# COMMENTARIES

## Time, Culture, and Stories of the Self

### Jonathan M. Adler
*Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*

### Dan P. McAdams
*Department of Psychology and Department of Human Development and Social Policy*
*Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*

The theoretical core of the James-Mead model of the dynamic self (Kashima, Gurumurthy, Ouschan, Chong, & Mattingley, 2007) takes seriously both the temporal nature of identity and the fundamental sociality and cultural entrenchment of the self. Kashima et al. (2007) suggest that work from the narrative study of lives tradition is well situated to speak to the temporal dimension of the self, for stories are inherently concerned with time (Bruner, 1990; Ricour, 1984). But work on narrative identity has as much to say about the *social* component of the self as well. In this commentary we will provide an overview of the contribution of a narrative perspective to these two principle components of Kashima et al.'s (2007) theoretical basis for the stream of enculturated consciousness.

### Time and Stories of the Self

In work that is foundational to the narrative study of lives, Bruner (1990) distinguished between two modes of thought: the paradigmatic and the narrative. The paradigmatic mode is concerned with rational analysis, logical proof, and empirical observation and is the basis for scientific reasoning and many lay conceptions about how the *physical* world works. By contrast, the narrative mode is concerned with stories, which are fundamentally about "the vicissitudes of human intention," organized in time (Bruner, 1990, 16). People typically use stories to explain how the *human* world works—how and why, that is, human beings do what they do. Stories deal with human needs, wants, and goals, which connect the present self to the past and the future. For this reason, temporality is inherent to narrative (Ricour, 1984). From about age three, human beings tell stories about their own experiences. Beginning in the adolescent and young adult years, furthermore, most people begin to put their narrated experiences to-

gether into broader and more temporally extended *life stories* (McAdams, 1985, 2001), or narrative identities. Life stories weave together the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the anticipated future in an effort to provide the self with a feeling of purpose and unity (McAdams, 2001). By explaining how a person has come to be who he or she is over time, internalized life stories function to reinforce a sense of *diachronic integration* in personal experience.

A story must obey certain basic structural standards. Temporal coherence, or the discernable adherence to an over-arching chronological order, is one such standard (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Although stories may contain scenes that do not sequentially follow the preceding one, such as flashbacks, there must be a clear sequencing to events in order for the story to make sense to a reader or listener. Disruptions in this temporal coherence have been observed as a marker of pathology in the narratives of people with schizophrenia (Lysaker, Wickett, Campbell, & Buck, 2003). In addition, life narratives must contain causal coherence, or explanatory links between occurrences separated in time (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). For example, research has shown that former psychotherapy patients who connect their past work in therapy to their current lives show better functioning than those who do not (Adler & McAdams, 2007). These causal connections between remembered events separated in time are one of the primary ways in which one's experiences are incorporated into narrative identity (Pals, 2006). Work on personal narratives thus holds this temporal component of the self as a core principle, but it is underdeveloped in the Kashima et al. (2007) model, which incorporates a simpler perspective of time. Narrative perspectives embrace time as meaningful from the human perspective—the unfolding of events across the duration of lived experience. In contrast, the Kashima et al. (2007) model appears to adopt a more

reductionistic conception of time as merely a sequence of inputs followed by outputs in their simulations.

In addition to fundamentally concerning time, personal narratives themselves change over time. The life story is a personal project that is developed in adolescence and worked on throughout the rest of the life course (McAdams, 2001). As people accumulate new experiences over time, their motivations, goals, and autobiographical priorities change and their personal narratives evolve. In a three-year longitudinal study that asked college students to recall and describe ten key scenes in their life stories on three different occasions, McAdams et al. (2006) found that less than a third of the original memories were described again at subsequent assessments. The salience and personal relevance of these particular memories may have shifted along with the changing autobiographical demands participants faced over time. However, despite these variations in the stories' manifest content, noteworthy consistencies were also observed in certain emotional and motivational themes in the narratives, as well as their degree of complexity (McAdams et al., 2006). This later finding suggests that personal narratives are temporal phenomena that show both continuity and development over time. Thus, the temporally dynamic component of the Jamesian self is especially clear at the level of narrative identity.

## Culture and Stories of the Self

George Herbert Mead expanded upon the Jamesian notion of the dynamic self by suggesting that the ever-evolving self is an inherently social phenomenon, constructed through interpersonal interaction and situated within a cultural milieu. Culture can be seen as providing a menu of options for the psychosocial construction of narrative identity to the constituents of the given culture (McAdams & Pals, 2006). This menu includes expected developmental milestones for the life course, socially acceptable plots, and particular themes that are recurrent within the culture. For example, among highly generative Americans (those especially concerned with and engaged in giving back to society), McAdams (2006) has observed a typical progression of scenes in their narratives, referred to as the "redemptive self." Appropriating American cultural themes that can be traced back to Puritan autobiographies and forward to Hollywood movies and the American self-help industry, highly generative American adults often construct life stories featuring a gifted and innocent protagonist who, equipped with strong but simple convictions, journeys forth into a dangerous world, overcoming adversity, and ultimately trying to redeem the self and the world. The redemptive self is a quintessentially American narrative identity—made and lived in America, by highly productive and caring adults who share a common cultural heritage. The connectionist model described by Kashima et al. (2007) nicely captures this fundamental entrenchment of the self in culture through their third and fourth simulations, where they demonstrate the role of social/environmental cues in directing individualistic or collectivistic narratives.

Habermas and Bluck (2000) view the "cultural concept of biography" as a template or normative grid that is internalized in late childhood and early adolescence that outlines the prevailing cultural expectations for a life story (755). It provides an instrumental guideline as people learn how to tell their personal life story, but it also provides a dominant storyline that may suppress possible alternative plots for the life. Indeed, life stories tend to echo the social categories such as gender and class that are common in cultural discourse. For example, certain feminist scholars have argued that in modern, Western societies, women have been deprived of dominant narratives of power (Heilbrun, 1988). In addition, when individuals find themselves living in two social contexts that offer incompatible cultural narratives, they may be unable to find an integrated personal narrative to tell. For example, Halbertal and Koren (2006) described the struggles of gay and lesbian orthodox Jews who find themselves with competing and irreconcilable stories about these two equally important facets of their social identities.

But personal narratives are not just drawn from the menu of cultural stories; they are also collaboratively formed through social interactions, something not fully addressed by the Kashima et al. (2007) connectionist model. There is a growing appreciation that narrative expressions of the self cannot be understood outside of the (either real or assumed) social context in which they are shared (Pasupathi, 2001). The social sharing of self stories not only serves several psychological functions (McLean, 2005), but also helps to reinforce the personal meaning of the events being recounted for the storyteller (Thorne & McLean, 2003). Pasupathi and Rich (2005) also demonstrated that when the listener is distracted, the storyteller's confidence that what he or she is describing represents a true expression of the self is undermined. So, the socially-situated nature of the self as described by Mead is clearly evidenced in studies of narrative identity.

## Conclusion

In their theoretical development of the James-Mead model of the self, Kashima et al. (2007) call attention to two aspects of selfhood that are often overlooked—the inherent temporality of the self and its fundamental cultural entrenchment. Their connectionist approach to the dynamic, social self is one sophisticated model for these complex phenomena. We have outlined the

perspective that work on narrative brings to bear on these important dimensions of identity. People's personal stories are fundamentally temporal, for they are about the intentions of human characters across time. Narrative identity itself also evolves over time in ways that have been quantified through research. While much of the content of key scenes from people's life stories may change from a given telling to later ones, a moderate degree of continuity has been observed in the thematic and structural organization of these stories, suggesting that there is some temporal stability to narrative identity.

In addition, narrative perspectives embrace the fundamentally social nature of the self. People's life stories are largely drawn from a menu of available story options provided by their culture. These menus provide the necessary structure for individual storytelling as to make it easily communicable, but in certain instances, they can also prove oppressive to people whose lives do not easily conform to dominant cultural plots or themes. Stories are collaborative endeavors, co-constructed in the (real or imagined) act of being told. The effects of listeners on the content of and the confidence in a given personal story have been well-documented.

Thus, narrative perspectives also take seriously the temporal and cultural aspects of the self captured by the James-Mead conceptualization, the core theoretical principles of Kashima et al.'s (2007) model. Work on life narrative provides another promising direction for research on the stream of enculturated consciousness.

## Note

Address correspondence to Dan P. McAdams, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, 2120 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208. E-mail: dmca@northwestern.edu

## References

Adler, J. M. & McAdams, D. P. (2007). Telling stories about therapy: Ego development, well-being, and the therapeutic relationship. In R. Josselson, A. Lieblich, & D. P. McAdams (Eds.), *The meaning of others: Narrative studies of relationships* (pp. 213–236). Washington, DC: APA Books.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Actual minds, possible worlds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a life: The emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin, 126*, 748–769.

Halbertal, T. H., & Koren, I. (2006). Between "being" and "doing": Conflict and coherence in the identity formation of gay and lesbian orthodox Jews. In D. P. McAdams, R. Josselson, and A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Identity and story: Creating self in narrative* (pp. 37–61). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press.

Heilbrun, C. (1988). *Writing a woman's life.* New York: Norton.

Kashima, Y., Gurumurthy, A. K., Ouschan, L., Chong, T., & Mattingly, J. (2007). Connectionism and self: James, Mead, and the stream of enculturated consciousness. *Psychological Inquiry, 18(2)*, 73–96.

Lysaker, P. H., Wickett, A. M., Campbell, K., & Buck, K. D. (2003). Movement towards coherence in the psychotherapy of schizophrenia: A method for assessing narrative transformation. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 191(8)*, 538–541.

McAdams, D. P. (1985). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity.* New York: Guilford Press.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*, 100–122.

McAdams, D. P. (2006). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by.* New York: Oxford University Press.

McAdams, D. P., Bauer, J. J., Sakaeda, A. R., Anyidoho, N. A., Machado, M. A., Magrino-Failla, K., White, K. W., & Pals, J. L. (2006). Continuity and change in the life story: A longitudinal study of autobiographical memories in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality, 74(5)*, 1371–1400.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist, 61*, 204–217.

McLean, K. C. (2005). Late adolescent identity development: Narrative meaning making and memory telling. *Developmental Psychology, 41*, 683–691.

Pals, J. L. (2006). Constructing the "springboard effect": Causal connections, self-making, and growth within the life story. In D. P. McAdams, R. Josselson, and Lieblch (Eds.), *Identity and story: Creating self in narrative* (pp. 175–199). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press.

Pasupathi, M. (2001). The social construction of the personal past and its implications for adult development. *Psychological Bulletin, 127*, 651–672.

Pasupathi, M., & Rich, B. (2005). Inattentive listening undermines self-verification in personal storytelling. *Journal of Personality, 73*, 1051–1085.

Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Thorne, A., & McLean, K. C. (2003). Telling traumatic events in adolescence: A study of master narrative positioning. In R. Fivush and C. A. Haden (Eds.), *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self* (pp. 169–185). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.