectrum, life story making continues well beyond the early adult years, as midlife and older men and women continue to refashion themselves and renarrate their lives in the wake of predictable and unpredictable life changes. In the midlife years and beyond, the issue of generativity may move to the front and center of a person's life story as he or she seeks to fashion an appealing story "ending" that will generate new and good beginnings.

The psychology of life stories ties neatly to contemporary research and theory on autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory helps to locate and ground the self within an ongoing life story featuring extended lifetime periods or chapters, knowledge about typical or characteristic life events, and specific and sometimes vivid details of particularly well-remembered scenes. Like the life story, autobiographical memory is contoured by the person's current goals and anticipations of what future chapters and scenes are likely to bring. Yet, autobiographical memory and the life story are not exactly the same phenomena. Autobiographical memory encompasses a vast range of personal information and experience, whereas the life story consists of a more delimited set of temporally and thematically organized scenes and scripts that together constitute identity.

Life stories provide a view of human personality that cannot be accessed through dispositional traits or characteristic adaptations. Indeed, personality may be seen as a unique patterning of traits, adaptations, and stories. Dispositional traits, such as those presented in the Big Five trait taxonomy (McCrae & Costa, 1990), provide an initial sketch of human individuality; characteristic adaptations, such as motives and developmental tasks, fill in the details; and life stories provide integration and meaning. Individual differences in life stories are just as rich and interesting as individual differences in any other aspect of human individuality. Among the more important individual-differences dimensions are content themes of agency and communion, narrative sequences of redemption and contamination, and structural complexity and organization of life stories.

Stories live to be told to others. Life stories, therefore, are continually made and remade in social relationships and in the overall social context provided by culture. As psychosocial constructions, life stories reflect the values, norms, and power differentials inherent in the societies wherein they have their constitutive meanings. The construction of coherent life stories is an especially challenging problem for adults living in contemporary modern (and postmodern) societies, wherein selves are viewed as reflexive projects imbued with complexity and depth, ever-changing and yet demanding a coherent framing. Given the centrality of life story making and life storytelling in contemporary social life, it is heartening to see that empirical psychologists have recently turned their attention to life stories and autobiographical memories. Stories always have audiences, explicit or implied. Developmental, cognitive, personality, and cultural psychologists have recently joined in as audiences for people's life stories, bringing their theories and their hypotheses to the performance and, we surely hope, their wisdom and insight as well.

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