The Creation of Stories: For the Person, or for the Group?

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Dan McAdams has authored a voluminous array of empirical articles, theoretical treatises, and books, all with the aim of promoting a science of narrative identity (e.g., McAdams 1985, 1993, 1995, 2001; McAdams and Pals 2006; McAdams and Cox 2010; McAdams and McLean 2013). Within the field of personality psychology this work has fundamentally reorganized how the structure of personality is understood. It is now clear that a pure focus on traits neglects the dynamic and rich construct of personality, which includes many “levels” (e.g., McAdams 1995). But McAdams’s framework goes beyond personality, as articulated in this paper, to include perspectives on development and evolution (among others).

I focus this commentary on an issue that meets at a specific joint of tension in thinking about contemporary and evolutionary conceptions of narrative: the degree to which stories function primarily for the person or for the group. Contemporary theorizing on narrative identity has a strong focus on the function and meaning of stories for the person. However, an evolutionary perspective bolsters recent arguments that challenge this individualistic focus in which humans are viewed as largely agentic and independent in authoring themselves. Thus, building on McAdams’s provocative discussion, I make three arguments: (1) stories are not sole-authored, but are instead co-authored, (2) co-authoring creates a press for alignment with the group, and (3) co-authored stories are the developmental origin of narrative identity.

The Role of Stories in Groups

If an evolutionary perspective features an examination of how we organize ourselves for survival, in groups, then what stories get us is a leg up on survival because telling stories helps to form, maintain, and strengthen the functioning of groups. As McAdams articulates, narrative facilitates group belongingness as a mechanism to socialize appropriate behaviors related to both safety and appropriate conduct. Within this socialization process narratives can also provide us with a sense of the purpose of each person in the group. In McAdams’s example, the tall man with the limp has a story that the group uses for insight into his behavior, his goals and how he might enact them, and also his role in the group. In short, the story about the man with the limp helps him make sense to the group; the story functions for the group.

All of this is well articulated in McAdams’s paper, and is not controversial from an evolutionary perspective.

But What About the Person?

Indeed, none of the above is about a *personal* identity. And the theoretical and empirical work on narrative that McAdams has championed *is* about personal identity, about the unique story that each person develops, revises, and shares to communicate the self to others (e.g., McAdams 2001). So, is the story about the man with the limp so that the group knows how to treat him and what to expect from him? Or is the story about the man with the limp for him to better understand himself? This is where the joint of tension between evolutionary and contemporary conceptions of narrative and identity meet. Is the story primarily functioning for the person or for the group? And even further, is the story constructed by the person or by the group?

Contemporary conceptions of narrative identity fall on the side of the story being for the person. Indeed, theorists and empiricists use a language of agency and self-authorship, indicating that the story is developed by and utilized primarily for the person. For example:

Out of the episodic particulars of autobiographical memory, a person may construct and internalize an evolving and integrative story for life, or what psychologists today call a *narrative identity* (Singer 2004). Narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning. (McAdams and McLean 2013, 233).

Of course the story can be shared with others, and it can be useful and meaningful to others (e.g., Thorne 2000). But the story “belongs” to the individual; it is built and revised by the individual. This kind of language and theorizing implies a great deal of agency and creative power for the person.

The Turn Towards Co-authorship

However, a recent development in the field challenges this notion of personal agency, focusing on the *co*-authoring of the self (McLean 2015; see also McLean and Syed 2015). From this perspective, the person is not the sole agent in constructing and telling the story. There is a shared, distributed agency with close others who develop and tell, and re-tell, stories about that person. Further, cultures at large provide the narrative templates for self-construction that exert considerable force on how that story is used and shared (McLean and Syed 2015).

Such a perspective fits neatly within evolutionary viewpoints, as McAdams discusses. Indeed, the idea of co-authoring is consistent with the notion of narrative as fundamentally about the group. Stories socialize us into the group so that we can better function within it, and we employ them to maintain the strength and harmony of the group. So it makes sense that the group would have some say in those stories.

Further, both co-authorship and evolutionary perspectives share an emphasis on the importance of predictability. When people story themselves in ways that are consistent across time and context, we have some idea about how they will act, what we can expect from them and, thus, how the group will function. The same goes for intrapsychic processes—we need to predict and anticipate our own actions as well. So if we go awry of this predictability, we may let the group down and be taking some personal risks—if not about physical survival, perhaps about social survival.

This emphasis on consistency and predictability is not only about the person over time and across context. There is also an emphasis, in both co-authoring and evolutionary perspectives, on the fit of the story to the larger group. An emphasis that raises the question: is your story *consistent* with the expectations and norms of your group? This element of narrative approaches to identity is captured under the umbrella of “master” narratives (McLean and Syed 2015), which provide templates for valued stories for any given cultural group—the accepted content, form, and function of stories. These master narratives function to make the group cohere. On a benign level, master narratives provide templates for personal stories, facilitating their construction. On a more malignant level, they dictate the way we should construct and share our stories, with consequences for deviation. In fact, deviation from any kind of established consistency—your own story or that of your culture—is problematic.

The function of stories as group-oriented fits nicely within evolutionary perspectives, as McAdams articulates so well. But the evolutionary perspective on stories does not play as nicely with contemporary theorizing about narrative identity where the individual is the privileged agent. However, there is emerging evidence that attention to “the group” might actually be critical to understanding the development of narrative identity. Although the larger cultural group can be difficult to observe (as scholars of cultural psychology and anthropology well know) (see McLean and Syed 2015), there are other groups that function like mini-cultures and that are much more manageable to observe: families. Such observation shows that the stories families tell about their members are consequential for their identity development (McLean 2015).

Co-authored Stories are the Origin of Narrative Identity

McAdams makes the argument that the life story, or narrative identity, does not emerge until adolescence and emerging adulthood and that this development is revelatory. In fact, there is good evidence that the skills for constructing narrative identity do coalesce during these developmental stages making this full-blown story possible (e.g., Habermas and de Silva 2008). However, as with any development, it is not brand new. Though many theories of development favor the dramatic shift between “stages,” it is clear that this is more metaphor than reality. Piaget’s stages involve a lot of two-steps forward, one step back dynamics before infants and children really ascend to the next stage (see Courage, Edison, and Howe 2004 for an example of infant self-recognition). And although Erikson’s stages appear to be particularly relevant at different life stages, they do not disappear. For example, the concern with autonomy is particularly salient to toddlers, but it is not irrelevant when the child turns towards concerns with initiative or the adolescent begins to consider identity or intimacy in depth (Syed and McLean 2018). Thus, as McAdams writes, the more apt metaphor may be a “thickening” of self.

Consistent with that idea, I argue that narrative identity is actually not new in adolescence. It exists prior. It just exists in the stories of *others*. Stories about us have been told since we were born (and imagined stories exist pre-birth). They are told by our co-authors—our parents and siblings, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our cousins, our friends, and our intimate partners (McLean 2015). And, as discussed above, the manner in which stories *ought* to be told exists prior—in the very architecture of the cultures in which we develop (McLean and Syed 2015). Thus, we braid together existing narrative strands that fit a mold that others have developed for us, so that, in some ways, we emerge into a story that already exists. We just develop capacities for making it feel like it is our own.

Those existing narrative strands need to be connected to something that makes sense. We can’t develop brand new stories that are completely inconsistent with the stories others tell us about us. That just doesn’t fly. And why not? Because we have an evolutionary, and group-based, need to be predictable. We need to be able to predict ourselves—to feel that we exist in a coherent way through time (Pasupathi 2014). And others need to be able to predict us as well.

In short, the creativity of “constructing” a self really may be less autonomous, less imaginative, and less agentic that we think—particularly those of us who live in cultures that place great value on the independence of the individual.

In Closing

If we view personal narratives in this way, it might allow us to better consider the degree to which they are so very necessary for our survival, so rooted in evolutionary mechanisms. And

we might see the person and the story as constructed, maintained, and developed by the group. The function of stories goes well beyond the person.

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