Narrative Identity

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To appear in:

S. Hupp & J. Jewll (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Child and Adolescent Development*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Version: 9/12/17

Abstract

Narrative identity is a subjective recollection of the personal past, which serves to integrate a life. Narrative identity emerges in adolescence, with clear pre-cursors in childhood, and with consequence for mental health and well-being in adolescence and adulthood. This entry reviews the theoretical foundation of the field, major dimensions of narrative identity, its development, and current and future research.

Key words: identity development, adolescence, emerging adulthood, narrative

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Telling stories is one of the most natural, and universal, of human experiences. Stories are told to transmit life lessons and history, to entertain and connect with others, and to explain the self. The scientific study of stories has blossomed over the past several decades across the psychological disciplines of development, personality, clinical, social, cognition, and neuroscience. The study of stories is useful in many disciplines, but it is the study of *narrative identity* that is most central to developmental and personality psychologists. Narrative identity is a selective and subjective account of how one came to be the person one currently is (Singer, 2004). As individuals select autobiographical memories that are significant and meaningful to them, they are able to weave them into an extended story that defines the self (McAdams, 1993). Such a story brings a person a sense of integration, meaning and purpose.

Intellectual Context

The two original theorists most closely associated with the study of narrative and self are Erik Erikson and Henry Murray. Murray's original work on the thematic apperception test (TAT) was one of the first empirical tools to use stories as a psychological assessment. The TAT is an assessment in which people construct a story about a relatively ambiguous picture, such as two women – one younger and one older – with a beaker in what looks like a laboratory setting. It turns out that people tell quite different stories to such a picture. For some, this is a story about female achievement – scientists working on their discoveries. To some, these are the assistants to a scientist not depicted. To some, they are arguing. And to some, one is the teacher, mentoring her young student. Murray argued that the type of story one tells reveals parts of personality that are relatively inaccessible via self-report assessments; in other words, the individual may not be aware of these implicit, or unconscious aspects of personality (Murray, 1938). In particular, Murray focused on the unconscious motivations towards power, achievement, and intimacy. This kind of work showed the initial power of stories to reveal parts of personality that may be relatively inaccessible in using face valid, straightforward measures. Such projective story measures have been applied in contemporary research in the study of motives, as well as narrative identity (research described below), and in other areas of psychology, such as attachment classifications.

In contrast to Murray's work on motivations, Erik Erikson was concerned with life span development, offering the first theory that covered development from the cradle to the grave, detailing eight life stages (Erikson, 1950). He proposed that there was a developmental task to be addressed at each stage before successfully moving on to the next stage (but see Syed & McLean, in press). For example, the task for an infant is develop a sense of trust (versus mistrust) in his or her caregiver, a task consistent with attachment theories of development. If the infant does not develop this sense of trust, he or she may be comprised in managing the next task, which is autonomy versus self-doubt. Despite his life span focus, Erikson was particularly focused on the stage of adolescence and the task of identity versus role confusion. It is at this time that adolescents have the cognitive abilities to begin to think about their selves across different contexts (e.g., with friends and at school), and across time (e.g., how am I the same person now as I was 10 years ago). They are also pressed – by parents, friends, and the

culture at large – to define themselves, to know who they are. To Erikson, this meant finding a sense of integration by making sense of oneself across various contexts, across time, and within one's broader cultural context. To develop his theory, Erikson examined the life stories of people such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther, using their narratives to understand their identities. The personal life stories of these figures revealed the importance of understanding the self to later tasks of adult development, such as developing intimate relationships and finding one's purpose in the larger society in which one lives.

Several decades later personality and developmental psychologists expanded these theoretical traditions. Like Murray and Erikson, these later theorists addressed the issue of narrative from different angles. Theodore Sarbin (1986) emphasized the idea that telling a story is a performance, which is rooted in the cultural and historical context in which the narrator performs. Jerome Bruner (1990) focused on narration as a cognitive (and cultural) tool to make sense of one's own and others' actions and intentions. Silvan Tompkins (1979) elaborated the idea that narrative scripts are built from affective responses to various stimuli, and come to constitute expected patterns of behavior. And in the field of personality psychology, dominated by the idea that traits *are* personality, Dan McAdams (1993; McAdams & Pals, 2006) argued that the manner in which people tell stories reflects individual differences in personality in ways that are distinct from traits and offer greater explanatory power than do traits alone. As with Murray and Erikson, although the emphasis may differ across these theorists, for all, narrative serves as a meaning-making tool that explains past events that may seem chaotic and disparate without the work of storying them. This shared emphasis gave birth to the thriving empirical study of narrative identity, primarily focused on adults and adult development. This is likely due to the separation of personality and temperament researchers - the former focus on adults, and relatively less on constructs of development.

Meanwhile, for developmental psychologists, narrative was emerging as an important developmental construct. Researchers trained in cognitive development, who had questions about early memory development and infantile amnesia (the phenomenon of not remembering the first several years of one's life) also became interested in memory construction through narrative. In working to understand when and how young children develop the ability to retain (in reportable fashion) past events, researchers explored the ways in which parents narrated past events with their children. In essence, the way parents talk about the past at one time point is related to how children recall the personal past at later time points (for a review see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2007). For example, some parents ask more open-ended questions, offering their children opportunities to contribute their own perspective on the past event. Other parents ask more repetitive, or closed-ended, questions in which the focus is more on accuracy than perspective. These conversational patterns predict the manner in which children recall their own pasts over time, and are also linked to constructs such as self-concept in childhood. Thus, the developmental focus necessitated the introduction of a social dimension of empirical analysis to the study of narratives because the focal point of research was parent-child interactions. The relational focus stands in contrast to the focus in personality psychology on the individual construction of the narrative, rather than the social action of telling and sharing stories. Work on past-event conversations also introduced an emphasis on studying the

development of narrative skills, by identifying a potential process of such development. In other words, one reason that the capacity to create a coherent narrative improves across time is because of the way in which parents engage their children in conversations about past events. More recently this work has been linked to adolescent identity development, reviewed below.

Recent advances in theoretical traditions have primarily emphasized the cultural nature of narrative identity. Although theorists have long argued for the importance of culture in understanding narrative and narrative identity (Bruner, 1990; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Sarbin, 1986), and developmental psychologists examined the local and immediate context of parent-child conversations, there has been recent effort to refine theory about the role that culture plays in narrative identity development in ways that create more testable research questions and hypotheses. Building on recent theoretical formulations that place greater emphasis on culture (Hammack, 2008; McAdams & Pals, 2006), McLean and Syed (2015) argued that just as persons can be defined as storied, so too can cultures. Cultures contain *master narratives* about how to tell stories and how to live lives. These stories are viewed as powerful frameworks that individuals use to define themselves. Yet tension arises when the master narratives do not align with personal experience – that is, when individuals do not tell stories or lead lives in expected fashions. McLean and Syed (2015) detailed a framework for capturing these various negotiations between personal and cultural stories, and recent empirical work has revealed the potential constraints that individuals face in constructing an identity, given the cultural values placed on certain kinds of stories (and certain kinds of lives), and how such constraints are related to more effort towards defining the self in narrative. This strain of research is elaborated in the section on current and future work below.

In sum, and importantly, although these various theoretical and empirical have different emphases, they are not in conflict. Thus, we currently have a science of narrative identity that embraces the construct as a phenomenon of individual differences, development, and cultural context.

Major Dimensions

The quantitative analysis of narratives generally focuses on rating or scoring components of narratives that are hypothesized to be important to development and well-being (Adler, Dunlop, Fivush, Lilgendahl, Lodi-Smith, McAdams, McLean, Pasupathi, & Syed, in press; Syed & Nelson, 2015 for a discussion of methods). In an overview of the incremental validity of narrative identity in predicting well-being, Adler Lodi-Smith, Philippe, and Houle, (2016) argued that there are four general categories captured in narrative coding, which are detailed below (see also McAdams & McLean, 2014).

Motivational themes concern what the narrator is seeking, or has sought in the past. They focus on the needs, goals, or strivings of an individual. Although many people have similar motives, they vary in the emphasis placed on them. Two primary motivational themes are

agency and communion (these themes have origins in the motivations documented by Murray, described above). Agency involves a focus on control, autonomy, achievement, mastery, strength, and power. Communion focuses on connection with others in terms of love, intimacy, belongingness, and caring. Researchers have found that agency is particularly important for health and well-being. Communion is linked to traits that are adaptive in relationships, such as agreeableness.

Affective themes concern the emotionality of a narrative, such as its positive or negative valence. These themes are correlated with, but not reducible to traits such as extraversion and neuroticism, and are also associated with well-being. For example, those with more positive stories score higher on measures of well-being both concurrently and over time. A more complex kind of affect theme is the *change* in emotional state over the course of the narrative. McAdams has shown that those whose stories move from negative to positive – a redemptive story – show much better profiles of adjustment, from measures of well-being to generativity (i.e., an engagement with nurturing future generations).

Structural elements concern the general coherence of the story – for example, whether it includes enough details or context to understand it. Coherence is a construct that gets better over time – as children move from childhood into and through adolescence they tell stories that make more sense and are more deeply elaborated. In adulthood, coherence is clearly associated with psychological health, such that those who cannot tell a story about their experiences with characters, ordered events, context, and detail are not functioning particularly well.

Finally, *themes of integrative meaning* concern how the narrator makes sense of the narrated event(s), particularly in relation to how the event explains or connects to the self, as opposed to the recollection of an event that is centered on the details of what happened, rather than the personal meaning of it. There are a variety of ways of capturing this component of narratives, but it is clear that this is also a construct that improves with age. Meaning-making is important to psychological health, as measured by well-being, and is particularly important to the examination of identity development. It is in engaging in meaning-making processes that individuals do the work of using past events to understand and define the self.

Though these dimensions capture a great deal about narratives, there are still some components missing. First, what the constructs described above are missing is the *content* of the story – what the story is actually about. A story might be redemptive or filled with integrative meaning, but does it matter if it is about a break-up, or meeting the love of one's life? A cancer diagnosis, or an experience with discrimination? Indeed, researchers have recently argued that examining content is a necessary part of the scientific step of description – meaning that we have to know what the phenomenon is before we can adequately study it. Further, content is also important in understanding individual identity, as well as for understanding the larger cultural context in which the individual develops (Galliher, McLean & Syed, in press). For example, in a study of ethnic identity development, Syed and Azmitia

(2008) asked participants for a narrative of becoming particularly aware of their ethnicity. Based on the narratives collected, they developed a coding system to capture the thematic content of the narratives (e.g., awareness of prejudice, connection to culture/ethnicity), themes that were then found to be relevant to measures of identity exploration. Those who told stories that were about experiencing prejudice were more likely to be identity achieved – to have both explored and committed to an idea of themselves. This finding underscores the importance of studying the content of stories – so that we can uncover some of the potential processes of identity development, as narrating such stories may be a part of the process of exploration and commitment in emerging adulthood. It also tells us something about the cultural context – in this case the experiences of discrimination that ethnic minority emerging adults experience in the United States.

The second addition that we add to the discussion of these components of narrative is that they are not meant to be exhaustive. Narrative research is both creative and generative, which means that researchers can devise new coding systems to capture something novel in their data. For example, many of these coding systems to capture affect, integrative meaning, and other dimensions have been developed using standard life story prompts (e.g., tell us about a high point, low point, turning point). However, asking about specific areas of one's life brings with it new opportunities to capture different aspects of narratives, and of identities, as Syed and Azmitia capitalized on in their study of ethnic identity. Thus, it is important to consider the wealth of possibilities in doing narrative research – engaging not only in replication and use of established methodologies, but also being aware of the generative nature of such a discipline that allows for new questions and methodologies to be employed. Indeed, Syed and Azmitia noted in their discussion that these content themes might be specific to the college students they studied, opening the door to a new opportunity for understanding identity content in different groups of emerging adults.

Development in Narrative

Children's ability to tell stories about themselves is dependent on cognitive development (e.g., self-recognition is pre-cursor to this task), language development (e.g., use of personal pronouns is also a pre-cursor), and as discussed above, the social context in which the child is developing, particularly the ways in which their parents talk about the past with them (see Fivush et al., for a review). Thus, children are able to engage in heavily scaffolded conversations with their parents about the past between the ages of 2 and 3, with increasing autonomy in recollection across the early childhood years.

By middle childhood, youth are able to understand cultural expectations for what a good story should look like (Habermas & Reese, 2015). Although there is far less research on narrative development in middle childhood, the existing data show that children are good storytellers at this age. This means they can give coherent and meaningful accounts of the past, and they understand what a story is supposed to look like, suggesting that they have absorbed some of the cultural norms about storytelling. For example, children learn what kinds of events

should be included in a life story, such as the beginning of school or graduation, and when those types of events should happen in a life course.

Across adolescence and into emerging adulthood fully developed skills to narrate a more complete life story, as opposed to specific events, emerge and the themes of integrative meaning become more prominent as individuals work to construct a coherent and integrative identity (Habermas & Reese, 2015). Others still play a role in this story construction, both at level of parents and friends helping to construct stories, and the influence of and negotiations with the larger cultural stories and expectations. We also see that the associations between narrative constructs, such as integrative meaning, begin to look similar to those relations found in adulthood – with more meaning-making processes related to more positive well-being. Thus, this stage represents a time of working to define the self and coming to some understanding of who that self is, with consequences for psychological functioning more broadly.

As mentioned above, research in adulthood is more focused in individual differences in narration, and how those differences are related to well-being and other components of personality. However, we do know that narrative can be employed as a mechanism for personality development. For example, Pals (2006) showed that the way in which a life low point was narrated at mid-life explained why some people increased or decreased on various aspects of personality, such as coping openness and ego resilience. Thus, it is worth noting that researchers studying development from childhood through emerging adulthood have focused relatively more on age-related changes in the aspects of narrative that are relevant to well-being and personality in adulthood, and researchers studying narrative in adulthood have also focused more on the idea of narrative as potential drivers of development in adulthood (see also McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

Current Theoretical and Empirical Work, and Future Directions

There are four issues that we consider with regard to current emphases in the field and avenues for future work, as they are relatively new questions to the discipline. The first is the importance of *longitudinal studies* to understand the unfolding of narrative identity over time. Elaine Reese (e.g., Reese, Chen, Jack & Hayne, 2010) launched a study with participants in early childhood, who are now emerging adults. She has shown that the ways in which parents talk with their children about the past in early childhood (e.g., the amount of elaborative, open-ended questions asked), is related to how those same children construct their narrative identities in adolescence – a critical linkage, consistent with theoretical foundations. There are several other current longitudinal studies of emerging and mid-life adults, and these studies will allow the description of development in narrative identity, as well as to understand some of the mechanisms behind it.

The second critical emphasis is the *expansion of reference groups and samples* to understand how the phenomenon of narrative identity, and its development, looks across populations. As discussed above, Moin Syed (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2008) has led the charge to

understand the role of narration in ethnic identity development. Phil Hammack (e.g., Hammack & Cohler, 2009) has expanded research on narrative identity to sexual minorities. And others have begun work around the world to understand more about the cultural specificity of narrative identity. It is clear that cultures provide very different contexts for identity development, and that the content of identity varies when examining constructs such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc. These studies expand our knowledge base about identity development, and offer a more complete representation of the phenomenon.

Indeed, the expansion of reference groups brings with it evidence that narrative identity may *not* be the same across groups. For example, not surprisingly, experiences of prejudice are more commonly integrated in to the narratives of ethnic minority participants than ethnic majority participants (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Hammack (see 2008) has shown that Palestinian and Israeli youth use very different stories to develop and sustain their identities, stories which also sustain the political conflict between them. Data such as these not only deepen our understanding of the cultural nature of identity development, but also illuminate how the larger cultural structure of a given society (e.g., legal and ideological barriers to opportunity for certain groups) plays a critical role in identity development (McLean & Syed, 2015). Hammack has even argued that changing personal stories is one way to change the structures of society, a provocative and meaningful insight.

Related to the above, the third issue we raise here is the idea that *narrative may be used as a tool for intervention*. Longitudinal studies have shown that narration captured at one moment in time predicts meaningful outcomes, such as emotion regulation (Cox & McAdams, 2014), and prospective longitudinal work has shown that changes in stories *precede* changes in mental health (Adler, 2012). This suggests that changing one's story may be important for valuable outcomes. This area has the most potential room for growth and has been relatively untapped. Considering how narrative interventions might work differently for children, adolescents, and adults is also important as younger groups are managing *developing* identities, and older groups may be managing changes to identities that are likely *already formed*.

Fourth, there are new issues arising in thinking about narrative as a level of personality that offer exciting new lines of inquiry. Indeed, a new and increasingly important area of work concerns *intra-individual variability* in narrative, as it has become clear that individuals do not narrate events in the same ways (McLean, Pasupathi, Fivush, Greenhoot, & Wainryb, 2016). For example, someone may narrate one turning point with a redemptive ending, and another turning point may be stable in its positivity. A person may narrate one self-defining memory rich with integrative meaning, and the same person may narrate another self-defining memory as a simplistic report of events without explanation of the personal meaning. Given that narrative is meant to be an assessment of a component of personality, this fluidity in the way that people narrate raises some questions.

To start, there are good reasons for this variability. First, not all events require the same kind of narrative tools. For example, a positive event does not need resolution or redemption in the same way that a traumatic event might. Second, varying one's story for different

audiences may represent a mature flexibility in perspective taking, such that one may tell a different story about the same event to one's friend, child, boss, or spouse. Third, as individuals tell the story of the same event over time, it may change. For example, a traumatic event may become more resolved, and even less personally salient, resulting in a quite different story over the course of time.

Despite these good reasons for varying the way one tells stories, the question arises of whether this variability means that narratives are not a measure of a *stable* component of personality. If the stories vary by audience, event, and time, are they representing something enduring about the person? The assumption is that they must be, because characteristics of stories have been related to other more stable aspects of personality, such as traits and well-being. Thus, recently researchers have posed the question of whether there is stability in variability. That is, the ways in which one varies in their storytelling, may itself be an enduring part of who someone is. This work is in its infancy, with clear data that intra-individual variability exists, and work to be done on the meaning of it, both for personality and identity development (e.g., does variability increase or decrease over time, or is predictable variability a marker of a healthy identity).

The final emerging and important direction discussed is a marrying of developmental and personality approaches to examine *individual differences in development*. Given that we know that there are individual differences in how people narrate their lives, the question of longitudinal patterns in such variation becomes pressing. Are there some who become increasingly elaborative in their stories across adolescence and emerging adulthood, reaching a mature peak as their identities become integrated? In contrast, do some individuals start off with more elaborative narratives and remain relatively stable in their patterns of storytelling? And, importantly, do those two trajectories mean different things for psychological adjustment? Longitudinal studies with repeated assessments of narratives are the only way to examine these issues, and such studies are currently underway.

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Brief Bios

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