"First we invented stories, then they changed us": The Evolution of Narrative Identity

Dan P. McAdams

Abstract

An integrative psychological concept that bridges the sciences and humanities, *narrative identity* is the internalized and evolving story a person invents to explain how he or she has become the person he or she is becoming. Combining the selective reconstruction of the past with an imagined anticipated future, narrative identity provides human lives with a sense of unity, moral purpose, and temporal coherence. In this article, I discuss how the evolution of human storytelling provides the basic tools for constructing self-defining life narratives. I then consider theory and research on the development of narrative identity over the human life course, socially consequential variations in narrative identity, and how culture shapes the stories people tell about themselves. My overall perspective on narrative identity was formulated within the fields of personality and developmental psychology, but it is also informed by concepts and constructs in evolutionary biology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and literary studies.

Keywords: narrative identity, stories, autobiographical memory, episodic future thought, culture, evolution, sociality, psychological development, agency, theory of mind

Like no other animal on the planet, we human beings love to tell stories. And we love to listen to them, around the campfire and on the school bus, to watch them at the cineplex or on our mobile devices, to ponder the meaning of stories, to obsess over them, to judge each other and consider events in terms of stories, and to think about our very lives as stories playing out over time and across a landscape of consciousness. Storytelling would appear to be an ingrained feature of human nature. "The mind is a narrative machine," writes the evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson, and those narratives that "prove most innately satisfying spread and become culture" (Wilson 2005, ix). In the words of the American essayist Joan Didion (1979, 11), "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

In a recent article that aims to trace the evolutionary roots of storytelling, Boyd (2018) foregrounds human sociality, the emergence of language, and the predisposition toward play. By the time of *Homo erectus*, our forebears had evolved to live in highly interdependent groups that could not function well without exquisite coordination of roles and intense information sharing. For hundreds of thousands of years, group members must have communicated with each other in prelinguistic, mimetic ways, conveying the gist of past events and formulating rudimentary future scenarios through gestures and primitive vocalizations. The advent of language afforded greater efficiency and precision in narrative expression, enabling early humans to learn about themselves and the world in indirect ways (through spoken scenarios) rather than being solely reliant on firsthand experience. Language, moreover, revivified and retooled the ancient proclivity for play, as humans began

to tell (real and imagined) stories for fun and amusement. Enhanced storytelling led the way through an evolutionary portal to full-fledged artistic fiction, from *Gilgamesh* to Ian McEwan, and the attendant human practices that ultimately depend on compelling cultural stories, such as religion. As Boyd (13) puts it, "first we invented stories, then they changed us."

My thesis is that something rather similar to what Boyd conveys in his felicitous expression runs its course in the psychological development of individual human beings. In adolescence and young adulthood, we invent stories to make sense of our own lives. And then these stories change us. The particular kinds of stories I have in mind are what many psychologists today call *narrative identities*. A narrative identity is a person's internalized and evolving story of how he or she has become the person he or she is becoming (McAdams and McLean 2013). Narrative identities reconstruct the autobiographical past and anticipate the imagined future to provide the self with temporal coherence and some semblance of psychosocial unity and purpose. Over the past decade, the concept of narrative identity has attracted considerable attention from personality, developmental, social, clinical, and cultural psychologists, from sociologists and other social scientists, from cognitive scientists and neuroscientists, and from humanists (McAdams and Manczak 2015; McAdams 2017). Herein I describe important trends in recent theory and research on narrative identity, considering the concept from the standpoints of human evolution, psychological development, individual variation, and culture.

HUMAN NATURE

Narrative identity derives from storytelling, and storytelling derives ultimately from human sociality. Stories are inherently social in two fundamental ways. First, stories exist to be told. There is always a presumed listener, viewer, or audience for a story, be that audience close

friends who will laugh at the telling or the imagined readership for one's first novel. Even the keeper of a secret diary imagines a reader of some sort—perhaps God appreciates what I am writing, or future generations will dig my diary up and understand the extraordinary sufferings I have endured. Second, stories are nearly always about social life, about intentional human agents who interact with each other over time and across circumstances (Bruner 1986). For there to be a story, a human or humanlike agent must act to accomplish a desired end (Little Red Riding Hood sets out to deliver her cakes) and must confront some kind of obstacle (typically human or humanlike) that stands in the way of goal attainment (the Big Bad Wolf). The action unfolds as a sequence of social events that plays out under the aegis of uncertainty, until an ending resolves.

Human sociality is also the starting point for efforts to understand the role of narrative in human evolution (Dautenhahn 2002; Mar and Oatley 2008; Boyd 2009, 2018). The basic argument is that the evolutionary origin of communicating through stories coevolved with increasingly complex social dynamics of our human ancestors. For *Homo erectus*, the refinement of stone tools and weapons may have promoted cooperative hunting of large animals. With the control of fire, our forebears developed the art of cooking. Wrangham (2009) contends that the shift from raw to cooked foods was a turning point in human evolution. Cooking food allowed the digestive tract to shrink and, at the same time, may have afforded (and eventually provided energy for) the greater growth of the brain (Henrich 2015). Cooking also changed social life, bringing small groups together to share cooked meat (and eventually stories) in the vicinity of the campfire (Wilson 2012). In addition to hunting, stone weapons eventually proved useful for defending the group against rival groups. Turchin (2016) argues that the development of projectile weapons shaped human sociality in many different ways—by enhancing egalitarianism within the group, for

example, because weapons partially compensate for deficiencies in physical strength, and by promoting success in intergroup competition.

As groups grew in size and complexity, human sociality came to be contoured by the twin dynamics of intra- and intergroup relations. Within the group, individuals occupy different roles in daily life—foraging, hunting, guarding the campsite, caring for the young, settling disputes among group members, and so on. Group members must cooperate with each other in order to perform these roles and achieve group goals. They must also compete for finite resources within the group, such as food, mates, and desirable shelter. *Getting along* and *getting ahead*, therefore, become primal motivational categories for group life (Hogan 1982). Competition between groups may intensify pressures to coordinate individual efforts within the group. All other things being equal, the groups that are better organized and coordinated, that bring together individuals willing and able to cooperate with each other to attain group aims, even to the point of compromising individual well-being, will enjoy a decided advantage over poorly coordinated groups, or groups whose members are unwilling or unable to put aside selfish concerns for the good of the group. In the cold calculus of human evolution, then, an individual's genetic fitness is a product of at least two kinds of factors: (1) those that enhance individual reproductive success, and (2) those that enhance the success of the group (which ultimately serve the purpose of the first). In the simplest terms that follow from the logic of multilevel selection (Wilson and Wilson 2007), if the group is destroyed, one's own competitive prowess may be moot.

The growth in brain size over the course of human evolution may have been driven, at least in part, by the need to navigate through, and make cognitive sense of, increasing social complexity (Dunbar and Sutcliffe 2012). A major challenge was (and continues to be) predicting what other group members will do. For this primordial reason, human beings surely evolved to detect consistent differences in social and emotional displays, differences that come to comprise social *reputations*. Through social observation and gossip, group members come to know who the "trustworthy" individuals are in the group, who tends to be "courageous" or "conscientious" or "antagonistic" or "emotionally out of control." Group members also get a sense of what their own tendencies may be, by observing themselves and noting how others react to them (Bem 1972). These attributions reflect, among other things, the public display of dispositional temperament and personality traits (McAdams 2015), classified by personality psychologists today into approximately five basic (the Big Five) groupings: (1) extraversion versus introversion, (2) neuroticism versus emotional stability, (3) conscientiousness versus lack of control, (4) agreeableness versus antagonism, and (5) openness versus conventionality (McCrae and Costa 2008). They are the basic psychological dimensions that human beings invoke when they size each other up as social actors, angling for advantage in the never-ending quest to get along and get ahead in social life.

But making trait attributions about social actors is not quite enough (McAdams 1995). Knowing that the tall man with the odd gait tends to be trustworthy much of the time is helpful in deciding whether or not you will align yourself with him on a particular task. But you could derive more information about him, in order to predict his behavior with more precision, by learning or divining what goes on in his head in a particular situation. The tall man who limps is, like you, more than a social actor with certain general traits and tendencies. He is also a *motivated agent*. That is, he has specific desires, goals, fears, and plans in his mind, and these vicissitudes of intentionality may motivate his behavior in a given situation, even to the point of defying socioemotional expectations that derive from his traits. He is like a character in a story, endowed with intentionality and poised to act upon an internal agenda.

What will he do? You need to know what he wants in order to answer the question. Astutely inferring intentionality in other humans, therefore, would appear to be an invaluable asset in social life, both within the group and when it comes to intergroup competition. "A group with members who could read intentions and cooperate among themselves, while predicting the actions of competing groups, would have an enormous advantage over others less gifted," writes E. O. Wilson (2012, 224).

The ability to read intentions and thereby cooperate (and compete) with greater felicity is a feat of social intelligence that is tied up with a general inclination toward narrative sense-making. "The most magical capacity of literature has always been that it gives readers access to the minds of others," writes Martin Puchner (2017, 114) in *The Written Word*. Long before writing, stories served the same psychological end. Mar and Oatley (2008) argue that stories function to simulate social experiences. These simulations help us solve social problems (Sugiyama 2005). Human beings construct scenarios in their minds about what motivated agents might do, or might have done, moving forward and backward in time. Endowed with intentionality, the protagonist of the story acts upon a complex suite of desires, wants, hopes, fears, conflicts, beliefs, and plans. The narrator sets it all up and sorts it all out in the imagined story space, in the narrating mind, wherein protagonists enact various agendas that the narrator himself does not need to enact, or cannot enact.

I am not the tall man with the limp, so I do not have direct access to his mind. But let me imagine it. Let me create a story in my mind about what he might do with a particular motivational agenda in his head, or another one, or yet another. Let me tell stories to myself, or perhaps even share them with others, so that I can make a better prediction regarding his actions, which may (I hope) redound to my own success in getting along and getting ahead in social life. And let me do the same for my own motivational agenda—that is, imagine what might

happen if I try this plan, or that plan, moving forward in time, but safely in the space of my own narrating mind, rather than boldly enacting these plans, without foresight, in the real world, with the real group, in real time. The ability to create scenarios such as these, moving backward and forward in imaginary time, may have expanded considerably during the period of *Homo erectus*, paralleling what Leary and Buttermore (2003) have depicted as the evolution of human selfhood. They argue that among the most important cognitive skills shaping how human beings experience themselves is *extended self-ability*, which permits an organism to reflect on itself as it was in the past and as it might be in the future.

The broad significance of storytelling in human evolution becomes even more apparent in considering the function of story *for the group*. In a general sense, shared narratives promote large-scale cooperation among group members, a process that becomes ever more powerful with the emergence of human language (Dor 2015) and the parallel articulation of what Leary and Buttermore (2003) term *the conceptual self*. Greater proficiency with language and rising ability to conceive of oneself in highly abstract and symbolic terms may have played key roles in the remarkable explosion of art, technology, and culture that appeared between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago. The cultural big bang may have magnified and expanded the human power of storytelling for individuals and for the group.

Shared stories may promote social cohesion in groups (Dautenhahn 2002; Gabriel and Young 2011), an effect that is especially apparent when stories take on the sacred imprimatur of religion (Norenzayan 2013). Shared stories model values that are prized by group members, such as courage, resilience, and compassion, serving as important agents of socialization for children in the group (Boyd 2018). Shared cultural narratives may serve to legitimize authority in the group (Haidt 2012). They build group identification and a sense among members of a strong bond of belonging to the group

(Kesebir 2012). More generally, the ability to create an imagined reality out of words enables group members to coordinate their activities in increasingly complex and flexible ways, and over long periods of time. Harari (2015) argues that *Homo sapiens* crossed a Rubicon when they began to adhere to common myths about how the world works. By sharing constructed understandings of reality, large numbers of strangers could cooperate successfully, affording a tremendous expansion in the size of human groups, giving rise to cities, kingdoms, and the interconnected global communities that prevail today.

A recent study of contemporary hunter-gatherer societies in the Philippines speaks to the importance of stories and storytelling for groups and for individual members of groups (Smith et al. 2017). The researchers found that a large number of the stories routinely told by the Agta population convey messages designed to coordinate social behavior and to promote cooperation. In addition, those individuals judged by their peers to be especially adept storytellers proved to be more cooperative in their behavior overall, were preferred as social partners by others, and even enjoyed greater reproductive success. Finally, those Agta camps with a greater proportion of skilled storytellers tended to show more group cooperation. The researchers concluded that skilled storytellers spread cooperative norms and promote prosocial behavior in their respective camps.

In sum, humans have evolved to become a cognitively gifted, ultrasocial species with a predilection for constructing imagined social scenarios extending backward and forward in time. Animated by intentional agents who pursue goals and confront social challenges across a temporal terrain, stories explore human intentionality while simulating social experience, thereby promoting the social and psychological expertise that may promote getting along and getting ahead in human groups. At the level of the group, moreover, stories may function to consolidate group identification and morale,

increase group cohesion, convey valued means and ends, legitimate convention and authority, and promote large-scale cooperation. The evolved design for *Homo sapiens*, therefore, features a prominent storytelling sensibility. The reflexive application of that sensibility *to the self*—the construction of an integrative narrative to account for and explain *one's own life in time*—is what narrative identity is all about. Let us, then, move from the species to the individual person to consider how telling stories about the self develops over the human life course.

DEVELOPMENT

In any given human life, self-development follows an ontogenetic journey from actor to agent to author (McAdams 2013). Beginning life as a social actor who responds to others and performs emotion in its own characteristic way, the self evolves over the course of a lifetime into a motivated agent and an autobiographical author, too. The developmental thickening of selfhood—from seeing oneself as an actor only in the early years to seeing oneself later as an actor, an agent, and an author—tracks the progressive expansion and deepening of the self's engagement with time. Whereas the social actor enacts scripts and performs roles in the here and now, the motivated agent strives to realize plans and accomplish goals in the future, orienting toward time prospectively. The autobiographical author expands the temporal horizon further by stepping back to make narrative sense of it all—past, present, and future; retrospective, introspective, and prospective—through stories.

To start, human infants begin life with temperament dispositions that dictate the characteristic emotional and interpersonal styles they display as they engage the social moment. Clearly visible to the audiences (parents, caregivers) who observe young humans in their first couple of years, these socioemotional differences—toward positive emotionality, for example, toward self-control—eventually morph

into full-fledged personality traits in adulthood, such as extraversion and conscientiousness (Shiner and De Young 2013). By the age of two, children become aware of themselves as actors who move across a social space, as indicated in studies of self-recognition behavior in front of mirrors. From here on out, they observe themselves as they act, and observe the reactions from other actors, eventually gaining insights into the kinds of actors they are: "I am a nice girl," "I get mad a lot," "People like me because I am funny."

Before kindergarten, children also begin to attain insights into their own and others' internal agendas. What developmental psychologists call *theory of mind* pertains to a childhood awakening regarding what goes on in the heads of other people, and one's own (Apperly 2012). Children come to understand that people have minds within which are activated their own personalized beliefs, desires, and plans. They come to realize that people act upon these inner constructs: People do things *because they want to do them*, or in accord with their own beliefs and plans. In other words, people are *motivated agents* who pursue their own agendas over time, as do characters in a story. As they move through elementary school, children become more sophisticated in their understanding of motivated agency. They become more planful and goal-directed, encouraged to do so by teachers and other socializing agents, and they begin to sense what their own prevailing goals and values may be (McAdams 2015). Their fluctuating self-esteem rises and falls with their relative success in attaining their own most valued goals (Harter 2006). While they continue to perform their daily roles in accord with their developing personality traits (the self as social actor), they build agendas for the future in their minds, as motivated agents, laying out what they hope to accomplish over time, both in the short run ("I plan to avoid Kevin tomorrow, unless he apologizes") and over the long run ("I want to go to college some day, so I need to get better grades").

As children increasingly orient their consciousness toward the future, they are learning how to remember the past. Before age two, children are generally unable to encode, store, or recall specific events from their past. With the emergence of *autobiographical memory* in the third year of life, however, and the rapid development of language skills, children begin to tell stories about remembered past events, such as yesterday's visit to grandmother's house or what their preschool teacher told them when they broke her favorite mug (Howe and Courage 1997). In conversations and play, parents and other socializing agents provide scaffolding for children's efforts in self-narration, filling in details as the children talk, teaching them what is important to remember and how to shape a memory account (Fivush 2011). Children marshal their developing storytelling skills, moreover, to make narrative sense of both the past and the future. As the past expands in the child's mind, so does the cognitive articulation of what is to become, or what Szpunar (2010) calls *episodic future thought*. With respect to their expository form and the brain functions involved in their construction, stories about the remembered past tend to parallel imagined scenarios for the future. A growing body of research in cognitive science shows that retrospection correlates with prospection (Devitt and Schacter 2018).

Going back to Heidegger (1927), a strong line of philosophical thinking has emphasized the ways in which human consciousness is infused with an implicit apprehension of time, retrospective and prospective. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur (1984) asserted that human time is narrative time: human beings understand time as the unfolding of a story, situating their behaviors and their successive states of mind within ongoing plots, with beginnings, middles, and endings. A major spokesperson for the narrative perspective in philosophy today, Schechtman (1996) argues that we constitute ourselves as persons by locating our daily experiences within a temporal stream that

evokes a sense of plot and character, an ongoing autobiographical narrative within which we are able to reflect upon the significance of events as they transpire and make sense of their place in our lives as a whole. Often the process of reflecting is unconscious, more a matter of apprehending or vaguely sensing a narrative pattern. Implicitly and explicitly, we fashion stories about life, we see ourselves as the protagonists of those stories, and we continually monitor our narrative constructions and alter them to fit changing life circumstances. As such, Schechtman (1996) contends that we adopt the perspectives of author, character, and reader vis-à-vis our own autobiographical projects, a tripartite operation that also takes place in the reading of literary fiction, as Carroll (2018) argues. Stepping back from our day-to-day activities to think about the overall narrative shape and direction of our lives, furthermore, allows for the possibility of autonomy and moral agency (Schechtman 1996).

Older children and adolescents demonstrate the kind of expanded temporal sensibility (and moral accountability) that philosophers such as Ricoeur and Schechtman ascribe more generally to the narrating, autobiographical self. In recent years, neuroscientists have begun to explore the brain processes that may be responsible for the retrospective and prospective narration of self-relevant scenes in life (Mar 2011) and, relatedly, the experience of reading fiction (Jacobs and Willems 2018). Among other cortical regions, research shows that the ventral medial prefrontal cortex (VMPC), the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex (DPMC), and the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) are consistently implicated in cognitive operations that involve retrospection and prospection, and in tasks calling upon abilities associated with theory of mind (Spreng, Mar, and Kim 2008; Bressler and Menon 2010). These regions fall within what is now commonly termed the *default mode network* (DMN). The label derives from studies that initially identified this large-scale brain network as being routinely activated when the

brain is *not* engaged in effortful, goal-directed tasks—that is, when the brain appears to be "at rest" (Raichle 2015). Within this growing research literature, one line of interpretation suggests that the DMN supports the ability to mentally project oneself from the present moment into a simulation of another time, place, or perspective (Buckner and Carroll 2007). Another line contends that the DMN is responsible for the narrative construction of scenes (Hassabis and Maguire 2007). Both interpretations are highly consistent with the possibility that the DMN constitutes the neurological infrastructure, or at least part of the infrastructure, that has evolved to support the invention of life stories (Carroll 2018).

Full-fledged life stories become psychologically salient features of human selfhood in adolescence and young adulthood. It is during this developmental period that young people first face the psychosocial challenge of *identity*, as captured in these three existential questions: Who am I? What unifies and provides purpose for my life? What will be my place in the adult world? In a highly influential formulation, Erik Erikson (1963) described the development of identity in young adulthood as a matter of arranging the self such that one feels a sense of sameness and continuity across different social roles and over time. Even though a person may sense that he or she is constantly changing, the self-patterning produced by a coherent identity should affirm a psychologically vivified stance in the world, wherein one senses a creative fit with one's environment, and a feeling of being a whole, continuous, and unified person.

In the 1980s, personality and developmental psychologists began to argue that the psychosocial construction of a self-defining life story goes a long way to achieving some modicum of coherence, wholeness, and temporal continuity in life—that identity itself, as initially formulated by Erikson (1963), takes the form of a life story, or personal myth (Cohler 1982; McAdams 1985; Singer and Salovey 1993). Complete with settings, key scenes, characters,

plots, and themes, a person's internalized and evolving life story—that is, a person's narrative identity—constitutes the one answer to the three identity questions raised above: I am my story; my story provides my life with unity and purpose, at least to some extent; my story situates me in the adult world, more or less, which itself projects a panoply of other stories, some of which may resonate with my own (McAdams 1985). My story, moreover, develops in a dynamic interpersonal and social context. Personal relationships shape the form and content of the story (McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals 2007), as do societal and cultural norms (Hammack 2008).

Narrative identity draws upon autobiographical memory to reconstruct the past and upon episodic future thought to create an imagined future. Importantly, the story's coherence and explanatory power depend on the skillful use of *autobiographical reasoning* (Habermas and Bluck 2000). In adolescence, many people begin to employ a range of cognitive operations that enable them to derive personal meaning from autobiographical recollections and episodic future thought (Habermas and de Silveira 2008). These forms of autobiographical reasoning include deriving a central theme or life lesson from manifold personal experiences, linking different events together to explain causation in one's life, delineating turning points and epiphanies to explain important shifts in self-conception, foreshadowing later conflicts by showcasing emblematic early experiences, and various other psycholiterary devices that resemble, in many ways, what fiction writers achieve in their art. A growing body of research demonstrates that self-narrators show increasingly sophisticated forms of autobiographical reasoning in narrative identity as they move from adolescence and early adulthood through late midlife (Bluck and Gluck 2004; Pasupathi and Mansour 2006; Kingo, Bernsten, and Krojgaard 2013).

In sum, narrative identity enters the psychosocial stage in adolescence and young adulthood,

and it builds on the cognitive skills developed in the realms of theory of mind, autobiographical memory, and episodic future thought. A critical factor is autobiographical reasoning, which involves deriving semantic meaning from the recollection (and projection) of episodic events in one's life. Narrative identity provides a life with unity and purpose (McAdams and McLean 2013) and situates the individual as a moral agent in the world (Schechtman 1996). The autobiographical author invents a story to explain how he or she came to be the person he or she is becoming, a story that is both retrospective and prospective. Once the story is invented, the author—who is also the main character of the story and its most assiduous reader—is forever changed. In a sense, the author has become the story, and the author will continue to understand the self in these narrative terms, making important life decisions with an eye toward their significance in the story. There is no going back to a simpler time when I was nothing more than a social actor, or a motivated agent striving to achieve a handful of goals. Now I cannot help but make narrative sense of what I do as a social actor and what I want as a motivated agent within the encompassing frame that explains to me, and to others, what it all means for the story of my life.

Variation

Angela Robinson is a 55-year-old, African American woman who has been a teacher, an actress, a singer, a playwright, and a cocktail waitress. She now runs a nonprofit agency that provides pregnancy counseling to young, underprivileged women, and also helps them to develop their artistic skills. Angela has been married for 12 years, but the marriage is failing. She has a grown adult son. Driven by strong humanistic values, Angela sees her work with young women as a life calling, a vocation that enables her to make a positive difference in the lives of the next generation. At the same time, she admits that she has been an inadequate

mother to her own son. As Angela passionately pursued her personal dreams in her 20s and 30s, she left it to her relatives to raise her son. She traveled the world and met many interesting people. She enjoyed dalliances with dazzling men and enjoyed considerable success in the arts and in education. In establishing the nonprofit agency, she finally found her life's mission. Angela describes herself as "strong," "driven," "creative," "smart," and a little bit "selfish." She is a "workaholic" (her term), but she loves her work. As she looks to the future, Angela hopes to win wider recognition for the plays she has written and to ramp up the arts activities that her agency sponsors.

In the interviews conducted for a longitudinal study of narrative identity (McAdams and Guo 2015), Angela tells a fast-paced, emotionally intense life story wherein the protagonist repeatedly triumphs over adversity. In the story's opening chapter, Angela's mother dotes on her and convinces Angela that she is the most precious and gifted little girl in the world. Joyous scenes with her mother are juxtaposed, however, with horrific episodes of childhood sexual abuse, perpetrated by her stepfather and brothers. Despite the abuse and other challenges, Angela seems to thrive, largely because of the success she enjoys in school. But then two life-altering events occur. First, she gets pregnant at age 16, to her mother's profound disappointment. "You are going to turn out just like me—nothing but a housewife," her mother laments. Second, a year later, her mother is killed in an automobile accident. Angela is devastated. But as she tells the story today, the two critical events from her teens redirected her life plot in a dramatic way. To make up for disappointing her mother and to honor her mother's legacy, Angela needed to leave the stultifying small town where she grew up to find excitement, success, and meaning on a larger stage:

I knew the rest of my life I had to make it up to her, and so I had to be successful. . . . I knew

I was going to go on and make something of myself. I knew there was a bigger world out there cuz I used to read these books, and my mother would read, and I would read, and I'm like, oh God, these people in these books are doing all this stuff, and I want to be one of them. … My mom had told me that I was special, and I was put here for a reason. She made me think that every day. No matter what other people did, you know, she just told me I was special.

Angela's story is not without regrets. She wishes she had been a better mother to her son, but she feels that if she had devoted herself to him, she would never have found the opportunities she ultimately found in the wider world. She would have, instead, turned out like her mother, which would have (ironically) been an insult to her mother's legacy. She regrets that her single-minded devotion to her vocation has compromised her ability to make good friends over the course of her life. Nonetheless, Angela's narrative identity celebrates the agency of a powerful protagonist who finds meaning and redemption in life. The interviewer asks her what the overall "theme" of her life story is. She says, "To make dreams, and to make them come true."

In content and form, each life story is its own unique variant. Working mainly with interview transcripts and open-ended written responses, personality psychologists have designed and validated a host of coding procedures for quantifying individual differences in narrative identity (McAdams and Manczak 2015). Their studies have consistently shown that certain variations in content and form are strongly associated with important psychological variables and life outcomes (Adler et al. 2016). For example, life stories that feature strongly agentic protagonists—that is, characters who strive to achieve autonomy and mastery in the world, as in the case of Angela Robinson—tend to be constructed by narrators who enjoy high levels

of psychological well-being. In a longitudinal study of psychotherapy patients, Adler (2012) has shown that as narratives change over time in the direction of greater agency, the adults who tell these stories tend to experience improvement in mental health. In Adler's (2012) analysis, the changes in the story predict and precede the decline in symptoms and the enhancement of psychological well-being. In other words, the story changes first, and then the storyteller gets better.

Empirical studies have examined differences in autobiographical reasoning and meaning making as evidenced in life stories (McLean and Pratt 2006); the relative prevalence of content themes in narrative identity, such as growth (Bauer, McAdams, and Sakaeda 2005), communion (forming close relationships; McAdams et al. 2004), and contamination (plot sequences in which happy openings are suddenly ruined or spoiled; Adler, Kissel, and McAdams 2006); and variations in the extent to which life stories show a good form and follow a logical sequence (Waters and Fivush 2015), among other approaches. These variations have been linked to individual differences in personality traits, motives and goals, religious and political values, and important life outcomes, such as happiness and mental health. Whereas the many studies on variations in narrative identity conducted over the past two decades generally assume that nearly everybody "has" a narrative identity to be analyzed, interest has also been expressed in the possibility that some people are more oriented toward narrative identity than are others. Hallford and Mellor (2017) recently designed the Awareness of Narrative Identity Questionnaire (ANIQ), with items such as "I understand how the story of my life has unfolded" and "I can perceive common themes about who I am across memories of my life." Low scores on the ANIQ are associated with telling relatively incoherent life narratives. Extreme incoherence in life storytelling has also been shown for individuals afflicted with schizophrenia (Lysaker and Lysaker 2006) and certain personality disorders (Adler et al. 2012).

Showcased in the story told by Angela Robinson, a significant line of quantitative and qualitative research has examined a suite of life-narrative themes that together comprise *the redemptive self* (McAdams 2006/2013). The story begins with the protagonist's enjoying a special distinction (Theme 1: Early Advantage) while empathizing with the pain or disadvantage of others (Theme 2: Suffering of Others). The hero is a gifted protagonist who journeys forth into a dangerous world. In Angela's case, her mother repeatedly "told me that I was special," that "I was put here for a reason." As Angela recalls it, her mother also sensitized her to discrimination and oppression in American society. Motivated by a strong system of ethical beliefs (Theme 3: Moral Steadfastness), the protagonist encounters daunting setbacks and failures in life, even to the point of trauma or abuse, but these negative scenes typically lead to positive outcomes, or to the realization of life lessons (Theme 4: Redemption). Looking with optimism to the future, the protagonist formulates goals designed to improve the lives of others (Theme 5: Prosocial Goals), often in gratitude for the positive outcomes he or she has experienced. Midlife adults whose narrative identities resemble closely the redemptive self tend to score especially high on independent measures of *generativity*, indicating a commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations (McAdams et al. 1997; Walker and Frimer 2007; McAdams and Guo 2015). They also show high levels of psychological well-being, and strong scores on personality traits reflective of positive emotionality, altruism, resilience, and achievement-striving (Guo, Klevan, and McAdams 2016).

In sum, variations in content and form of narrative identity reveal robust associations with a range of important psychological and social outcomes. The kind of story a person tells about his or her life really matters. Rather than

a veridical testimony of what has objectively occurred in one's past, narrative identity is an invented construction, a product of imagination and experience, designed to support a certain kind of life. In the case of the redemptive self, for example, narrators who truly believe that they were destined for special favor in life (Early Advantage), and that they showed a precocious sensitivity to others' pain (Suffering of Others), create a story that sets up a moral challenge: I was blessed, but others suffered. The challenge may motivate them to work hard for social change or to exert some positive influence on the next generation. When their efforts to do so fail, they are not dissuaded, for they look back on their past and recall many previous events through which negative experiences eventually produced positive outcomes (Redemption). They soldier on, with resilience and hope.

CULTURE

Human beings evolved to create culture, and variations in cultural practices, in turn, have contoured human evolution. Henrich (2015, 2) describes culture as "the large body of practices, techniques, tools, motivations, values, and beliefs that we all acquire while growing up, mostly by learning from other people." We might also add stories to the cultural mix. Henrich (2015) suggests that more than a million years ago, members of our evolutionary lineage began learning from each other *in a cultural manner*, which is to say that they began to pass practices, techniques, and knowledge on to the next generation, giving that generation a (culturally mediated) head start in the struggle to adapt. Culture became cumulative. Useful skills regarding practices such as hunting, tool making, and dispute resolution began to improve and aggregate, from one generation to the next. Natural selection began to favor individuals who were better cultural learners, gradually and subtly transforming the nature

of human nature. Developing cultural practices ultimately initiated a process of self-domestication, Henrich argues, "driving genetic evolution to make us [relatively] prosocial, docile, rule followers who [generally] expect a world governed by social norms monitored and enforced by communities" (5).

Whereas it is difficult, therefore, to separate biology from culture in disentangling the causal threads of human behavior, there is some utility in following this heuristic: "Human behavior is determined by neither genes nor culture but instead by a complex interaction of these two prescribing forces, with biology guiding and environment specifying" (Wilson 2005, vii). In the case of narrative identity, culture surely "specifies" the prevailing images, themes, plots, and meanings that life stories may exhibit within a particular stratum or grouping of human beings. In this regard, the redemptive self may be an especially "American" kind of life story, with prevailing versions extolling canonical American tales of religious *atonement*, personal *emancipation*, upward *social mobility* (the American Dream), and *recovery* (McAdams 2006/2013). Especially generative American adults in their midlife years likely appropriate metaphors and plotlines from a cultural repository of redemptive stories—to be found in American folklore, television shows, movies, popular fiction, and so on, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass to Oprah—and assimilate their life experiences, retrospective and prospective, to these cultural forms. Equally productive and caring adults in other societies draw from their own rather different repository of canonical cultural stories.

The redemptive self is an example of what Hammack (2008) describes as a *master narrative* of culture. He defines a master narrative as "a cultural script that is readily accessible to members of a particular axis of identity, whether that be a nation, an ethnic group, or a gender" (235). A master narrative conveys how a particular identity constituency has traditionally

construed its own history and the expected life history of its individual members. As such, a master narrative conveys an ideological message that both validates the group's identity and sets forth what counts as a good and praiseworthy life for the individual.

McLean and Syed (2015) have delineated five defining features of master narratives of culture. First, all master narratives exhibit *utility*. Individuals who identify with a particular cultural group look to master narratives to provide them with guidelines in life and useful information about the history, goals, values, and identities of the group. Second, master narratives are nearly *ubiquitous* within a given cultural context. Even if members of a group do not accept the master narrative, they are intimately familiar with the narrative's outlines. At the same time, third, master narratives are typically *invisible*. Members of a culture unconsciously and automatically become acquainted with the master narrative. They do not have to work hard to know what it means to be a good member of a society. The narratives do not typically become visible and explicit until a person violates the narrative's norms or gains exposure to alternative narratives that call the master narrative into question. Fourth, master narratives manifest a *compulsory nature*: "They have a moral component, an ideological message, which tells us how we are supposed to feel," to think, and to be (327). Fifth, master narratives typically exhibit marked *rigidity*. They offer a well-defined structure within which to articulate a narrative identity, but the structure is not especially elastic, in part because its existence often reinforces positions of privilege in society or affirms deeply held values whose violation exerts significant cost.

Ever since Markus and Kitayama (1991) published a seminal paper on East versus West, psychologists have focused a tremendous amount of attention on broad cultural differences between collectivist (often East Asian) societies on the one hand and individualist (often North American) societies on the other.

Whereas most of these investigations have historically focused on cognition, emotion, or motivation, recent years have witnessed an uptick of interest in narrative. Autobiographical accounts provided by American children tend to be more detailed and more self-promoting than are the corresponding accounts of their Chinese and Korean peers (Reese 2013). Stories told by American children tend to emphasize the pursuit of positive rewards for the self, but those told by Chinese and Korean children often place more focus on the avoidance of negative states (Heine and Buchtel 2009). Among adults, North Americans tend to highlight memories of individual experiences and one-time events in their life stories, but Chinese men and women recall more memories of social and historical events and more frequently draw on past events to underscore moral truths (Wang and Conway 2004). Narrative identities of North Americans appear to prioritize self-expression, whereas those told by their Chinese counterparts may often convey moral messages about how to live well, and in harmony, with others.

Tracking the collectivism/individualism distinction, cultural differences in life narration, as they apply to East versus West, may reflect religious and philosophical traditions. Confucian traditions in China and Korea place a great deal of emphasis on history and respect for the past, which dovetails nicely with a collectivist ethic. Individuals are encouraged to learn from the experiences of others, including their ancestors. From a Confucian perspective, the highest purpose in life is *ren*—a blending of benevolence, moral vitality, and sensitive concern for others. One method for promoting *ren* is to scrutinize one's autobiographical past for mistakes in social conduct. Another method is to reflect upon historical events to understand one's appropriate position in society. It should not be surprising, then, that personal narratives imbued with a Confucian ethic employ the use of both individual and historical events to derive directions for life.

An alternative theory aiming to explain the same cultural distinction focuses on the potential long-term effects of different traditions in *agriculture* (Talhelm et al. 2014). *Rice* farming is a labor-intensive enterprise that requires extraordinary cooperation among different farmers in the same region. Because rice paddies need standing water, farmers in rice regions collectively build elaborate irrigation networks and coordinate their planting and harvesting activities so that nearly all able-bodied individuals work together to produce an adequate annual yield. Rice farmers have to form collectives in order to survive. By contrast, *wheat* farming requires rather less labor and much less social coordination. The lighter labor burden means that individual farmers can look after their own plots without relying as much on their neighbors. In a remarkable empirical study, Talhelm and colleagues (2014) compared scores on standard measures of collectivism/individualism among inhabitants of traditional rice-growing and traditional wheat-growing regions in China, controlling for a host of potentially confounding factors. Even though none of the participants were farmers themselves, Chinese adults living in areas with a rice-farming tradition scored in a more collectivist direction, on average, than did their more individualistic counterparts living in areas where wheat has traditionally been grown.

Still other explanations for cultural differences focus on *modernity*. Greenfield (2013) proposes that celebrating the self in an individualist manner is part-and-parcel of a broad cultural shift toward urbanization and modernization, as expressed in the German sociological concept of *Gesellschaft*, roughly translated as "society." Adaptation to urban environments requires more individualistic and materialistic values; such adaptation prioritizes choice, personal possessions, and child-centered socialization in order to foster the development of a unique self. By contrast, a *Gemeinschaft* ("community") ethic is more collectivist, tracking adaptation to rural environments, which prioritize traditional family structures, social belonging, and socialization practices that teach children to value their obligations to other group members. Worldwide, rural areas (even in North America) do indeed tend to exhibit higher levels of collectivism, whereas many urban areas (even in East Asia) tend toward individualism.

The issue of modernity raises a more fundamental question about narrative identity. Might the very construction of a personal life story depend on the affirmation of human selfhood that accompanies cultural modernity? Taylor (1989) describes the modern self as a reflexive project that modern people fashion and work on. Endowed with depth and dynamism, the modern self needs to be made and understood, and narrative proves to be the most efficacious tool for the job. Whereas storytelling is an ancient practice that appears in all human cultures, the idea that individual human lives may readily assume a narrative form and that individual human beings may "have" stories, or "make" stories about their lives, would appear to be a cultural construction that resonates well with the sensibilities of the modern world. Giddens (1991, 54) writes: "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (emphasis in original). Amidst the constant change and indeterminacy of the modern (and postmodern) world, Giddens argues, people no longer rely solely on such authoritative sources as the church (or parents) to define who they are. Instead, they invent stories.

At what point in human history did people begin to assimilate their own lives, in a reflexive manner, to broad narrative forms? When did telling stories about events of the day bleed into conceiving of one's own life as an ongoing narrative? In writing the *Confessions*, St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.) is often credited with producing the first truly self-reflective autobiography. But the urge to do so surely predates him. Homer and the Old Testament authors told third-person stories about the lives of gods and men. In some

of these stories, the protagonists were themselves motivated agents, as in *The Odyssey*. In others (*The Iliad*, the book of Genesis), supernatural forces and voices sometimes dictated the actions of human protagonists. Still, even the tale of hapless Adam and Eve features the kind of motivated agency that coherent stories require—on God's part, mostly, but also in Eve's acting upon her own desire to bite into the forbidden fruit. Thousands of years ago, authors invented stories about characters. It seems reasonable to assume that they possessed the ability, and perhaps the desire, to tell stories about themselves also. Those stories may well have been simpler, perhaps more episodic than encompassing a full life, and less introspective and psychological than the stories modern humans tell. It also seems reasonable to predict that the stories human beings will tell about themselves 500 years from now will sound very different from the life stories we know and hear today.

CONCLUSION

The story of narrative identity begins with the evolution of hominid hypersociality and runs through the emergence and proliferation of cultural modernity. From the beginning, stories have served the individual function of simulating social experience, providing those who are able to create and tell scenarios a significant adaptive advantage in social life. For hunting-and-gathering human groups, stories helped to coordinate diverse activities of different individuals while consolidating group cohesion and morale. As humans became more proficient in using language, they were able to refine and expand their narratives, paving the way for significant expansion and increasing complexity in social life. For good and for ill, stories continued to serve individual and social needs, through the invention of agriculture, the rise of kingdoms and city-states, and the further transformations of human society and culture that have transpired over the past 3,000 years, leading up to the current historical moment.

For the individual human life, the ontogenetic roots of narrative identity lie in the emergence of autobiographical memory in the third year of life, the refinement of theory of mind and motivated human agency in the school years, and the advances in autobiographical reasoning that appear in adolescence and young adulthood. The construction of life stories may be mediated in some manner by the brain's default mode network (DMN), which appears to be activated in autobiographical retrospection, prospection, thinking about the perspectives of other people, and (intriguingly) reading fiction. By the early 20s, most people have constructed a narrative identity for their lives—an internal story that explains how the individual has become the person he or she is, and where his or her life may be going in the future. The story affirms a sense of temporal coherence in life, integrating the reconstructed past with the imagined future, and it typically provides the person with a sense of wholeness, psychic unity, and moral purpose.

Individual differences in the shape and content of life stories reveal robust associations with many important psychological and social constructs and outcomes. Stories with strong themes of agency and redemption tend to be highly favored, at least in American society, and strongly associated with positive personality traits, psychological well-being, and a generative (productive and caring) approach to adult life. In constructing narrative identity, human beings plagiarize shamelessly from their respective cultures, borrowing and appropriating master narratives, common images and metaphors, and prevailing plotlines from a set of canonical cultural forms, each culture showcasing its own favorites. Biology guides and culture fills in the details. Narrative identity, therefore, is a joint production, an invention of the storytelling person and the culture within which the person's story finds its meanings and significance. Other people in the author's life, along with groups and institutions, may also exert an authorial force. Therefore, the autobiographical author is, in reality, a *co*-author. It is *the* self-defining collaboration of a lifetime.

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Identity, Narrative, Language, Culture, and the Problem of Variation in Life Stories

Dan P. McAdams

The fourteen responses to my target article on the evolution and development of narrative identity raise important issues regarding (1) the nature of human identity, (2) the meaning of narrative, (3) the roles of language and culture in the construction of narrative identity, and (4) the problem of variation in the kinds of life stories people create. Let me continue the conversation here by briefly addressing each of these four issues.

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

My particular approach to the topic of *identity* follows the tradition initiated by Erik Erikson (1963), who singled out the period of adolescence and young adulthood as the time when the psychological problem of finding personal unity and purpose in life first emerges. During this developmental epoch, Erikson maintained, the identity question of "Who am I?" automatically gives rise to the related questions of "Who have I been in the past?" and "Who will I be in the future?" As Roy Baumeister observes, identity aims, in part, to construct the unity of self *across time* (unless otherwise noted, author references are to the response articles in this issue). Seeing the self, and seeing others, as continuous over time is foundational, Baumeister argues, for the kind of group living that human beings evolved to do, providing a psychological underpinning for assuming moral responsibility for one's actions, making commitments, keeping promises, and so on. With the dramatic physiological, emotional, and social changes that accompany adolescence, young people begin to perceive themselves as discontinuous in time: *I once was one thing (a child) and now I am something else.* The theory of narrative identity maintains that the young person begins to account for the temporal discontinuity by creating a life story.

But there are other ways to find (and explain) unity and purpose in life. As Jeff (Robert R.) McCrae points out, dispositional personality traits, such as those encompassed within the Big Five taxonomy, capture consistent differences between people that themselves endure over time. It is essential to note that people perceive these differences *in themselves* and in others. As such, self-attributed traits become important features of identity, too. Therefore, one simple answer to the question regarding self-continuity over time goes like this: *I am an extravert in the present; I was an extravert in the past; I am likely to remain an extravert in the future.* People recognize their own traits in themselves, construing identity as a social actor. This kind of identity formation follows from a simple form of paradigmatic thought, as suggested by Laura Akers and Gerard Saucier. No storytelling is necessary.

A parallel set of processes may unfold at the level of agency, too. A person's goals and values may confer upon his or her life a sense of temporal continuity and purpose, as Patrick Hogan points out. In this case, we observe the kind of identity forged by motivated agents—identity through the decisions people make, in keeping with the spirit of Keith Oatley's commentary.

Identity is based on the prospective agenda of values and goals that the self as "I" formulates to guide the self as "me" going forward.

Therefore, what Erikson originally identified as the psychosocial achievement of identity comes in at least three different packages—identity via traits (the social actor), identity via goals and values (the motivated agent), and identity via narrative (the autobiographical author) (McAdams and Zapata-Gietl 2015). All three varieties are useful. But constructing identity through stories—the self as autobiographical author—holds certain advantages over the other two, as Baumeister clearly articulates. The discourses of traits and motivation have a difficult time explaining *continuity amidst change*. Take my own case, for a moment: How did a generally conservative and diffident working-class kid who grew up in the Baptist Church become, by the time he hit midlife, a committed secular humanist who teaches college classes and writes articles and books about personality and identity? I cannot explain it fully to you by appealing to the actor's traits or charting the agent's changing goals and values. I have to tell you a story.

The distinction between the actor's traits and the author's life narrative derives directly from what Robert Hogan and Ryne Sherman delineate as the basic principles of socioanalytic theory. Hogan and Sherman argue for the primacy of three psychological needs—acceptance (getting along), status (getting ahead), and meaning. As I see it, dispositional personality traits, as perceived both by the self and by others, capture social reputations (in the minds of self and others), and social reputations are, at their base, about getting along and getting ahead. The traits subsumed within the Big Five may have evolved as relevant psychological domains in everyday human life, as Leif Kennair contends, but I would add that humans have evolved to take careful note of these dimensions, in the self and others, because of their relevance for getting along and getting ahead in groups. What Hogan and Sherman, along with

Baumeister, describe as the need for meaning is partly satisfied through creating life stories and/or aligning ourselves with broad cultural narratives. These storied meanings speak to the self's desire to wrench some degree of unity and purpose from the randomness of everyday life. But as Hogan and Sherman add, these meanings are also meant *for others*. We employ narratives to justify our lives to others, to convince others that our lives are indeed coherent and worthy of attention.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE IDENTITY?

I read with some amusement James Carney's characterization of the narrative perspective as the "comfortable default" in psychology. Oh, for such a thing to be true! Despite popular appeal and rising interest in scientific circles, narrative perspectives still represent minority viewpoints in conventional psychological science. When I originally proposed a life-story model of identity in the mid-1980s (McAdams 1985), most of my colleagues labeled my ideas as too fanciful for serious psychological science. Following the introduction of the initial theory, it took me more than a decade to land my first empirical paper on narrative identity in a mainstream journal (McAdams et al. 1997). Two decades later, psychologists who study life stories still have to justify what they do to a skeptical scientific audience more comfortable with the methodological conventions of experimental psychology and neuroscience.

One of the problems with the idea of "story" is that different scholars project a ridiculously wide range of different meanings upon it. Some of these, like Akers and Saucier's characterization of stories as merely problem-solving scenarios and Hogan's characterization of them as "causal sequences," are so general and denuded as to rip away their most important features—that is, that stories involve motivated agents who want something and pursue what they want over time (Bruner 1990). Other perspectives make stories out to be simple tales that are

so neat as to be perfectly coherent and, as such, incapable of capturing the complexity and contradictions of everyday human life. For example, Brian Boyd characterizes the construction of a life story as akin to spinning a "cocoon"—creating a secure and cozy space that is insulated from the harsh (and difficult to narrate) vagaries of the outside world. It begs credulity, Boyd argues, to imagine that multifaceted modern people would ever find it psychologically useful to perceive their own lives as following a narrative arc. Boyd concedes that human beings *could* do this, if you made them do it. People can stand on one leg, too, Boyd points out—but that does not mean they go through life as "monopods."

I worried about the same sort of thing that Boyd imagines when I began research on life stories. My students and I ask our research participants to imagine that their lives are like novels, with chapters, characters, settings, and scenes. In our life-story interviews, we lead the participants through a series of structured questions to guide their storytelling responses. At the beginning, I worried: What if people can't do this? Or, what if they can do it, but it seems forced or unnatural? In my own lab, we have conducted at least 1,200 full-length life story interviews over the past three decades and collected countless abbreviated, written responses describing life-story scenes. Out of that total, there was one participant (back around 1990) who claimed she simply had no story to tell. "I don't think of my life that way," she said. Most of our research participants, however, find the interview process to be deeply meaningful, even if they shed tears and express angst along the way. In the debriefing that follows the interviews, many people report that the exercise in self-narration felt good and natural. For them, it is not like standing on one leg.

Still, Boyd and others (e.g., Akers and Saucier, Oatley) raise an important point in questioning the everyday relevance of life narration. Boyd suggests that people are too busy to think much about the past, and Oatley wonders just how important retrospection is for the prediction of everyday behavior. Adopting an existentialist perspective, Oatley also suggests that decisions regarding the future typically trump stories about the past.

In this regard, it is probably best to think of narrative identity as something that runs in the background of everyday consciousness. Although I am walking around with stories in my mind about how I came to be the person I am becoming, these stories are not constantly intruding on my phenomenal experience. I consult the stories from time to time, especially when making big decisions in life. Narrative identity may provide some guidance for making decisions, and in some cases, it may even prove to be a change-resistant "enabler," as Oatley aptly observes. But narrative identity itself also changes dramatically over time, as a result of decisions that people make, as agents and authors, a point underscored by Baumeister. Concerning Oatley's invocation of Kierkegaard, my view is that you can be an existentialist and still have a narrative identity, making sense of life backwards as you make decisions looking forward. Indeed, Sartre's writings on existentialism underscore the value of constructing narratives to make sense of the personal past, or what Sartre called making life into a *true novel* that captures central personal and historical truths (Charme 1984). By contrast, predicting the quotidian moves of the social actor is not something that narrative identity is well-designed to do, though it can be helpful. On this score, Oatley's indictment is well placed. As I see it, behavioral prediction is mainly about accounting for how dispositional personality traits, guided by immediate goals, combine with environmental factors in a given situation. Narrative identity's value to psychological science does not lie so much in its ability to improve discrete behavioral prediction. Its value instead comes from its ability to capture how people make meaning out of their lives.

P. Hogan argues that the concept of narrative identity is too broad and vague to be useful

in specific inquiries. A more fine-tuned and precise paradigm might draw upon clearly delineated components of self-categorization, such as rules, prototypes, and exemplars. I have no problem with this critique. Indeed, in my own research, I tend to examine discrete components or features of narrative identity, rather than the full life story itself. Among these features are specific *thematic lines* or motivational tendencies that run through the text (such as *agency* and *communion*), the story's *ideological setting* (or backdrop of belief and value upon which the plot unfolds), the structural *complexity* and relative *coherence* of a life story, personified and idealized characters in the story (*imagoes*: McAdams 1985), and emotional sequences that mark transitions in the text (such as *redemption sequences* and *contamination sequences*). As Robyn Fivush adds, narrative identity may encompass multiple voices and conflicting authorial perspectives. For these reasons among others, precise and accurate research into narrative identity typically requires that researchers take life stories apart and examine their particular pieces, dimensions, or shadings.

What Are the Roles of Language and Culture in Narrative Identity?

Technically speaking, stories do not require words. Dorthe Berntsen cites empirical findings showing that narrative processes and language processes involve different parts of the brain. Still, as Steven Mithen points out, language greatly augments the production of stories, endowing them with richness and precision of details. With this in mind, Mithen is more skeptical than I was in my target article regarding the ability of *Homo erectus* to construct stories *about the self* through prelinguistic and mimetic processes. Acknowledging that this topic is well beyond my expertise, I find myself sympathetic to Mithen's critique. Without the nuance that comes with words, it may be quite difficult to convey much that is specific and illuminating about one's mental life and about

long-term memories and aspirations. At best, storytelling was severely constrained before the advent of language, especially with respect to stories reflecting upon the self.

The interrelationship between language and culture in the construction of narrative identity is a central theme in the commentaries from Fivush and Berntsen, and in Kate McLean's remarks on the co-construction of life stories. As McLean sees it, autobiographical authors fool themselves into believing that their stories are indeed their own. The truth is that people co-construct narratives about the self with parents, friends, teachers, and many others in their culture, in an iterative and uneven manner, through fits and starts over the long course of life. In adolescence and young adulthood, we assume ownership of our stories, but we typically fail to see or understand the extent to which authorship is multiple and culturally shared. Building on McLean's insight, I would propose that the dawning realization that significant others, along with societal institutions and cultural norms, participate in the construction of narrative identity may be a signal achievement of psychosocial maturity in the midlife years, at least for some especially astute and observant autobiographical authors.

Sharply contrasting viewpoints on the role of culture may be observed in comparing the commentaries from Berntsen, Fivush, and McLean, on one hand, to McCrae, on the other. According to Berntsen, different cultures set forth different biographical *scripts* for the life course, setting normative expectations for the timing and the content of self-defining life events. Certain kinds of stories are tellable in certain kinds of cultures, reflecting cultural norms, beliefs, values, and traditions. Reinterpreting my own research on *the redemptive self* (McAdams 2013), McCrae proposes, by contrast, that certain stories may attain archetypal status, appearing in very similar forms across many different cultures. His perspective is reminiscent of Joseph Campbell's (1949) theory of universal myths.

McCrae may be right on a very general level. Certain broad plotlines, such as finding meaning in suffering and defending one's home, may hold universal appeal. Still, I am drawn to the cultural variations on such universal forms. With respect to the redemptive self, one may identify characteristically American variants, such as the rags-to-riches Horatio Alger story and variations on contemporary self-help narratives regarding recovery from trauma. Life narratives that resonate best with cultural master narratives confer significant advantages. It is no accident, in this regard, that U.S. presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama told quintessentially redemptive stories about their lives and projected those narratives onto the American people. Their narrative identities were assets for their own political campaigns, as Hogan and Sherman suspect, but not because these stories were objectively "better" or more "coherent" or more "exciting" than those told by their political rivals, but instead because they were more simpatico with American stories of personal redemption. President Trump, however, is a different story, as I will describe at the end.

Among other things, culture projects characteristic aesthetics onto group life. Henrik Høgh-Olesen demonstrates how even objects and ornaments reflect a culture's aesthetic norms while conveying culturally valued stories. In this regard, I am reminded of a news report I heard last year about an entrepreneur who collects cheap everyday objects, such as lamps and vases, and hires fiction writers to compose stories describing the unique history of each object. Simply having a story attached to the object greatly increases the market value of the object. The entrepreneur makes a significant profit on each one, even though he tells the purchaser that the story accompanying the object is completely fictional. An old lamp feels more valuable if the purchaser knows "its story"—even if the purchaser knows the story is fake!

As cultures change, the narrative identities that people construct will surely follow suit.

This is why I must take issue with Kennair's prediction that the kinds of stories people may tell about their lives 500 years from now are likely to look pretty much like the ones told today. As evidence against Kennair's view, just look *backwards* 500 years. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther described how he literally fought with Satan for much of his life (Erikson 1958). He was not being metaphorical. Constructed within a highly religious European worldview that antedates cultural modernity (Taylor 1989), Luther's life story would be deemed crazy today. Luther could never have predicted the kinds of narrative identities that proliferate in present-day Germany. What makes us think that we can predict the future any better than he could?

What Kinds of Narrative Identities Are There? (And Does Everybody Have One?)

As a personality psychologist, my main focus is *variation* in narrative identity. Most of my research involves charting individual differences in the kinds of stories people tell about their lives and relating those differences to important psychological and social outcomes.

In doing this kind of research, I resist an assumption that seems to run through the commentaries provided by Akers and Saucier, Carney, Kennair, and Boyd. Let me call it the *Kumbaya assumption*. It is the assumption that narrative identity, as I have portrayed it, is all about heart-warming stories that make people feel good about themselves, even as they fail to capture the complexities of lived experience. An accompanying assumption is that storytelling itself, at least as I have portrayed it, is always a good thing, akin to telling tales and singing songs around the campfire. The truth is that stories run the gamut, from good to bad, and that storytelling can be used for positive purposes or for nefarious ones. In and of itself, storytelling is not necessarily good or bad. It simply *is*.

Which raises a related question: What about people who resist the urge to understand their

lives as narratives? What about people who simply do not have a narrative identity? The philosopher Galen Strawson (2004) has famously railed against what he perceives to be the oppressive sentiment that a person *must* have a life story in order to have a good life. Strawson claims, "I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative. . . . Absolutely none" (quoted in Boyd). Invoking Strawson, Akers and Saucier assert that narrative identity applies mainly to only three types of people: (1) those who have overcome significant adversity in their lives, (2) old people, and (3) successful males. I know of no research that supports the view put forth by Akers and Saucier.

Nonetheless, the issue of individual differences in the extent to which people do indeed feel that their lives conform to some sort of narrative, whatever that narrative may be, is a very important issue in the study of narrative identity. Indeed, Hallford and Mellor (2017) have recently devised a self-report measure to assess this kind of variation, attempting to quantify the between-person variance that Carney suggests should be measured. Identifying with Strawson and with Leopold Bloom (the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses*), Boyd contends that his own personal experience feels more fragmented and episodic than narrative-like. Boyd writes: "After a momentous but inconclusive day in his [Bloom's] life, neither he nor we have any sense of what tomorrow or the day after tomorrow will bring for him. Bloom's experience seems closer to my experience than anything I see in the narrative identity hypothesis."

I agree with Boyd (and Strawson) that narrative identity may not be an especially relevant psychological construct for some people, though I imagine them to be a small minority. Beyond narrative, there are many ways to make sense of a life. And for some people, perhaps there is no need to make sense of it.

As a case in point, let me briefly note the most prominent person on the world's stage today who, I believe, has absolutely no narrative identity. He is, as of this writing, the current president of the United States. In McAdams (2016) and in a forthcoming study, I make the strong case that Donald J. Trump is, and has always been, *the episodic man*. Refusing to engage in introspection, retrospection, or prospection, Trump lives instead in the combative moment. As a highly extroverted and disagreeable social actor and a motivated agent who focuses nearly exclusively on narcissistic goals, Trump moves through life without any narrative understanding of himself whatsoever. All actor and agent, but no author. As such, he has no need to show personal consistency or moral accountability as he travels from one life scene to the next.

The dynamics behind the case of Trump involve, among other things, a decidedly Hobbesian view of the world wherein actors must do battle in every episode, moment by moment, scene by scene. In Trump's life, the scenes are distinct, unconnected. The moments do not build to form a narrative arc. As biographers and interviewers have repeatedly reported over the past four decades, there is very little by way of a reconstructed past and a long-term imagined future in the mind of Donald Trump. This particular episodic man does not have the psychological luxury to step back and see his life as a narrative. He is too busy fighting to win the moment. Throughout his life, Trump has approached every day in this same way. His stream of consciousness may not be as rich and variegated as I imagine the case to be for a philosopher of Strawson's caliber, but in keeping with Strawson's own self-attributions, Trump has absolutely no sense of his life as a narrative—absolutely none.

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