Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespan: An Introduction

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In a quiet but consistent way, a new subdiscipline of personality psychology—narrative identity research—has emerged. Its organizing concern is how individuals employ narratives to develop and sustain a sense of personal unity and purpose from diverse experiences across the lifespan (McAdams, 1985, 1987, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2001). Partly obscured by its interweavings with clinical, developmental, and cognitive psychology, as well as links to social psychology (e.g., Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993; Gergen, 1992; Sarbin, 1986), and the related social sciences of sociology and anthropology, it has sometimes seemed too diffuse or chameleon-like to identify. Finding allies in philosophy (Ricoeur, 1984), psycho-analysis (Schafer, 1981; Spence, 1982), narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and literature (e.g., Lau, 2002; Bruner & Weisser, 1991), it may have appeared too humanities-oriented to be considered a part of scientific inquiry. With its roots in the personological perspective of Henry Murray (1938), it may have been written off by some as too grand in design and similar to Murray's noble, but daunting, efforts to capture all of the complexity of human personality.

Now, however, it is clear that there is a body of midcareer and younger empirical researchers who place narrative identity at the center of personality. In the language of McAdams's (1995) frame-work of personality, this group draws on Level 1 "Trait" measures,

such as the Big Five, and Level 2 "Characteristic Adaptations" constructs, such as personal strivings or motives, but their primary emphasis is on Level 3 "Identity and Life Stories." Their work fundamentally focuses on questions of how individuals seek to make meaning of their lives, both how they understand themselves as unique individuals and as social beings who are multiply defined by life stage, gender, ethnicity, class, and culture. At the core of these efforts at self-understanding is the role of narrative memory and life story construction (McAdams, 1987, 1990, 2001; Singer & Salovey, 1993). To understand the identity formation process is to understand how individuals craft narratives from experiences, tell these stories internally and to others, and ultimately apply these stories to knowledge of self, other and the world in general. In an era of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, these researchers are distinguished by their determination not to lose sight of a humanistic concern with how individuals look for meaning and spiritual depth in life; they do not want to relinquish an interest in the content and quality of thought by focusing solely on biochemistry, process or mechanics.

In this special issue of the *Journal of Personality*, I present a sampling of these researchers through a focus on one specific aspect of narrative identity across the adult lifespan—the efforts individuals make to extract meaning from their narratives. There are many researchers doing exciting work in related areas of narrative identity—Lynne Angus (Gonclaves, Korman, & Angus, 2000), Arnold Bruhn (1990), Ed de St. Aubin (1998; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997), Ruthellen Josselson (1996, Josselson & Lieblich, 1993), Jonathan Kotre (1995), Jane Kroger (1990, 1995), Jennifer Pals (under review), Monisha Pasupathi (2001), Elli Schachter (in press), Abigail Stewart (Stewart, Franz, & Layton, 1988), among many others, but space constraints have limited me to the group presented here.

In this introductory essay, I first identify what I see as the common attributes that link this set of highly diverse researchers together. Although their research backgrounds and methods vary widely, they have indeed found common ground through a shared interest in the role of narrative identity in personality. In the field of psychology where fragmentation is increasingly the rule, it is encouraging to see a unifying perspective on personality emerge across subdisciplines. Having elaborated the overlapping principles manifest in these researchers' work, I then turn to the contributions

of each paper, highlighting the unifying themes across the seven empirical articles.

COMMON PRINCIPLES OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY RESEARCHERS

Centrality of Narrative to Identity Formation

In making claims for the centrality of narrative to ongoing identity formation, these researchers follow in the tradition of psychobiography (see, for example, the special issue of the *Journal of Personality* edited by McAdams & Ochberg, 1988) and the idiographic study of lives (Allport, 1942; 1965; Murray, 1938; White, 1975; Stewart et al. 1988), as well as the seminal work of Tomkins (1979, 1987). However, there are several factors that distinguish these researchers from some of the earlier currents of narrative research in personality. First, these researchers do not see identity or the life story as reducible to a particular set of psychodynamic forces, whether it be Freud's emphasis on sex and aggression, Jung's principle of opposites, Adler's striving for superiority, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, or any other ''grand theory'' of human desire. Tending to be noncommittal on these more dynamic and affective motive forces, there is almost an implicit endorsement of theories of personality that seek individuals as inherently meaning seekers or symbol manipulators (e.g., Kelly's work on personal constructs, 1955, or White's 1959 proposal of a need for competence; see Mahoney, in press, on the constructivist movement for a related perspective).

In some senses, this freedom from the need to link the search for identity to a particular reductionist theory of motivation is both this group of researchers' greatest strength and weakness. Without the need to see all stories as ultimately about one or two conflicts or themes, these researchers are free to explore how narratives emerge from complex constitutive influences based in specific cultural and historical matrices (Bruner, 1965, 1986, 1990). This sensitivity to the nuances of sociocultural context prevents the privileging of a dominant ideological position, masquerading as an ''objective'' scientific principle, as was too often the case in the imposition of psychoanalytic dogma on the study of lives (see Freud's case study of Leonardo De Vinci, Freud, 1957, as an example of this excess and

Elms' 1988 critique). On the other hand, without recourse to a dynamic organizing principle, narrative researchers run the risk of providing descriptive rather than explanatory accounts of identity and personality. They also may come across as too focused on the cognitive and conscious aspects of personality at the expense of the irrational, affective, and unconscious factors that shape individuals and their behavior.

Perhaps McAdams's (1990) emphasis on individuals' search to find a balance between autonomy (agency) and relationship (communion) as a pervasive theme in narrative identity comes closest to a dynamic position, but he is careful to situate this tension in its contemporary western postindustrial context and not to make universal claims for these motives. He also does not offer a more organic account of why human beings desire both separation and connection in their lives. He accepts this proposition, but does not try to explain it in either evolutionary or biologic terms. Many of his fellow narrative identity researchers have found this agency vs. communion theme helpful to their work, but are similarly cautious in asserting its domain as a dominating perspective on human nature.

Role of Cognitive-Affective Processes in Formation of Narrative and Meaning Making

As already intimated, this new cohort of narrative identity researchers is highly sympathetic to the advances of cognitive science, particularly autobiographical memory research, in understanding personality. This affinity for aspects (but certainly not all) of the information-processing paradigm also distinguishes these narrative researchers from an earlier generation of psychoanalytically oriented psychobiographers and Murray's personological disciples. Tracing the roots of this dimension of their work to Tomkins's cognitive-affective approach to personality, including his script theory (Tomkins, 1979, 1987; see also J. L. Singer's work, 1975, 1987, on the private personality), these researchers came of age in an era where artificial intelligence researchers were beginning to ask critical questions about how individuals make inferences in natural conversation, organize and prioritize autobiographical memory, and link plans and goals to behavior (Reiser, 1983; Reiser, Black, & Abelson, 1985; Reiser, Black, & Kalamarides, 1986; Schank, 1982;

Schank & Abelson, 1977). Simultaneously, the "real memory" movement in cognitive psychology, led by Neisser (1978, 1982; Neisser & Fivush, 1994; Neisser & Winograd, 1988) and Rubin (1986, 1996, 1998) opened the doors of this field to questions concerning the role of affect and the self in memory encoding, storage, and retrieval. As Conway (Conway, 1996; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), more than any other cognitive researcher, has come to understand, a satisfactory account of autobiographical memory requires a model of self and a recognition of how personality processes interact with cognitive processes to create a goal-based hierarchy of autobiographical knowledge. This autobiographical knowledge is expressed through narrative memories that give accounts of the individual's goal pursuits, obstacles, and outcomes.

Underlying this linkage of memory and personality is the cognitive construct of a schema and its subtype, the script. If schemas, as articulated by Piaget, are organized bodies of knowledge, then the script, as defined by both Tomkins (1979) and Schank and Abelson (1977) are schemas that contain information about sequences of events and the causal linkages that bind these sequences together. They specify rules about what precedes what in a particular type of experience, and they alert individuals to diversions from the expected sequence. For Tomkins, scripts contain information, most often in an interpersonal context, about the sequence of emotions that adhere to an unfolding series of events. Scenes are the manifestations in a given moment in time of these abstracted affect-event sequences, along with the unique imagery that accrues to a specific episode from one's life. For example, a woman may have a romantic script that follows a sequence of conflict, reconciliation, and further conflict. This scripted affective sequence of anger; joy; and anger takes the specific form of a narrative scene about a particular New Year's Eve, when she broke up with her lover over the evening meal, reconciled with the chime of midnight, and then resumed their quarrel with the break of day.

For the new generation of narrative identity researchers, these scripted units of personality appear in different guises—nuclear episodes (McAdams, 1985), memorable events (Pillemer, 1998), self-defining memories (Singer, 1995), or autobiographical memory narratives (Bluck & Glück, this issue)—and operate at different levels of abstraction from the scene to the script to the life story

schema (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), but all of these manifestations of narrative memory are taken to be the building blocks of ongoing identity. Singer and Bluck (2001) have defined this approach to the organization of life experience as "narrative processing" or the construction of

> storied accounts of past events that range from brief anecdotes to fully developed autobiographies. These accounts rely on vivid imagery, familiar plot structures, and archetypal characters and are often linked to predominant cultural themes or conflicts. (p. 92)

Once we have filtered life experiences through the narrative lens, we can *make use* of the narratives we have created. We can employ stories to raise our spirits, guide our actions, or influence others as a tool of persuasion or rhetoric. We can draw inferences from stories with particular self-relevance in order to gain insight into our own nature, values, and goals. The accumulating knowledge that emerges from reasoning about our narrative memories yields a life story schema that provides causal, temporal, and thematic coherence to an overall sense of identity (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). All of these activities, which lie at the heart of meaning making, can be distinguished from narrative processing per se and defined as "autobiographical reasoning" (Singer & Bluck, 2001).

In reality, narrative processing and autobiographical reasoning often converge because many of the cultural forms that guide the creation of narratives will subsequently influence what meaning or lesson we extract from a particular narrative unit. For example, when late adolescents and young adults are asked to recall "self-defining memories" (Blagov & Singer, this issue; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, this issue), their memories follow familiar plot trajectories of athletic and academic triumphs and failures, relationship beginnings and ends, and family disruptions and illnesses. Although the lessons these college students extract from their experiences about hard work, love conquering all, or growth through adversity reflect their personal insights, they are also heavily informed by the available repertoire of moral dictums provided by our shared culture. In this sense, our sociocultural context strongly shapes how we fashion narratives from "raw" experience and, subsequently,

what meaning we make of the narratives that we have created. We will return to this point later as a full-fledged principle.

Emphasis on a Lifespan Developmental Approach

The fact that our capacity to turn experience into narrative emerges from a social cognitive developmental process defines another point of intersection for this group of narrative identity researchers. Building on their interest in cognitive-affective processes and the emergence of these processes across the individual life, these researchers take an avowedly lifespan developmental approach to their understanding of narrative identity (Singer, 1996). Wedding Piaget and Erikson, these researchers trace the use of narrative through progressive stages of cognitive growth that take place in the context of social interaction and maturation. Nelson (1988) and Fivush (1994) have documented the emergence of narrative through adult-child interactions. Habermas and Bluck (2000) have described the cognitive changes that must take place in order for the adolescent to initiate the crafting of the life story that is at the heart of McAdams's theory of identity. Similarly, Thorne (2000) describes the critical role that peer dialogue and parent-adolescent exchanges play in the formation of the adolescents' ability to "tell" who they are, both to others and to their own private self. Mary Gergen (Gergen & Gergen, 1995) has elaborated on how young lovers of each historical era over the centuries have relied on extant myths, rituals, and literary forms to guide their development of intimacy. Ed de St. Aubin, in his work with McAdams on generativity (McAdams et al., 1997), has highlighted the nature of midlife narratives that express themes of personal and social contribution. King (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000) has looked at how parents of Down syndrome children construct narratives of their birth and how (King and Raspin, this issue) middle-aged and older women narrate their lives before and after divorce. Staudinger (2001) and Bluck (Bluck & Glück, this issue) have studied how elderly individuals generate narratives of wisdom. These examples only highlight the commitment that these researchers have to a lifespan development perspective. Our ability to construct narratives evolves and changes over all phases of the lifespan, as does our capacity for autobiographical reasoning and the ability to make meaning of the stories we tell.

Recognition of Sociocultural Factors in the Construction
of Narrative Identity

If the developmental phase of life presents an influential context for
the forging of narrative identity, then clearly gender, class, race,
ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and other sociocultural factors
are critical to the shaping of narrative self-definition (for example,
see the work of Cohler, Hostetler, & Boxer, 1998; Franz & Stewart,
1994; Gregg, 1996; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Miller, 1982; Miller &
Sperry, 1988). Though the goal of this special issue was to examine
narrative identity and meaning making with a sensitivity to different
phases of the lifespan, future projects will need to cover the multiple
influences of these formative factors on meaning making associated
with narrative identity. Narratives are inevitably created to meet the
demands of social roles and historical-cultural niches; they force us
to ask about their audience and how their construction seeks to
answer certain problems raised by the various subgroups to which
we belong. The papers collected here provide new methods of
measuring types of narratives and meaning statements in response
to these narratives; these methods would allow researchers to
differentiate meaning making that reflected a more individualistic
vs. collective self-understanding (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), as well
as allow researchers to compare structural features of narratives
composed by individuals from various cultures or communities of
practice. For example, within ethnically homogenous communities,
studies of gendered reminiscence practices in childhood have been
found to extend to self-defining memories in adolescence (Fivush,
Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Thorne & McLean, 2002).

Diversity of Methods of Study and Linkage
to Other Levels of Personality

One final and critical convergence for the group of researchers
represented here is their willingness to employ a mixture of qualita-
tive and quantitative methods in the study of narrative identity. In
the truest spirit of Murray's ''tough and tender'' personological
inquiries, these researchers collect narrative material that lends itself
to interpretative analysis *and* coding by reliable and validated
scoring systems. These researchers also rely on other types of
personality measures that include self-report inventories and projec-
tive testing, which sample from Levels 1 and 2 of McAdams's levels

of personality framework. They employ these methods to demonstrate the linkage of narrative identity to critical factors of human life—personal adjustment, coping, subjective well-being, and mental and physical health. The extension of their efforts at making these linkages to behavioral and physiological indices, as well to increased timeframes within longitudinal designs, will enrich this work and increase its relevance to other subdisciplines of psychology. In some ways, this group may be vulnerable from both directions: too positivist and reductionist for the social constructionists (e.g., Gergen, 1992) and too literary and diffuse for the trait enthusiasts (McCrae & Costa, 1999). Yet this may be an occupational hazard in seeking a middle and integrative path in the study of personality and identity.

In sum, narrative identity researchers take seriously McAdams's proposal that ''identity is a life story'' (McAdams, 1987). That is, individuals' ongoing sense of self in contemporary Western society coheres around a narrative structure, which casts the individual as a protagonist in a lifelong journey, marked by the mutual challenges of intimacy and autonomy, and expressed through archetypal characters, turning points, and varying outcomes of redemption or contamination (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Secondly, they do not see this work of building a narrative identity as adhering to a particular stage or phase of life. To do research in narrative identity is to embrace a lifespan developmental perspective on personality. Biological and cognitive changes, role demands of particular life stages, historical and cohort influences all conspire to make any individual's narrative a fluid and evolving work in progress. Third, they do indeed believe in the word that I just used, ''progress.'' These researchers see the potential, though it is certainly not realized in every case, for individuals to learn and grow from the stories they construct out of their life experiences. They see the building of the life narrative as an exercise in interpretative knowledge; individuals have experiences and then make stories of them in order to extract meaning from their retelling. The stories individuals create draw from the existing repertoire of cultural narratives based in myth, fable, literature, popular entertainment, and ethnic family history that define the meaning making parameters of their lives. Their personal narratives, their ''narrative identity'' situates them meaningfully in their culture, providing unity to their past, present, and anticipated future. Each addition to the ongoing

life narrative offers another opportunity for individuals to understand where they belong in the world and to determine what takes them closer or further away from the goals to which they aspire. The progressive momentum is from story making to meaning making to wisdom accumulation that provides individuals with a surer and more graceful footing on life's path. Finally, all of the researchers assembled here see that the capacity to extract meaning from life narratives has correlates with other positive dimensions of personality, though not necessarily always with happiness. As the authors of the papers assembled here demonstrate, to draw lessons and wisdom from one's narratives reflects ego development, personal adjustment, stress-related growth, and maturity, but not necessarily an immediate sense of subjective well-being. To learn and grow may involve acknowledging what has been lost or what will never be, but this acceptance may allow for better long-term adjustment and more judicious life choices that lead to greater happiness in the long run.

THE ASSEMBLED ARTICLES

The papers in this issue are arranged from a more micro and cognitive focus that begins with autobiographical memory processes and expands to a more interpersonal emphasis that encompasses life-changing issues ranging from divorce to the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001, attack. The age span of participants included in these articles goes from 17 to 80+. For readers interested in the formation of narrative identity in the childhood and preadolescent years, I would once again recommend the groundbreaking work of Nelson (1988), Fivush (1994), and Nelson and Fivush (in press).

Conway and Holmes (this issue) start this special issue by linking autobiographical memory recall to the work of the founding father of identity research, Erik Erikson (1963). Drawing on the Self-Memory-System model of autobiographical memory (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), they argue that the accessibility of a given memory is a function of its relevance to the outcome of active goals in consciousness. Events in any given period of the lifespan that are critically related to the developmental goals of that period are likely to be the most accessible in memory. To verify this claim, Conway and Holmes asked elderly participants to recall memories from seven decades of life (spanning from 0–9 to 60+) and then coded the

memories for Erikson's psychosocial themes. As predicted, memories from the first decade reflected concerns with trust and developing autonomy and competence; memories from the second decade highlighted identity themes; memories from the third decade favored intimacy; and so on, corresponding to each stage of Erikson's life cycle. In a second experiment with another set of elderly participants, the authors used psychosocial cue words to prompt memories and then examined the age patterns of the memories generated. Once again, the resulting data plot demonstrated the predicted correspondence of age periods and developmental themes in the seniors' memories.

These results reinforce the proposition that narrative identity emerges from and remains sensitive to developmental crises throughout our lives. Singer and Blagov (in press) have argued that individuals' goal hierarchies and the corresponding salience of self-defining memories may be linked directly to the developmental concerns that predominate for an individual at a given period in their lives. For example, memories of an unrequited love from high school or other past romances might take on a new urgency during a period in which one's current marriage or partnership is foundering.

Conway and Holmes's contribution sets the underlying framework for all efforts at meaning making from narratives about the self. They cannot be divorced from Erikson's "epigenetic" press that carries forward its themes of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, self-definition, intimacy, generativity, and integrity with varying intensity through each decade of life.

From questions of memory accessibility, we turn to how individuals step back from recalled memories and link them to self-understanding. Blagov and Singer collected self-defining memories from a sample of college students and also employed the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory (Weinberger, 1998) to obtain levels of self-restraint, subjective distress, and repressive defensiveness. Among several findings, there are two most relevant to narrative identity and meaning making. First, the authors found that how individuals structured their narratives correlated with their level of defensiveness. Individuals high in a defensive avoidance of emotion and conflict were more likely to recall memories that lacked specific imagery and detail. On the other hand, individuals high in defensiveness did not tend to recall fewer negative memories. It would appear that for highly defensive individuals what is critical to block

is not the acknowledgment of putative bad feelings about an experience, but rather vivid imagery or detail that might lead to the reexperiencing of the recollected event.

Second, Blagov and Singer found that individuals who wrote down statements integrating their memories with their current self-understanding or understanding about life in general showed optimal levels of self-restraint on the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory. These individuals displayed moderate self-restraint, eschewing either an undersocialized impulsive style or an overly controlled excessive self-restraint. Weinberger has found moderate self-restraint correlates with a variety of indices of well-being and positive health outcomes.

The combination of these two findings suggests a fruitful connection of narrative identity research to clinical work in psychotherapy. Therapists strive to assist clients in expressing the full complexity of their life experiences, including both affective and intellectual dimensions. Blagov and Singer's work suggests that individuals who can achieve the dual feat of recalling a memory with specificity and imagery, while simultaneously extracting integrative meaning from that recollection, may be likely to show the most positive adjustment and therapeutic outcome.

In the next paper of this special issue, Thorne, McLean, and Lawrence look more closely at the kinds of integrative meanings individuals draw from self-defining memories. They also make the distinction between memories that are simply recalled privately and those memories that also possess a ''telling narrative,'' memories for which the individual can recall a specific episode of recounting the memory to another person or persons. Drawing on their previous work (McLean & Thorne, in press), the authors first differentiate meaning making about memories into two categories. *Lesson learning* is a practical inference drawn from the experience that directs future action in similar circumstances. *Gaining insight* steps back from the experience and links the message gained from the experience to a deeper self-understanding or knowledge about the world or relationships. For example, lesson learning would be when an individual, who recalls a memory of being shortchanged in an open-air market, writes that it is best to count your change after a transaction. Gaining insight would be if the same memory provoked someone to write that, though we want to believe people are good, it is wise not to be too innocent in any kind of monetary transaction.

In addition to examining the percentages of each type of meaning making associated with late adolescents' self-defining memories, the authors looked at what types of memories tend to induce meaning making. They found that meaning making was most linked to memories that expressed some form of tension or conflict, particularly those memories that displayed themes of mortality or relationship. Achievement and leisure memories were less likely to lead to efforts at integrative meaning. Interestingly, and fitting with the developmental theme of this special issue, the authors found that for late adolescents, only 23% of memories had meaning making associated with them. As Bluck and Glück (this issue) illustrate, this capacity for making integrative meaning of one's experiences appears to emerge more powerfully in early adulthood and is sustained through later adulthood.

With regard to the telling memories, Thorne and her colleagues found that individuals tended to share insights in equal proportion to lessons learned, but that within these telling narratives, listeners received insights more positively than lessons learned. They suggest that listeners are inclined to reinforce individuals' efforts to extract a more general understanding or universal application to their experiences. On the other hand, lessons learned in telling narratives often took the form of a self-condemnation or a pat acknowledgment that one should know better next time. These meaning statements were considered less likely to invoke the positive reaction of a listener. Finally, the authors also noted that for memories that had never been told to others, the percentage of meaning making was just as great as for those that had been told. Examining these memories and their content more closely, the authors observed that individuals were often motivated to keep these memories private in order to highlight a distinction for themselves between self and other. They conclude that both more private and more shared meaning making take place in an interpersonal context in which the construction and the application of the memory narrative are shaped by social dynamics. In this way, even memories and meanings that are not shared are part of an ongoing conversation that we continually hold with internalized others.

Susan Bluck and Judith Glück build on the theme of meaning making from narrative processing by examining the ways in which individuals experience themselves as ''wise.'' Drawing on a cross section of adolescents (15–20), early adults (30–40), and older adults

(60–70), they asked individuals to define moments from our life story as touchstones of wisdom—pivotal events that reflected the acquisition of an insight or truth. In agreement with McAdams and colleagues' work on redemption narratives (McAdams et al., 2001) and Thorne et al.'s (this issue) finding of the association of tension with meaning making, Bluck and Glück found that most wisdom narratives provided by their participants highlighted negative or challenging situations that led to an uplifting resolution or lesson (what we might call the "when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade" phenomenon). Contrary to the received view that wisdom is the sole domain of elderly sages (cf. Merlin, Yoda, Dumbledore), these authors demonstrated that experienced wisdom and the capacity to link life lessons emerges strongly in early adulthood and maintains a consistent presence throughout the adult lifespan. Further, their work illustrates that the ability to see oneself as possessing a set of wisdom experiences enhances one's sense of competence and self-efficacy. This compendium of life lessons that constitutes "wisdom" gives individuals an internal assurance that a knowledge base is available to cope with and triumph over the challenges or adversities that life might present.

One other promising finding that emerged from their investigation is that individuals' wisdom narratives tended to expand across larger temporal periods, linking a set of related events together rather than focusing on a single isolated incident. Bluck and Glück see this result as indicative of individuals' efforts to incorporate these narratives into their larger life story, what one might consider an assimilation of experiences into the life story schema. If this were the case, it would explain why the adolescents from the study were less likely to generate wisdom experiences that reflected a larger life philosophy or connection to a broader understanding of self or world. The authors called the adolescents' emphasis on more literal lessons from their wisdom experiences, examples of "factual or procedural knowledge." This type of meaning making clearly parallels what Thorne et al. calls "life lessons" as opposed to "gaining insight" memories. These younger people are still developing the social-cognitive skills (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) to elaborate a coherent and unifying life story schema. One can find a converging pattern of results to support this idea in the Blagov and Singer (this issue) study. They found that late adolescents with more summary memory narratives showed higher numbers of integrative meaning statements, perhaps

indicating that these individuals are now beginning the abstracting process that leads to the construction of a life story schema.

Bluck and Glück point to the benefits for adjustment and self-competence associated with the capacity to link meaning making to narrative identity. Bauer and McAdams take this view a step further by demonstrating that the ways in which individuals make sense of transition narratives in their lives are linked to their stage of ego development (Hy & Loevinger, 1996) and social-emotional development (Deci & Ryan, in press). To examine this question, the authors solicited adult volunteers ranging in age from 25 to 73 to write 1–2 page narratives about important transitions in their careers and religions. They then analyzed these narratives for *integrative* themes (reflecting statements about a new understanding of self or others), *intrinsic* themes (an emphasis on personal happiness and fulfillment), agency, and communion. Participants also completed a sentence completion test of ego development and two measures of well-being.

These authors found that transition stories that stressed integrative lessons about personal mastery or enhanced status (agency) were more highly correlated to ego development, while transition stories that focused on personal growth in relationships (communion) were more linked to intrinsic themes and greater subjective well-being. Similar to Thorne et al.'s results, Bauer and McAdams found that relationship memories that expressed enhanced belonging and happiness were not as likely as memories of striving or conflict to generate insight and self-understanding. However, the one type of memory that correlated with both ego development and social-emotional development were relationship memories that involved struggle and resolution. The authors suggest that perhaps we come closest to the "good life" through meaningful relationship experiences that ultimately teach us the greatest priorities in life (e.g., the near fatal illness of a child or the positive resolution of a marital crisis).

The differential relationship of types of meaning making to forms of ego and social development is also the main theme of Laura King's and Courtney Raspin's contribution to this collection of papers. Working with an adult population of divorced women, ranging in age from 39 to 86, King and Raspin asked these women to write narrative descriptions of their best possible future selves before their divorce (retrospectively) and then after their divorce. Measures of ego development and well-being were collected

concurrently and two years later. The two sets of narratives allowed the authors to compare the participants' "lost possible selves"—the dreams they had held for a married future that did not come to pass, with their "found possible selves"—the aspirations they now held based on their current lives (only 3 of the 73 sampled had remarried). The study looked at two particular aspects of these lost and found narratives—their *salience* (how frequently participants thought about them) and their *elaboration* (how detailed a vision of these selves they held). The salience of the lost possible self was negatively correlated with subjective well-being, while the salience of the found possible self was positively related to well-being. In contrast, the elaboration of the found possible self was linked to ego development, concurrently and two years later. The elaboration of the lost possible self interacted with years since the divorce to predict ego development. In other words, as time passed since the divorce, those women who maintained a more elaborated vision of what they had given up were also more likely to show enhanced ego development, translating into a tolerance of complexity and ambivalence. Paralleling findings from the three previous papers in this special issue, meaning making correlates with greater insight, wisdom, and maturity, but not necessarily subjective well-being. What life has to teach us may not always come in an elixir of happiness, but these lessons are likely to bring us greater wisdom and contentment in the long-run.

In the final contribution to this special issue, Woike and Matic illustrate that our narrative identity and efforts at meaning making coalesce not only around private events, but public traumas as well. In two studies of these different types of trauma, Woike and Matic emphasize not simply the content of narratives, but the ways in which we structure our efforts at extracting meaning from narrative experience. In their first study, the authors asked college student participants to write about their thoughts and feelings immediately after the events of September 11th in New York City. Participants were also measured for agentic and communal motives, stress-related growth, and psychological symptoms. In the second study, individuals received the same personality measures, but wrote about a personally traumatic experience. In both studies, the authors measured the narrative structure of their accounts by looking at the degree to which their narratives showed examples of *differentiation* (use of contrasts, comparisons, qualifications of meaning) or

integration (use of causal links, similarities, resolutions). Drawing on their previous work (e.g., Woike, 1995; Woike, Gersekovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999), Woike and Matic predicted that individuals high in agency would employ more differentiation and rely on more distancing and isolating coping responses to their traumatic experiences. In contrast, individuals high in communion would show more integrative narratives and more engagement with their experiences, leading simultaneously to more expression of anxiety and more enlistment of social support. The actual results from the two studies are complicated and highlight some of differences between the incorporation of public and private events into narrative identity. One overarching finding that complements the other papers of this special issue is that the tendency to use integration in both types of memory narratives correlated with stress-related growth. Once again, the ability to see connections and find meaning from traumatic or stressful experiences is associated with personal growth. Woike and Matic's study lends support to Singer, King, Green, & Barr's (2002) finding that summer interns who connected their internship experience to their commitment to making social contributions also reported greater stress-related growth from the experience.

CONCLUSION

In sum, across different phases of the adult lifespan, ranging from ages 15 to 86, the studies presented in this special issue illustrate the power of narrative identity and meaning making in adult development and personality growth. As a clinical psychologist, I am heartened to see cognitive, developmental, and personality psychologists building a body of research that illustrates the psychological gains that accrue from the capacity to narrate one's life and then draw insight from these personal narratives. For more than a decade, James Pennebaker has championed the mental and physical benefits of narrative self-disclosure accompanied by efforts at integration and meaning making (e.g., Pennebaker, 1989). The papers in this special issue complement his groundbreaking work, but extend his findings to the development of an integrated narrative identity across the lifespan. The assembled authors have asked and begun to answer the question of not only how we make sense of emotionally difficult experiences in our lives, but where the process of meaning making fits in the overall structure of adult identity and how it develops,

stabilizes, and changes over the course of the adult lifespan. They have provided us with a beginning nosology of types of meanings and with a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes that impose meaning structures on new and recollected experiences. They have shown how the varied content of narrative experiences differentially invokes meaning making and how an actual and imagined audience for these narratives affects the degree and kind of meaning expressed.

In so doing, they have brought us closer to actual lived lives and the expressions of sorrow and growth that constitute the daily theater of operation of the therapeutic encounter. As this research continues to develop and flourish, the applications to clinical work are likely to become even more direct. Independent of this promise, this new generation of narrative identity researchers have found a way to combine the tough and tender in an effort to fill out the full picture of McAdams's three-tiered framework of personality. Whether studying narratives of an adolescent's first love on a chilly beach, a college student's response to the September 11th attacks, a middle-aged woman's reimagined future in the aftermath of divorce, or an older participant's memory of a WWII air raid, these researchers have demonstrated that we come to know ourselves and to know about the world through the stories that we tell, and through the meanings that we construct from these self-defining narratives.

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