

# Narrative Identity

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## Abstract

*Narrative identity* is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose. In recent studies on narrative identity, researchers have paid a great deal of attention to (a) psychological adaptation and (b) development. Research into the relation between life stories and adaptation shows that narrators who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration, tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity. Researchers have tracked the development of narrative identity from its origins in conversations between parents and their young children to the articulation of sophisticated meaning-making strategies in the personal stories told in adolescence and the emerging adulthood years. Future researchers need to (a) disentangle causal relations between features of life stories and positive psychological adaptation and (b) explore further the role of broad cultural contexts in the development of narrative identity.

## Keywords

narrative identity, life stories, self, development, culture

Human beings are natural storytellers. In forms that range from traditional folk tales to reality TV, stories are told or performed in every known human culture. People construct and share stories about themselves, too, detailing particular episodes and periods in their lives and what those experiences mean to them. 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. Thus, a person's life story synthesizes episodic memories with envisioned goals, creating a coherent account of identity in time. Through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future.

The idea that people create identity through constructing stories about their lives has emerged, over the past 2 decades, as a broadly integrative conception in both the humanities and the social sciences (McAdams, 2001). Within psychological science, researchers use empirical studies to examine both the internal dynamics of private

life narration and the external factors that shape the public expression of stories about the self. In many studies, investigators ask participants to tell extended stories about scenes or periods in their own lives, and they then code the narrative accounts for dimensions and features, such as those presented in Table 1. As just one example, researchers have shown that middle-age adults who score high on self-report measures of generativity, indicating a strong commitment to improving society and promoting the well-being of future generations, tend to construct life stories that showcase many instances of *redemption sequences* (McAdams, 2013; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). As indicated in Table 1, a redemption sequence marks a transition in a life narrative account from an emotionally negative scene to a positive outcome or attribution about the self. By conceptualizing their own lives as tales of redemption, middle-age adults may sustain the hope or confidence that is needed to weather short-term setbacks

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**Table 1.** Examples of Life-Story Constructs Used in Research on Narrative Identity

Coding construct	Definition	Example (of high score)
Agency	The degree to which protagonists are able to affect change in their own lives or influence others in their environment, often through demonstrations of self-mastery, empowerment, achievement, or status. Highly agentic stories privilege accomplishment and the ability to control one's fate.	"I challenge myself to the limit academically, physically, and on my job. Since that time [of my divorce], I have accomplished virtually any goal I set for myself."
Communion	The degree to which protagonists demonstrate or experience interpersonal connection through love, friendship, dialogue, or connection to a broad collective. The story emphasizes intimacy, caring, and belongingness.	"I was warm, surrounded by friends and positive regard that night. I felt unconditionally loved."
Redemption	Scenes in which a demonstrably "bad" or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably "good" or emotionally positive outcome. The initial negative state is "redeemed" or salvaged by the good that follows it.	The narrator describes the death of her father as reinvigorating closer emotional ties to her other family members.
Contamination	Scenes in which a good or positive event turns dramatically bad or negative, such that the negative affect overwhelms, destroys, or erases the effects of the preceding positivity.	The narrator is excited for a promotion at work but learns it came at the expense of his friend being fired.
Meaning making	The degree to which the protagonist learns something or gleans a message from an event. Coding ranges from no meaning (low score) to learning a concrete lesson (moderate score) to gaining a deep insight about life (high score).	"It really made me go through and relook at my memories and see how there's so many things behind a situation that you never see. Things are not always as they seem."
Exploratory narrative processing	The extent of self-exploration as expressed in the story. High scores suggest deep exploration or the development of a richly elaborated self-understanding.	"I knew I reached an emotional bottom that year . . . but I began making a stable life again, as a more stable independent person . . . it was a period full of pain, experimentation, and growth, but in retrospect it was necessary for me to become anything like the woman I am today."
Coherent positive resolution	The extent to which the tensions in the story are resolved to produce closure and a positive ending.	"After many years, I finally came to forgive my brother for what he did. I now accept his faults, and, as a result, I think he and I have grown closer."

while reinforcing long-term commitments to improving the lives of others (see also Walker & Frimer, 2007).

### **Adaptation: How People Narrate Suffering**

The theme of redemption points to the broader adaptation issue of how human beings make narrative sense of suffering in their lives. In general, research on narrative identity suggests that adults who emerge strengthened or enhanced from negative life experiences often engage in a two-step process (Pals, 2006). In the first step, the person explores the negative experience in depth, thinking long and hard about what the experience

felt like, how it came to be, what it may lead to, and what role the negative event may play in the person's overall life story. In the second step, the person articulates and commits the self to a positive resolution of the event. Research suggests that the first step is associated with personal growth—the second, with happiness.

With respect to the first step, studies by King and colleagues have examined how people narrate difficult life challenges, such as learning that one's child is disabled or coming to terms with divorce (e.g., King & Hicks, 2007). Those narrators who were able to articulate detailed and thoughtful accounts of loss and struggle in their lives tended to score higher on independent indices of psychological maturity, and they showed increases in

maturity over the following 2 years. Bauer and colleagues have examined negative accounts of life-story low points as well as stories about difficult life transitions. People who scored higher on independent measures of psychological maturity tended to construct storied accounts that emphasized learning, growth, and positive personal transformation (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). McLean and Pratt (2006) found that young adults who engaged in more elaborated processing of turning points in their lives tended to score higher on an overall index of identity maturity (see also Syed & Azmitia, 2010).

When it comes to the narration of suffering, then, self-exploration often produces lessons learned and insights gained, enriching a person's life in the long run. Nonetheless, narrators should not go on so long and so obsessively as to slide into rumination, for good stories need to have satisfactory endings. Accordingly, many studies demonstrate that positive resolution of negative events is associated with higher levels of happiness and well-being (e.g., King & Hicks, 2007; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). In a longitudinal demonstration, Tavernier and Willoughby (2012) reported that high-school seniors who found positive meanings in their narrations of difficult high-school turning points showed higher levels of psychological well-being than those students who failed to construct narratives about turning points with positive meanings, even when controlling for well-being scores obtained 3 years earlier, when the students were freshmen.

In American society today, a major arena for the narration of suffering is psychotherapy. Therapists work with clients to re-story their lives, often aiming to find more positive and growth-affirming ways to narrate and understand emotionally negative events. In a series of studies, Adler and colleagues asked former psychotherapy patients to tell the story of their (remembered) therapy (e.g., Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008). Those former patients who currently enjoyed better psychological health tended to narrate heroic stories in which they bravely battled their symptoms and emerged victorious in the end. In these accounts, the theme of personal *agency* (see Table 1) trumped all other explanations in accounting for therapeutic efficacy. Moreover, agency emerged as the key narrative theme in a prospective study of psychotherapy patients who provided brief narrative accounts about the course of their treatment before each of at least 12 therapy sessions (Adler, 2012). As coded in the succession of narrative accounts, increases in personal agency preceded and predicted improvement in therapy. As patients told stories that increasingly emphasized their ability to control their world and make self-determined decisions, they showed corresponding decreases in symptoms and increases in mental health.

## Development: The Formation of Narrative Identity

Given the importance of narrative identity to well-being, it is important to understand how individuals develop the abilities to engage in the complex process of narrating stories about the self. Building on Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development, McAdams (1985) originally argued that narrative identity emerges in the late-adolescent and early-adult years, partly as a function of societal expectations regarding identity and the maturation of formal operational thinking. Constructing and internalizing a life story—McAdams argued—provides an answer to Erikson's key identity questions: Who am I? How did I come to be? Where is my life going? Accordingly, Habermas and Bluck (2000) proposed that it is not until adolescence that people can construct stories about their lives that exhibit causal coherence (a convincing account of how early events cause later events) and thematic coherence (the derivation of organizing themes or trends in a full life). Consistent with their claim, a growing body of research suggests that as people move from late childhood through adolescence, their life-narrative accounts show increasing evidence of causal coherence, thematic coherence, and other markers of a well-formed narrative identity (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008).

Working within a Vygotskian tradition, McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) have developed a sociocultural model to guide examinations into the development of narrative identity. The model suggests that a narrative identity builds slowly over time as people tell stories about their experiences to and with others. Over developmental time, selves create stories, which in turn create selves (McLean et al., 2007). Through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity.

To develop a narrative identity, a person must first learn how to share stories in accord with particular cultural parameters and within particular groups—in families, with peers, and in other formal and informal social contexts. Employing cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs, developmental psychologists have repeatedly shown that conversations with parents about personal events are critical to the development of narrative skills in children (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). This research demonstrates that parents who use an elaborated conversational style—focusing on causes and explanations in personal stories and underscoring emotional evaluations of past events—tend to stimulate the development of strong self-storytelling skills in their children.

Greater parental elaboration is associated with a variety of positive cognitive and socioemotional outcomes in children, including greater levels of elaboration in children's personal storytelling.

Early parent-child conversations provide the foundations for children to learn how to make meaning out of personal events (Reese, Jack, & White, 2010), and meaning making (see Table 1) is a process central to the development of narrative identity. Through meaning making, people go beyond the plots and event details of their personal stories to articulate what they believe their stories say about who they are. Storytellers may suggest that the events they describe illustrate or explain a particular personality trait, tendency, goal, skill, problem, complex, or pattern in their own lives. In making meaning, the storyteller draws a *semantic* conclusion about the self from the *episodic* information that the story conveys.

Developmental research shows that meaning-making skills show age-related increases across the adolescent years (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010), as do other kinds of interpretive narration (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010), particularly in middle adolescence when individuals become better able to manage paradox and contradiction in personal stories. The research also shows that meaning making can be hard work, and it may sometimes exert a cost. Especially in early adolescence, boys who engage in greater levels of meaning making in relating autobiographical stories tend to show lower levels of psychological well-being compared with boys who engage in less meaning making (Chen, McAnally, Wang, & Reese, 2012; McLean et al., 2010). It may be the case that some boys come to adolescence less prepared for the work of narrative identity, perhaps because they have had less practice in processing emotions and reflecting on the meanings of personal experiences. By late adolescence, however, boys seem to catch up with the girls, such that their meaning making efforts in late adolescence may become associated with higher levels of well-being and greater levels of self-understanding (Chen et al., 2012; McLean et al., 2010).

What is happening over the course of adolescence to produce age-related changes in meaning making? Cognitive development likely plays a crucial role in the ability to represent the self in more abstract ways and to deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of life experiences. In addition, social pressures to define the self become more prominent, encouraging adolescents to "figure out" who they are. As adolescents broaden their social networks, they may begin to share themselves with others more often and in a wider range of conversational contexts. Such sharing typically requires having interesting stories to tell about the self and being able to tell them in such a way as to capture the attention of potential listeners.

Research on adolescents and emerging adults has now shown that several aspects of conversational contexts matter for the degree to which conversations become important for meaning-making processes. First, the reason for sharing a memory matters. When trying to entertain a listener, meaning does not appear as relevant as when one is trying to explain oneself to another (McLean, 2005). Therefore, stories told exclusively for the entertainment of others typically contain few examples of meaning making. Second, the listener matters. In experimental designs in which listener behavior is manipulated, Pasupathi and colleagues have shown that attentive and responsive listeners cause tellers to narrate more personally elaborated stories compared with distracted listeners (e.g., Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010). In this sense, attentive listening helps to promote the development of narrative identity. Third, relationships matter. In a short-term longitudinal study, McLean and Pasupathi (2011) found that the more romantic partners agreed on the meaning of a shared memory, the more likely the teller was to retain that meaning over time. Therefore, when important people in a person's life agree with his or her interpretation of a personal story, he or she is likely to hold on to that story and to incorporate it into his or her more general understanding of who he or she is and how he or she came to be.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have focused on two central themes in the wide-ranging empirical literature on narrative identity: adaptation and development. A strong line of research shows that when narrators derive redemptive meanings from suffering and adversity in their lives, they tend to enjoy correspondingly higher levels of psychological well-being, generativity, and other indices of successful adaptation to life. Important exceptions to this rule, however, have been identified in studies of young adolescent boys, indicating that future researchers need to more carefully track the moderating effects of demographics, developmental stage, and a range of other factors, as they may impact the relation between the quality of life stories on the one hand and psychosocial adaptation on the other (Greenhoot & McLean, 2013). In addition, researchers need to conduct more longitudinal investigations and controlled experiments to disentangle causal relations. Does the construction of redemptive narratives increase well-being, or does enhanced well-being lead naturally to the construction of redemptive life stories? Results from Adler (2012) and Tavernier and Willoughby (2012) are consistent with the former possibility, but considerably more research—employing a broader range of methodologies—is needed.

Studies tracing the development of narrative identity from childhood through the emerging adulthood years

underscore the power of conversation and social contexts for learning narrative skills, shaping identity expectations, and formulating a meaningful story for one's life. Reinforcing the significance of social context, future research on the development of narrative identity would benefit from a broader consideration of the role of culture. Hammack (2008) and McAdams (2013) have described how cultural narratives about national history, ethnicity, religion, and politics shape the personal stories people live by, and how personal stories can sustain or transform culture. In a study of Israeli and Palestinian youths, for example, Hammack found that both groups imported into their personal narrative identities dramatic master narratives about their respective cultures, resulting in a preponderance of redemptive stories for Israeli youths and stories of contamination and tragedy for the Palestinian youths. The striking mismatch between respective narrative identities of Israeli and Palestinian youths may contribute to difficulties, Hammack argued, in finding cultural common ground and establishing peace. McAdams et al. (2008) documented sharply different styles of redemptive discourse in the life stories of American political conservatives and liberals, reflecting competing national ideals that prevail between conservative and liberal subcultures in the United States.

It would seem that different cultures offer different menus of images, themes, and plots for the construction of narrative identity, and individuals within these cultures appropriate, sustain, and modify these narrative forms as they tell their own stories. Beginning even in childhood, narrators draw selectively from the menu as they gradually develop story forms that capture well their personal experience. Therefore, because narrative identity is exquisitely contextualized in culture, future researchers need to examine the development of life stories in many different societies, nations, and cultural groups.

### Recommended Reading

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- McAdams, D. P., Josselson, R., & Lieblich, A. (Eds.). (2006). *Identity and story: Creating self in narrative*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. A collection of essays and research reports sampling a range of approaches to studying life stories, which together address the issues of unity versus multiplicity, self versus society, and stability versus growth in narrative identity.
- McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist*, *61*, 204–217. The authors conceive of narrative identity as one of three levels of personality, along with basic dispositional traits (such as those subsumed within the Big Five taxonomy) and characteristic adaptations (such as goals, values, and cognitive schemas).

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### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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