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Chapter 9

Identity and the Life Story

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The *self* is many things, but *identity* is a life story. In my life-story theory of identity (e.g., McAdams, 1985, 1993, 1996), I argued that identity takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, characters, plot, and themes. In late adolescence and young adulthood, people living in modern societies begin to reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future in terms of an internalized and evolving self-story, an integrative narrative of self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose. Life stories are based on autobiographical facts, but they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful. A person's evolving and dynamic life story is a key component of what constitutes the individuality of that particular person (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 1995), situated in a particular family and among particular friends and acquaintances (Thorne, 2000), and living in a particular society at a particular historical moment (Gregg, 1991). Life stories develop over time, and although identity itself does not become a salient psychosocial issue until the adolescent years (Erikson, 1963; Habermas & Bluck, 2000), the origins of life-story making and telling can be traced back to early childhood (Fivush, 1994), and traced forward to the last years in the human life course (Kenyon, 1996).

The idea that identity is an internalized and evolving life story resonates with a number of important themes in psychology and the social sciences today. This chapter explores the meaning and the implications of this idea in

the contexts of contemporary research and theory on the development of self-understanding over the life course, connections between autobiographical memory and self, the place of life stories in human personality, and the relations between life stories on the one hand and culture and society on the other.

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

Social scientists and laypersons alike commonly use the terms *self* and *identity* interchangeably. Following Erikson (1963), however, I employ a sharp distinction between the two. As James (1892/1963) argued, the self may be viewed as both the subjective sense of "I" and the objective sense of "me." Accordingly, the "me" includes within it any and all things, features, and characteristics that the "I" may attribute to it—all that is me, all that is mine. By contrast, Erikson's conception of identity refers to a peculiar quality or flavoring of the self-as-me—a way that the "I" begins to arrange or configure the "me" in adolescence and young adulthood, when the standards for what constitutes an appropriate "me" change rather dramatically. It is at this time in the life course, Erikson maintained, that people first confront the problem of *identity versus role confusion.* In this, the fifth of Erikson's eight stages of life, people first explore ideological and occupational options available in society and experiment with a wide range of social roles, with the aim of eventually consolidating their beliefs and values into a personal ideology and making provisional commitments to life plans and projects that promise to situate them meaningfully into new societal niches (Marcia, 1980). It is during this developmental period, recently given the apt name of *emerging adulthood* by Arnett (2000), that people first seek to integrate their disparate roles, talents, proclivities, and social involvements into a patterned *configuration* of thought and activity that provides life with some semblance of psychosocial *unity and purpose* (Breger, 1974). That configuration is what identity is.

Employing Erikson's understanding of the term, then, identity is an integrative configuration of self-in-the-adult-world. This configuration integrates in two ways. First, in a synchronic sense, identity integrates the wide range of different, and likely conflicting, roles and relationships that characterize a given life in the here-and-now. "When I am with my father, I feel sullen and depressed; but when I talk with my friends, I feel a great surge of optimism and love for humankind." Identity needs to integrate these two things so that although they appear very different, they can be viewed as integral parts of the same self-configuration. Second, identity must integrate diachronically, that is, in time. "I used to love to play baseball, but now I want to be a social

psychologist." Or, "I was a born-again Christian, but these days I feel I am an agnostic." Identity needs to integrate these kinds of contrasts so that although self elements are separated in time (and in content quality), they can be brought meaningfully together in a temporally organized whole. Put starkly, identity becomes a problem when the adolescent or young adult first realizes that he or she is, has been, and/or could be many different (and conflicting) things, and experiences a strong desire, encouraged by society, to be but *one* (large, integrated, and dynamic) thing. Young children have selves; they know who they are, and they can tell you. But they do not have identities, in Erikson's sense, in that they are not confronted with the problem of arranging the me into a unified and purposeful whole that specifies a meaningful niche in the emerging adult world. Selves begin to take identity shape in late adolescence and young adulthood.

Why does identity wait so long? The reasons are both cultural and cognitive. In Western societies, we expect adolescents to begin the process of taking stock of the material, ideological, occupational, and interpersonal resources in their worlds, and taking stock of themselves, in order to find a reasonably good match between what a person can do and believe on the one hand and what adult society enables a person to do and believe on the other. Identity exploration is considered an on-time developmental task for late adolescence and young adulthood (Cohler, 1982). Parents, high school teachers, siblings, friends, college admissions counselors, the business world, the media, and many other aspects and agents of modern society explicitly and implicitly urge adolescents and young adults to "get a life" (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). It is time to begin to examine what society has to offer, to explore (in both imagination and behavior) a wide range of ideological and life-style options, and, eventually, to make commitments, even if only temporary, to personalized niches in the adult world. This is to say that society and the emerging adult are ready for the individual's identity explorations by the time he or she has in fact become an emerging adult. Accordingly, Erikson (1959) wrote:

> The period can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him. In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community's recognition of him. (p. 111)

Although Erikson did not emphasize it, advances in cognitive development in the adolescent years are likely to be as important as any other forces in

launching the identity project. Breger (1974) and Elkind (1981) argued that with the emergence of formal operations in adolescence, identity becomes an especially engaging abstraction for the abstract thinker: "[T]he idea of a unitary or whole self in which past memories of who one was, present experiences of who one is, and future expectations of who one will be, is the sort of abstraction that the child simply does not think about." But "with the emergence of formal operations in adolescence, wholeness, unity, and integration become introspectively real problems" (Breger, 1974, p. 330). The idea that one's life, as complex and dynamic as it increasingly appears to be, might be integrated into a meaningful and purposeful whole may represent, therefore, an especially appealing possibility to the self-reflective emerging adult.

During this developmental period, I have argued, people begin to put their lives together into self-defining stories. The process of constructing a life story may be incremental and uneven, subject to fits and starts, as the emerging adult tries out different kinds of characters, plots, and stories until he or she begins to settle on the kinds of narrative forms and contents that seem to work or fit. What gradually emerges is an internalized and evolving story of self that integrates the self synchronically and diachronically, explaining why it is that I am sullen with my father and euphoric with my friends and how it happened—step by step, scene by scene—that I went from being a born-again Christian who loved baseball to an agnostic social psychologist. According to Habermas and Bluck (2000), the construction of these kinds of integrative life stories requires a set of cognitive tools that are not fully accessible until adolescence. They argued that the full articulation of an integrative life story requires the understanding and utilization of four types of coherences: temporal, biographical, causal, and thematic coherence. The four begin to emerge in childhood, but they emerge at different points and develop at different rates. People can tell stories about themselves long before adolescence, but it is not until adolescence that they can effectively put their lives together into a story.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LIFE STORY

Stories are fundamentally about the vicissitudes of human intention organized in time (Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1984). In virtually all intelligible stories, humans or human-like characters act to accomplish intentions, generating a sequence of actions and reactions extended as a plot in time (Mandler, 1984). Human intentionality is at the heart of narrative, and therefore the development of intentionality in humans is of prime importance in establishing the

mental conditions necessary for story telling and story comprehension. Recent research with infants suggests that by the end of the first or early in the second year of life, humans come to understand other persons as intentional agents (Tomasello, 2000). For example, 16-month-old infants will imitate complex behavioral sequences exhibited by other human beings only when those activities appear intentional. As Tomasello (2000) wrote, "Young children do not just mimic the limb movements of other persons; rather, they attempt to reproduce other persons' intended, goal-directed actions in the world" (p. 38). What emerges at this time, wrote Dennett (1987), is an *intentional stance* vis-à-vis the world. In other words, children in the second year of life come to experience the world from the subjective standpoint of an intentional, causal "I," able now to assume the existential position of a motivated human subject who appropriates experience as his or her own (Kagan, 1994; McAdams, 1997). This existential I-ness is tacitly and immediately grasped in and through intentional action (Blasi, 1988).

In James's terms, with the consolidation of the existential, intentional I comes the eventual formulation of the me. In the second year of life, children begin to attribute various distinguishing characteristics to themselves, including their names, their favorite toys, their likes and dislikes, and so on. With the development of language, the self-as-object grows rapidly to encompass a wide range of things "about me" that can be verbally described. To be included in the mix eventually are memories of events in which the self was involved. According to Howe and Courage (1997), *autobiographical memory* emerges toward the end of the second year of life when children have consolidated a basic sense of I and reflexively have begun to build up a rudimentary understanding of the me. Although infants can remember events (basic episodic memory) before this time, it is not until the end of the second year, Howe and Courage contended, that episodic memory becomes personalized and children begin to organize events that they experience as "things that happened to me." From this point onward, the me expands to include autobiographical recollections, recalled as little stories about what has transpired in "my life."

Autobiographical memory emerges and develops in a social context (Nelson, 1988; Welch-Ross, 1995). Parents typically encourage children to talk about their personal experiences as soon as children are verbally able to do so (Fivush & Kuebli, 1997). Early on, parents may take the lead in stimulating the child's recollection and telling of the past by reminding the child of recent events, such as this morning's breakfast or yesterday's visit to the doctor. Taking advantage of this initial conversational scaffolding provided by adults, the young child soon begins to take more initiative in sharing personal events. By the age of 3, children are actively engaged in coconstructing their past

experience in conversations with adults. By the end of the preschool years, they are able to give a relatively coherent narrative account of the past. In conversations with adults about personal memories, young children become acquainted with the narrative structures through which events are typically discussed by people in their world. The sharing of personal experiences functions as a major mechanism of socialization (Miller, 1994) and helps to build an organized personal history from a growing base of autobiographical memories (Fivush, 1994).

As children move through elementary school, they come to narrate their own personal experiences in ways that conform to their implicit understandings of how good stories should be structured and what they should include. In this way, they imbue their experience with what Habermas and Bluck (2000) termed *temporal coherence.* Before adolescence, however, temporal coherence applies mainly to single autobiographical events rather than to connections between different events. In elementary school, furthermore, children begin to internalize their culture's norms concerning what the story of an entire life should itself contain. As they learn, for example, that a telling of a single life typically begins with, say, an account of birth and typically includes, say, early experiences in the family, eventual emergence out of the family, geographical moves, and so on, they acquire an understanding of what Habermas and Bluck (2000) called *biographical coherence.* Cultural norms define conventional phases of the life course and suggest what kinds of narrative forms make sense in telling a life (Denzin, 1989). As children learn the culture's biographical conventions, they begin to see how single events in their own lives might be sequenced and linked to conform to the culture's concept of biography.

Still, it is not until adolescence, Habermas and Bluck (2000) contended, that individuals craft causal narratives to explain how different events are linked together in the context of a biography. *Causal coherence* is exhibited in the increasing effort across adolescence to provide narrative accounts of one's life that explain how one event caused, led to, transformed, or in some way is meaningfully related to other events in one's life. Traits, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences may now be explained in terms of the life events that may have caused them. An adolescent may, for example, explain why she rejects her parents' liberal political values, or why she feels shy around members of the opposite sex, or how it came to be that her junior year in high school represented a turning point in her understanding of herself in terms of personal experiences from the past that have been selected and, in many cases, reconstructed to make a coherent explanation. In what Habermas and Bluck (2000) termed *thematic coherence,* furthermore, she may identify an overarching theme, value, or principle that integrates many different episodes in her life and conveys the gist of who she is and what her autobiography is all about. Studies reported by Habermas and Bluck (2000) suggest that causal and thematic coherence are rare in autobiographical accounts in early adolescence but increase substantially through the teen-aged years and into young adulthood. By the time individuals have reached the emerging adulthood years, therefore, they are typically able and eager to construct stories about the past and about the self that exhibit temporal, biographical, causal, and thematic coherence. Autobiographical memory and narrative understanding now have developed to the level whereby they can be called into service in the making of identity.

But identity is not made from scratch. Long before adolescence, children collect and process experiences of all kinds that may eventually make their way into or have some important influence on the integrative life stories they later construct to make sense of their lives (McAdams, 1993). Even early attachment patterns with caregivers may ultimately be reflected in the overall narrative tone and quality that adult life stories show (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). The dominant images and themes of adult life stories may reflect influences from the earliest years of life.

Over the adult life course, people continue to work on their life stories, reflecting various on-time and off-time transitions and happenings. In early to middle adulthood, for example, many American men and women appear to focus their identity work on articulating, expanding, and refining the story's main characters, or personal *imagoes.* An imago is an idealized personification of the self that functions as a protagonist in the narrative (McAdams, 1984). Akin to what Markus and Nurius (1986) called "possible selves," imagoes personify important motivational trends in the life story, such as strong needs for power, achievement, or intimacy (McAdams, 1985). The construction of imagoes helps to integrate a life by bringing into the same narrative format different personifications of the me—the self-as-loving-wife, the self-as-ardent-feminist, the self-as-devoted-mother, the self-as-the-young-girl-who-longed-to-escape-the-suburbs, the self-as-future-retiree-who-will-escape-to-that-country-home, and so on. By constructing a single life story that integrates a wide range of self-characterizations as interacting protagonists, or imagoes, the adult can resolve what William James first identified as the "one-in-many-selves paradox" (Knowles & Sibicky, 1990, p. 676). One's life becomes a story with a large cast of self-characters who assume different positions in the narrative, take on different voices, represent different self-facets, personify significant trends during different developmental chapters—all in the same evolving story, the same identity (Hermans, 1996).

The midlife years can be occasioned by considerable identity work for many modern adults. Of special interest are the ways in which what Erikson

(1963) termed *generativity* finds its way into life stories at midlife and beyond. As men and women move into and through midlife, themes of caring for the next generation, of leaving a positive legacy for the future, of giving something back to society become increasingly salient in life stories (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993; McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998). Furthermore, as adults move into and through midlife, they may become more and more concerned with the "endings" of their life stories. It is in the nature of stories that beginnings and middles lead inevitably to endings, and that endings provide a sense of closure and resolution (Kermode, 1967). The imagery and rhetoric of generativity provide adults with an especially compelling way to conceive of "the end," even as people are deeply immersed in the middle of the life course. By suggesting that one's own efforts may generate products and outcomes that will outlive the self, by framing a life story in terms of those good things (and people) that become the self's enduring legacy, life narrations that emphasize generativity implicitly provide stories with what may be perceived, consciously or unconsciously, as good and satisfying endings (Kotre, 1984; McAdams, 1985). These endings, in turn, feed back to influence beginnings and middles. Consequently, it should not be surprising to observe considerable revising and reworking of one's life story, even the reimagining of the distant past, in light of changing psychosocial concerns in the adult years and changing understandings of what the near and distant future may bring.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY AND THE LIFE STORY

An emerging theme in the study of memory for real-life and personal events is that autobiographical memory helps to locate and define the self within an ongoing life story that, simultaneously, is strongly oriented toward future goals (e.g., Pillemer, 1998; Schachter, 1996; Stein, Wade, & Liwag, 1997). For example, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) argued that a person's goals function as control processes in a self-memory system (SMS), modulating the construction of memories. Autobiographical memories are encoded and retrieved in ways that serve the goals of the current working self. As such, current goals influence how autobiographical information is absorbed and organized in the first place, and goals generate retrieval models to guide the search process later on.

In the SMS, personal goals are linked to an autobiographical knowledge base, which itself consists of information encoded at three levels of specificity: lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge (Conway &

Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Lifetime periods mark off relatively large chunks of autobiographical time, such as "my childhood years" or "my first marriage," and they correspond roughly to what I have designated as main chapters in a person's life story (McAdams, 1985). General events (e.g., "parties I attended in college," "weekend nights spent babysitting") and event-specific knowledge (e.g., "the particular evening I proposed to my wife," "my father's funeral") cover the same ground as Pillemer's (1998) *personal event memories* and what I have called *nuclear episodes* in the life story (McAdams, 1985). Indeed, the interview methodology that my colleagues and I employ in life-story research begins with accounts of life chapters, moves to accounts of particular episodes that stand out in bold print in the life story (nuclear episodes such as life-story high points, low points, and turning points), and moves eventually to accounts of future goals and plans. The life story is an integration of the reconstructed past, represented mainly as chapters and episodes, and the anticipated future, represented mainly as goals.

Some remembered episodes are more central to self-definition than are others. For example, Singer and Salovey (1993) focused on *self-defining memories,* remembered episodes that are "vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories, and related to an important unresolved theme or enduring concern in an individual's life" (p. 13). It is these kinds of memories that occupy the most prominent positions within identity as a life story. In this regard, Robinson and Taylor (1998) made an important distinction between autobiographical memories and self-narratives. They point out that people remember many episodes in life that are mundane and appear to have little relevance to their self-concepts. Autobiographical memory, therefore, comprises a vast range of personal information and experience. Self-narratives, in contrast, "consist of a set of temporally and thematically organized salient experiences and concerns that constitute one's identity" (p. 126). Self-narratives include only a subset of the remembered events stored in autobiographical memory, Robinson and Taylor suggested, and, moreover, self-narratives may also include information that is not technically part of the autobiographical memory base. An example of the latter is the individual's imagined future—how I see myself in 10 years, what events I believe I will experience one day, what I leave behind.

Nonetheless, there is significant overlap between the episodic knowledge that cognitive psychologists position within autobiographical memory and the lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge that go into the making of identity as a life story. Like many cognitive approaches to autobiographical memory, furthermore, the life-story theory of identity adopts a moderately reconstructive view of autobiographical recollections (e.g.,