

The cycle of life and story: Redemptive autobiographical narratives and prosocial behaviors

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Abstract

Adults often understand their lives by constructing personal stories and then living into them. Time and time again, a positive relation has been found between the tendency to build *redemptive* personal stories wherein negative and challenging experiences ultimately give way to positive endings and prosocial behavior. Here, I review the relevant literature in the interest of advancing the notion that redemptive stories and prosociality exist in a virtuous cycle. Engaging in prosocial acts can stimulate the redemptive framing of one's past. By the same measure, once formed, individuals work to bring the story to life, and the ethos of redemption holds the potential to stimulate and sustain prosocial behavior.

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We tell ourselves stories in order to live

Joan Didion

Above all else, humans are storytellers [1–12]; but also see the study by McAdams [13]. We perceive the social world using story-based principles, we construct and share stories about our personal experiences, and beginning in early adulthood, we come to craft internal and evolving life stories, or narrative identities in which the self and personal past, present, and presumed future are drawn together within a unifying and continuous arc.

The current entry is given over to explicating the relation between life and story. I argue that, whether big [14] or small [1], the personal stories formed in the

interest of self-understanding and continuity undergird a host of consequential behaviors and life outcomes (e.g. the work of Dunlop [5], Adler et al. [15], Dunlop [16], and Dunlop [17]). The ‘case in point’ example of this relation will be the lives and life stories of highly prosocial individuals. Among this select group, a particular type of story, the redemptive story, defined by a negative-to-positive affective arc (for review, see Dunlop [16]), serves as both a cause and consequence of prosocial behavior. Said differently, redemptive stories and prosocial behavior exist in a virtuous cycle.

Self is story

It is a requisite condition of personhood that individuals believe they are the same person they were the moment before and will be in the moment next [2]. A sense of ownership needs to be felt when gazing backwards upon the personal past and a sense of investment needs to be felt when considering the promise of an as-yet un-lived tomorrow. If such conditions were not to be met, ‘contracts and debts and promises would all fly out the same window, all prospects for a just and moral world would evaporate, and Judgment day would simply go out of business’ ([18] pp 6–7).

At first-blush, attaining this sense of self-continuity [19] or personal persistence [18] may seem both simple and straightforward. The past, however, is littered with the unexpected, the inconsistent, and the incongruent. When attempts to draw a line between then and now come to a head with these surprises, deviations, and incongruencies, narrative and narrative processing represents, at minimum, a resource and, much more likely, a necessity [5,6]. Through the act of storying, the many things seen, the many things done, and the many personal and social changes endured can be organized, integrated, and understood.

Life as story/story as life

We live our lives immersed in narrative ecologies that offer guidance concerning both what events are storied and how these stories should be told [20–22]. Normative events, such as graduating from high school, getting married, and having children, are more likely to find their way into individuals’ storied identities (e.g. the study by Umanath and Berntsen [22]). Within American cultural contexts (and perhaps abroad; see the study by

Blackie et al. [23], Blackie and McLean [24], and Eriksson et al. [25]), redemption has proven to be a particularly relevant lens to understand these and other less normative experiences (e.g. the study by McAdams [7], McAdams et al. [14], Dunlop [16], Dunlop and Tracy [17], Bauer et al. [26], Cowan et al. [27], Cox et al. [28], Guo et al. [29], Hall et al. [30], McAdams et al. [31], McLean [32], Perlin and Fivush [33], and Weston et al. [34]).

In a redemptive story, a bad or emotionally negative beginning gives way to a good or emotionally positive ending. Be it rags to riches, illness to health, suffering to salvation, or, otherwise, the bad is ultimately ‘redeemed’ in the form of an emotionally satisfying and positively resolved ending (see the study by McAdams [7, Dunlop [16]). Within the United States, redemptive stories exist everywhere, thick on the ground. This prevalence can be attributed to a confluence of factors residing at different conceptual levels, from the historical to the social and intrapersonal. For example, the history of America is often told using a redemptive arc [7], contemporary Americans demonstrate a preference for redemptive stories [32], and, when faced with adversity, these same Americans may feel pressure to construct, and seek comfort in constructing, such stories [17].

Researchers have developed several techniques to assess redemptive and other types of autobiographical stories (for reviews, see Refs. [35,36]). The most common of these approaches is to prompt participants for detailed descriptions (either provided orally or typed) of specific key moments from their lives, such as high points, low points, and other self-definitional experiences. The resulting material is then reliably coded for any number of thematic and structural features (see also, [37]). When studying redemption, typically (but not always; see Ref. [38]) raters read and then reliably determine whether a given story is or is not redemptive in nature (for review, see Ref. [36]). In the interest of familiarizing the reader with the nature of these data, I present a redemptive story that was produced by Jenny,¹ a young adult research participant who was asked to describe a self-defining memory (for further details on this type of memory, see Ref. [39]):

My brother was around one month old when he was admitted into the neonatal intensive care unit for a stomach infection. I visited him often and would stay with him when my mom went to take care of her daily needs (use the bathroom, take a shower, or eat). When I stayed with him, I felt really sad that my brother had the misfortune of getting a stomach infection. However, I felt reassured by the nurses that cared for him that he would get over the infection and get a lot stronger. Talking to the nurses and seeing the care they

provided to the infants in the neonatal intensive care unit made me realize that I want to give back to them by becoming a nurse, so I can also give hope to families.

In Jenny’s story, the bad and difficult are repurposed and redeemed. Her brother’s illness is framed as a springboard for her own development and career plans. Outside of courtrooms and other legal proceedings, the meanings that are derived through narrative typically take precedence over the events on which these tales are based (see also, [14]). Stories become stories when they move from the *landscape of action*, in which objectively verifiable statements about social behaviors and background settings are made (e.g., who was involved, where the event took place) to the *landscape of consciousness*, in which inferences are drawn about these actions, characters’ intentions, and broader meanings [3]. Returning to Jenny’s story, the specific date her brother suffered from this stomach infection (something that could be verified, if need be) is perhaps less important than her belief that the event has given her purpose and direction. Personal stories like Jenny’s are psychosocial constructions [14,31]. They speak to a narrative rather than a historical truth [40].

The central claim that I wish to make here is that life and story are so tightly intertwined that it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle one from the other. The meanings and interpretations we draw from our lives are influenced by the narrative ecologies in which we find ourselves and the many varied experiences we have amassed (e.g. the work of Dunlop [5, Fivush and Merrill [20], Dunlop [41]). At the same time, these storied meanings and interpretations possess a certain staying power. Not only are they relevant for an understanding of how we think our lives have thus far gone, they have a leading role to play in how the next chapter will unfold (e.g. the study by Adler et al. [15], Booker et al. [42], Lilgendahl and McLean [43], and Vanaken [44]. Like Escher’s drawing hands, life and story are always and forever engaged in the act of co-construction. One both influences and is influenced by the other.

If the central claim entertained in the pages of this entry is true, then we would expect to find that experiencing certain life events leads to changes in personal stories, as well as the inverse, with features of personal stories predating later changes in one’s behaviors and general psychological functioning. All the better if there also existed experimental evidence for a causal link between these narrative features, behaviors, and psychological constructs. In the last few years, it is precisely this type of evidence that has made its way into the published literature (e.g. the study by Dunlop [15], Dunlop and Tracy [17], Booker et al. [42], Lilgendahl and McLean [43], Adler [45], Jones et al. [46], Rotella et al. [47]).

¹ A pseudonym.

Life influencing story

One of the earliest and most significant events influencing the developing storyteller is the reminiscing style of their caregiver [48–50]. Children who have mothers that demonstrate an elaborative reminiscing style tend to themselves later produce more elaborative and coherent autobiographical memories. Intervention-based efforts have shown that stimulating an elaborative reminiscing style in caregivers enhances the coherence of children's personal stories throughout childhood, adolescence, and perhaps beyond (e.g. the study by Reese et al. [49]). It is also in post-adolescence that the occurrence of certain life events has been noted to correspond with changes in life stories. For example, among midlife adults, experiencing a vocational transition (often a job termination) was found to relate to a later reduction in the redemptive content of self-definitional stories [41].

Story influencing life

Stories have a role to play in the occurrence of subsequent life events. For example, constructing a redemptive story of one's most recent drink (in which a positive characterological development is professed) was found to predict the likelihood of sobriety among a group of otherwise comparable recently sober alcoholics [17]. More recent experimental efforts have provided evidence that viewing certain events through a redemptive lens increases the desire to make amends for collective wrongs [47] and stimulates scholastic motivation and performance [46]. In summary, there are several published works reporting data consistent with the notion that the structure and content of narrative identity influences a number of behaviors and psychological constructs over a span of minutes, weeks, and even years (e.g. [15,17,42,44,45,51–53]; but also see the study by Mason et al. [54]).

Story and prosociality

The mutually constituted nature of life and story is evident among highly prosocial individuals (e.g. the study by McAdams et al. [14], McAdams et al. [31], Dunlop et al. [55], Matsuba and Walker [56], McAdams and Guo [57], Walker and Frimer [58], and Walker et al. [59]). Here, a critical mass of studies, often drawing from hard-to-reach exemplary populations including generative teachers [14,31], young adults nominated for their exemplary community involvement [56] and those who have received national recognition on the basis of their caring or brave behaviors [55,58,59], has identified a relationship between a particular type of story and the demonstration of particular types of prosocial behaviors.

Before outlining the nature of this story, it is important to first provide some indication of what is meant by the term 'prosociality', as well as the particular manifestations of this construct implied above. By way of

preemptive concession, let me first state that whole texts and disciplines have been given over to this very task, so any expectation that the definitive definition of this construct will be provided should be severely tempered. With this concession raised let me now state that I find Eisenberg and Miller's ([60] p. 92) definition of prosocial behavior as 'voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another' to best capture the nature of the actions demonstrated by the exemplary populations under study.

The observant reader will have likely noted the use of the word 'type' rather than 'degree' above when reference was made to prosocial behavior. This word choice suggests a difference that is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. It was intentional. The little work I have carried out in the area of prosociality and personality has led me to an appreciation of the highly contextualized and varied nature of prosocial behavior. Consider, for example, the act of volunteering for decades at a community organization as compared to risking one's life to save a school-aged child from a cougar attack (both cases are represented in Ref. [58]). When the real-world prosocial behaviors demonstrated by the exemplars, in the studies of Walker and other et al. [14,58,59], are the topic of study, I believe at least one thing becomes apparent: we are dealing with different kinds of behavior and different kinds of people, not degrees (see also, [61–63]).

Given these qualitative distinctions in prosocial behaviors, it is all the more impressive that a single type of story appears to do a pretty good job capturing the self-definitional narrative representative of highly prosocial exemplars. This story is defined by a small constellation of features or themes, including: (1) a belief that the protagonist enjoyed an advantage in early life relative to others, who often suffered, (2) a commitment, or steadfastness, to certain moral principles and prosocial goals, and (3) the tendency to use redemptive imagery when outlining the most self-definitional moments, events, and experiences (see [14,57,58], but see the study by Matsuba and Walker [56]).

Redemption, in particular, has been signaled for its possible role as a contributing factor in the demonstration of prosocial behaviors. Walker et al. [59], for example, suggested that viewing one's past through a redemptive lens may represent 'an adaptive form of coping' (p. 934) that stimulates prosocial behavior. Similarly, McAdams and Guo [57] noted that 'Recalling the past in redemptive terms may reinforce generative commitment by sustaining the adult's morale and perseverance in the face of the difficult challenges that generative involvements often present' (p. 475). These assertions align with work exploring redemptive stories in relation to subsequent health behaviors [17] and health trajectories [15,27]. Furthermore, when

individuals fall short of their own internal benchmarks, constructing redemptive stories about their failings may be a mechanism by which they can maintain their sense of worth [64] and commitment to prosocial causes.

Within the broader arena of personality psychology, the narrative approach relevant to much of what has been written here is often contrasted with the more commonly considered personality trait paradigm. The constructs resting at the heart of this latter paradigm are broad patterns of affect, cognition, and behavior most often (though not exclusively) assessed via self-report (for review, see Dunlop [5]). Narratives and traits have routinely been found to independently account for variance in the outcome variable(s) of interest (for review, see the study by Adler et al. [65]). This underscores the notion that a complete account of persons and personalities requires working across assessment paradigms (see also [5]). Although both stories and traits are relevant to an understanding of caring and brave behaviors (e.g. the study by Theilmann et al. [66]), Walker and Frimer [58] observed that all personality differences between a group nationally recognized on the basis of their exemplary caring and brave behaviors and a demographically-matched control group were confined to the stories participants told (i.e. no group differences in personality traits were observed). To paraphrase McAdams and Guo [57], for these highly prosocial individuals, living into a story characterized by social awareness, moral steadfastness, and the tendency to find silver linings in dark clouds, may have helped to stimulate and/or sustain prosocial behavior when things are going well, and work to motivate persistence and resilience when things are not.

Moving the plot along

Life and story build upon and sustain each other. This is particularly so in the case of highly prosocial adults, who often understand their lives in terms of a constellation of narrative themes, chief among them being redemption. The central claim entertained here is that redemption and prosocial behavior exist in a virtuous cycle. Constructing redemptive stories about the past can help to stimulate and sustain certain prosocial behaviors. Undertaking these behaviors, in turn, may contribute to the construction of the redemptive self (see also, [5,16]).

Considerable ground has recently been made in the study of story and prosociality. Yet, much more needs to be done. One task on the field's list of things to do should be to get a better sense of why some remain committed to the 'same old stories' even in the face of changes in their life circumstances, whereas others appear to tell stories that demonstrate decidedly less tenure, changing with each telling and across contexts (see also [67,68]). This vexing individual difference may

correspond with the degree to which one's life imitates their story, relative to the degree to which one's story imitates their life (see also [36]). Second, although narrative researchers have begun to incorporate experimental methods in their pursuits (e.g. the study by Jones et al. [46, Rotella [47], Steiner et al. [52]]), they have yet to do so in relation to prosociality. Here and elsewhere, it may prove profitable to begin to explore the redemptive story alongside the experimental tasks often considered in the prosocial behavior literature (e.g. the study by Theilmann et al. [66]). One could imagine, for example, examining associations between the tendency to construct redemptive personal stories and behaviors demonstrated within certain economic games (e.g. the Commons Dilemma; [69]). Finally, researchers interested in better capturing the relation between story and (prosocial) behavior are encouraged to adopt a variety of longitudinal methods, including those involving multiple narrative assessments over a truncated period of time and following the occurrence of particular life events (e.g. the study by Slotter and Ward [51]), as well as more traditional assessment techniques (for review, see the study by Biesanz et al. [70]). Lives and stories rarely stay still for too long. Thus, arriving at a better sense of the dynamic contours of both will be required to further the story of self and story.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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