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Developing a Life Story: Constructing Relations between Self and Experience in Autobiographical Narratives

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Adolescence · Adult development · Life story · Self

Abstract
In this paper, we consider how the life story develops through the creation of self-event connections in narrating experiences. We first outline the ways in which such connections have been implied by existing work on the life story, and then consider the varieties of such connections that we see in our own work. That work suggests that self-event connections can construct both a stable sense of self as well as a sense of how the self has changed across time. Moreover, different types of connections have different implications for the development of the life story. We also consider developmental and other factors which make one or another type of connection more likely. Finally, we consider two issues for future work, as well as some methodological considerations involved in testing those proposals.
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How do we know that we are the same person over time? This problem, termed in philosophy the problem of *personal identity,* remains current in both philosophy [e.g., Christman, 2004; Schectman, 2003], and in psychology [Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; McAdams, 1996; Troll & Skaff, 1997]. The problem of personal identity *is fundamentally a developmental problem*. During later childhood and early adolescence, as people begin to construct a sense of their abstract and enduring characteristics, issues of personal consistency become important [Chandler et al., 2003; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Harter & Monsour, 1992; Kroger, 2003]. Moreover, failures to resolve the problem of personal identity during adolescence are linked to suicidality [Chandler et al., 2003], thus, the problem is not merely a theoretical abstraction. Once the problem emerges, however, the continuing develop-

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ment of individuals across adulthood means that people must continue to negotiate a sense of continuity in the midst of change. Some theorists believe that the problem of personal identity takes on a renewed importance in later life [e.g,. Butler, 1963; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Troll & Skaff, 1997]. Thus, identity is a developmental problem in two ways: first, in that it first emerges at a particular age, and second, in that it remains a problem precisely because individuals continue to develop across the lifespan.

Among the earliest notions about how individuals resolve this problem was Locke's proposal [Locke, 1996] that the capacity to remember the past provides us with a sense of continuity, although this solution clearly does not resolve all the issues [Schectman, 2003]. Recent developmental work [Chandler et al., 2003] examines a variety of reasoning strategies individuals have for resolving the issue, some of which are more complex and sophisticated than others, many (both simple and complex) of which are described as *narrative* strategies. Personality researchers have posited that the creation of a life story [McAdams, 1993] serves to resolve this particular identity problem, among others. The life story is a selective autobiographical narrative which articulates how the important events of our lives are shaped by, and have shaped, our sense of self [McAdams, 1993; McAdams, 1996]. In McAdams terms, the life story is an internal story-like mental representation that individuals carry with them from situation to situation; other researchers have proposed something more akin to a kind of schema that permits people to construct episodes of the life story around important life periods, highly significant events, and recurrent themes or issues [Bluck & Habermas, 2000]. That representation is subject to change over time, as a person's life unfolds.

A functional life story addresses the issue of personal identity by describing how the same person came to be the current self, via the remembering and interpretation of past experiences. Over time, the life story must change to accommodate new experiences and novel themes; of course, the life story also serves as a framework for assimilating new events in terms of recurrent identity themes. *Thus, the life story itself develops in terms of its content and themes.* This latter issue is the one that concerns us in the present work – in other words, we are focusing upon the second sense in which personal identity is a developmental problem.

Because the problem of personal identity and the creation of a life story are both features of late adolescent and adult development, we focus on late adolescence and adulthood throughout this paper unless otherwise noted. Children may also engage in storytelling, but at present, most findings suggest that prior to adolescence, there is no life story to develop, rather, there are precursors to the life story such as the ability to narrate events [Habermas & Paha, 2001].

Unfortunately, explorations of how the life story develops raise serious problems for empirical research. First, in its entirety, the life story is too complex and cumbersome to assess. While McAdams and others [e.g., Habermas & Bluck, 2000] believe that the life story is a representation that people hold about how they came to be, they also view the life story as something that is not produced in its entirety on any specific occasion. Second, the life story is a highly idiosyncratic aspect of the person [Hooker & McAdams, 2003; McAdams, 1996], and this makes it difficult to construct normative developmental hypotheses about the content of the life story. Thus, explorations of the development of the life story are sparse, and have primarily concentrated on developmental differences in the *capacity* and *motivation* to construct

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narratives of self and experience rather than on the development of life stories. Such studies suggest that the capacity to build such narratives emerges in mid- to late adolescence [Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001], and that such narratives increase in frequency throughout adulthood [Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; Pasupathi & Mansour, in press]. These findings demonstrate that the problem of personal identity emerges during adolescence [Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Harter & Monsour, 1992]; self and personality researchers have amassed data suggesting this is a problem that remains important across adulthood [Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee, & Lehman, 1996; Donahue, 1994; Troll & Skaff, 1997]. Thus, the *task* of building a life story is one contoured in part by chronological age – the first sense in which personal identity and the life story are developmental problems. This is not the same as considerations of how the life story itself develops for individuals.

Theoretically, the life story itself grows through the addition of new episodes and themes, as well as the re-interpretation of old events; people may also change their life stories by dropping events and themes. In our review, we take up the issue of how novel events might be added to the life story – that is, we focus on the addition of new episodes. If an event is added to the life story, we would expect people to view it as an important part of their autobiography, and perhaps to think of and talk about it frequently in contexts that require them to introduce, present, or explain themselves. We propose that events are more likely to be added to the life story when people construct links between the event and their sense of self, or what we term *self-event connections*. A self-event connection is *the relationship between a given experience and one's sense of self constructed within a particular narrative.* Such relationships are integral to the development of a life story via adding episodes.

Consider two examples, both drawn from data recently collected in our laboratory (see table 1, row 8). In this particular study, young adult college students were asked to write about recent experiences that contradicted their sense of self in an anonymous questionnaire. One woman wrote that while playing a board game at her in-laws during the holidays, she was losing. She writes that she is a highly competitive and hostile person, and thus, was angry at the impending loss. At that point, her husband tried to help her to play better. She snarled in response, 'I don't need any help from a moron like you!' All involved (her in-laws, husband and she herself) sat shocked for a moment. Her husband adeptly turned the incident into a joke by teasingly responding, and in the following days, the couple discussed the event privately, after which she felt their relationship was stronger.

In the same study, a man wrote about having ignored his best male friend since 5th grade, in favor of dates with women during their freshman year. He once dropped plans with his friend to go to an NBA basketball game with a woman, and failed even to call his friend, who understandably was enraged. He closes his story by writing 'I realized at that point when I found out how angry he was that … I wasn't a very good friend.'

Like any narratives, these are rich with implications about the tellers. Both young adult narrators construct stories that revolve around intimacy and separation, conflicts believed to be paramount at this age period [Conway & Holmes, 2004; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Thorne, 1995]. Our young female narrator also emphasized redemptive themes – out of this negative experience comes a strengthened relationship – an emphasis prevalent among Americans [McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Pals, 2006]. In contrast, the young male narrator builds a con-

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Table 1. Self-event connections across different studies and contexts

Event	Modality	Female %	European-American %	Sample	Self-event connection					% with connection
					none	explain	cause	dismiss	reveal	
Everyday positive[1]	conversation with attentive friend	50	90	introductory psychology	14	2	1	0	1	22
Everyday positive[1]	conversation with distracted friend	50	90	introductory psychology	12	3	1	1	2	37
Turning point[2]	interview	52	67	adult community (age 18–86)	44	4	15	4	1	35
Crisis/time of self-doubt[2]	interview	52	67	adult community (age 18–86)	62	5	0	8	0	17
Disclosed[2]	written	62	81	adult community (age 18–89)	99	11	14	1	5	24
Undisclosed[3]	written	62	81	adult community (age 18–89)	101	10	6	6	7	22
Self-confirming[4]	written	55	83	introductory psychology	18	7	0	2	0	33
Self-contradictory[4]	written	57	91	introductory psychology	4	1	0	12	0	76
First-time[4]	written	62	79	introductory psychology	24	0	2	0	0	8
Repeated[4]	written	41	82	introductory psychology	23	3	0	0	0	12

[1] See Pasupathi & Rich [2005], Study 2, for more details; self-event relations results are previously unpublished.
[2] See Pasupathi & Mansour in press], for more details and analyses of self-event relations.
[3] See Pasupathi [in press] for details; self-event relations results previously unpublished.
[4] Unpublished data from ongoing data collection, Pasupathi laboratory.

tamination sequence, in which positive events (dates with women) spoil a more important and long-term relationship.

Whether these particular brief stories become part of their narrator's life stories is something we cannot know. However, in these two cases, a further element of both narratives makes that more likely – both narratives explicitly drew a connection between the experience being narrated, and a self-conception potentially held by the narrators. Whether or not these events become part of the life story, the creation of these narratives may also have some incremental effect on self-conceptions held by the narrators – strengthening the young woman's view of herself as highly competitive, for example, or creating a new self-conception as an unreliable friend, in the case of the young man. Thus, the creation of self-event relations influences both the development of the life story, and the development of self-conceptions more broadly [see McLean & Thorne, 2006].

The developmental model underlying our reasoning is depicted, simply, in figure 1. Importantly, this model pertains to adolescents and adults with at least a rudimentary life story, although elements of it may also be relevant at earlier developmental periods. We propose that after experiences occur, people may or may not

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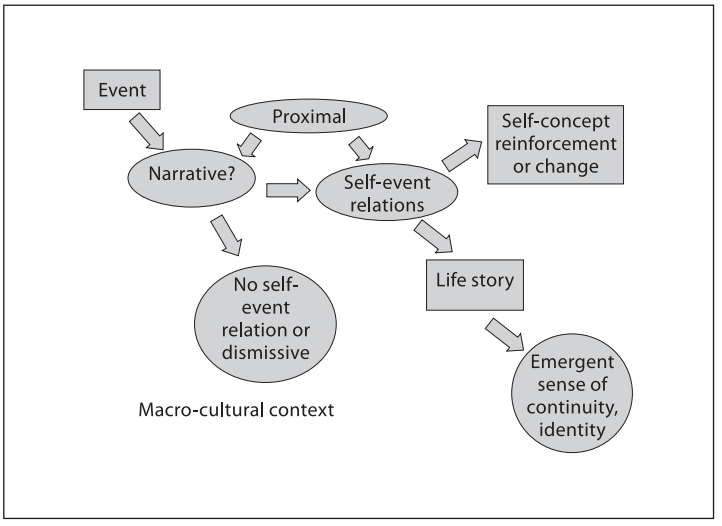


Fig. 1. Developmental model of how events may become part of the life story.

construct a narrative of the experience. The initial construction of narratives about experiences often occurs in the immediate aftermath of an event [Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Phillipot, 1998] or even during the event itself [Tessler & Nelson, 1994], although people also tell stories about more distant events, such as childhood experiences. Whether people tell a story about an event depends in part on the proximal contexts that allow for such narration (an available listener, some reason for telling the story) as well as on their own characteristics (e.g., habitual diary-keeping, age). If they construct a narrative, it may contain self-event connections; if it does, it may in turn become part of the life story, and it likely has some bearing on self-conceptions. If it does not, it is less likely to become part of the life story or to influence self-conceptions. As also shown, the construction of such connections, as well as the entire sequence from event to story to self and life story, occurs within a particular cultural context.

Narratives, Selves, and Life Stories Are Culturally Grounded

Stories, selves, and autobiographies are shaped, in part, by the cultures within which individual experiences unfold [Bruner, 1990; Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1995; Schuman, Rieger, & Gaidys, 1994]. Cultures provide different experiences to begin with – consider the life events in a subsistence agricultural world versus those occurring in Manhattan. Even events shared by many humans, such as becoming a parent, differ across different cultures. Beyond events, cultures entail shared beliefs about what constitutes a self and how selves are valued, what constitutes a tellable story and how stories should be told. If selves and

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stories both form basic building blocks of a life story and are culturally grounded, life stories are consequently culturally shaped. Further, assumptions individuals within a culture hold about the nature of a 'good' life are also relevant to the shaping of a life story. To further complicate matters, events, as well as the good 'selves', 'stories', and life stories that may be relevant for a particular group will also differ by gender or socioeconomic class within cultures [Fivush, 1998; Miller, Mintz, Hoogstra, Fung, & Potts, 1992; Thorne & McLean, 2003]. Importantly, cultures are not monolithic prescriptions that individuals follow – rather, cultures involve sets of shared beliefs and assumptions with which individuals enter into negotiation when they construct themselves and their stories [Wainryb, 2006]. So, for example, while people in the United States share an emphasis on redemptive stories, in which challenges and difficulties lead to positive outcomes [McAdams, 2006], individuals may or may not adopt this frame in constructing a personal story about a crisis. The choice individuals make carries meaning for themselves and their audiences, based on the negotiation of cultural ideals that it reflects.

However, despite the clear import of culture, the work on which we draw below is predominantly based on European-American samples, and to a lesser extent, African-American samples. The exceptions typically involve individuals from relatively industrialized, cosmopolitan settings, such as German and Austrian samples, or Chinese individuals dwelling in Hong Kong or Beijing. Moreover, these exceptions are often from research on autobiographical remembering rather than on the life story. The life story draws on autobiographical memory, but is a selective set of events and themes which serves to explain 'how I came to be who I am'; autobiographical memory research need not draw on the life story per se. As such, the extant cross-cultural work does not directly address issues of life story development.

Developing the Life Story: Linking Self and Experience across Time

The ability to construct a life story, and self-event relations within one, is something that develops over time. Before individuals develop a life story, they must be able to engage in the narrative reconstruction of their past. Research on the development of autobiographical remembering in different cultures has examined how remembering by children and adults together scaffolds children's capacity to create personal memory narratives [e.g., Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Fivush, 1991; Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Wang, 2004]. Early remembering by parents and children varies within and across cultures in the extent to which parents solicit elaborative remembering from children [Harley & Reese, 1999; Reese & Fivush, 1993]. Elaborative remembering includes both more details about what happened during an event, and interpretive, evaluative information such as what the experience meant to the individual. Notably, such information, especially emotional evaluation of events, differs in remembering with boys versus remembering with girls [Fivush, 1998]. Elaborated and evaluative information provides an individuated perspective on a shared event, forming the basis for an individuated self. In adults, this type of elaboration includes claims about the self-related implications of an experience [Pasupathi, 2006; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2006]; that is, this is the kind of information required for self-event connections. Elaborative parents not only elicit more elaboration from their children

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in concurrent remembering, but they also exert long-term influence on the style with which their children recall personal experiences in other contexts [Harley & Reese, 1999; Reese & Fivush, 1993].

Parent-child storytelling varies not only within groups, but also between groups. For example, the extent to which children are simply given latitude to express their own version of events varies by class and ethnicity, with middle- and upper-middle class parents and European-Americans providing greater latitude than working-class parents and African-Americans [Heath, 1983; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998]. More pertinent to self-event relations, Wang, Leichtman, and their colleagues [Han et al., 1998; Wang, 2004] have shown that Asian parents and children construct stories that are less elaborated along individual lines. In contrast, Asian parents and children, and subsequently, Asian adults [Wang & Conway, 2004] place greater emphasis on social interactions, relationships, and morals in their memory narratives, with less emphasis on an individual, unique perspective on personally significant, one-time events. This might suggest fewer self-event links in narratives from Asian groups than are observed in American samples.

While autobiographical memory work suggests that elaborative remembering and parental scaffolding lays a basis for the creation of self-event connections in memory narratives, the nature of the self changes across early childhood, where memory researchers focus, to adolescence and adulthood, where life story research is concentrated. The early childhood self, as constructed in narrative, might be termed an experiential self – that is, narratives are rich with self-implications to the extent that they elaborate the child's emotional reactions and understandings [Fivush, 1998]. While adolescent and adult memory narratives continue to construct this type of self, they also reflect and create a more conceptual self – a set of beliefs about one's capabilities, relationships, and roles [Harter, 1998]. Moreover, it is during adolescence and adulthood that a concern with personal identity, and especially continuity across time, emerges [Chandler et al., 2003; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Marcia, 1966].

Not surprisingly, then, the life story first appears during adolescence [Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001]. Habermas and colleagues have suggested this is because of important cognitive achievements for the construction of different kinds of coherence, one of which Habermas and Bluck [2000] termed *global coherence*. Global coherence is created by drawing connections between life events, and personal characteristics and themes. In short, *self-event relations* create global coherence in the life story. Two types of global coherence were posited by Habermas and colleagues: relations in which the self causes an experience to occur, and relations in which the self is changed or shaped by an experience.

Habermas and Paha [2001] asked early, middle, and late German adolescents to write down 5 of their most important attributes, and memories of 7 events that were important and significant to them. Participants were then instructed to incorporate those seven memories into a life narrative that explained how the participant had become the person with those important attributes. The resulting narratives were coded for causal links, particularly between personality and events narrated [Habermas & Paha, 2001]. Explicit causal links between personal attributes and experiences were more likely among middle and older adolescents, and only older adolescents reported on how experiences shaped or changed their personality. In other words, and consistent with other findings on both German and American samples

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[Bluck & Glueck, 2004], adolescents are only beginning to draw connections between their experiences and their sense of themselves, even under highly supportive circumstances. Other work suggests that across adulthood, people continue to grow in their capacity to draw these types of connections between experience and self [Bauer & McAdams, 2005; Pasupathi & Mansour, in press].

An already substantial body of literature around the life story links elements of the life story to personality [Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Blagov & Singer, 2004; McLean & Pasupathi, in press; Singer, 1990], and to well-being [Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; King & Raspin, 2004; Pals, 2006]. The life story clearly relates experiences and their narration to other elements of the self. However, this work doesn't always address how individuals explicitly draw such links or engage in such reasoning within their narratives. Nor, by extension, does it address how such links relate to changes in the life story over time. Most samples are adult – ranging from college-aged samples to middle adulthood or even old age, and they are predominantly middle-class and predominantly European-American. When it is relevant to self-event connections, the primary focus of this work is on the adaptive (or maladaptive) nature of such constructions, primarily as they relate to changes in the self over time.

Among these are *redemption* and *contamination* sequences [McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001]. A redemption sequence is one in which a bad experience can be changed or be given new meaning by the subsequent good that followed it, as the young woman noted earlier, the event redeemed the negative interaction with her husband through a deepened and strengthened relationship. In contrast the contamination sequence involves the move from good to bad, as with the contamination of the dates with women by the neglect of a friend. McAdams [McAdams, 2006] has argued that the United States uniquely and strongly emphasizes redemptive storytelling, and in US samples, redemption imagery is more common than contamination imagery, and is positively correlated with self-report measures of mental health and well-being [McAdams, 2006; McAdams et al., 2001]. But redemption and contamination sequences need not explicitly involve links to self-conceptions.

Others have emphasized how adults link experiences to positive self-change, including drawing new insights about the self [McLean & Thorne, 2003, 2006], reflecting active ways of changing in response to new demands [King & Patterson, 2000], or integrating the experience with important values, themes, or self-conceptions [Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b; Bluck & Glueck, 2004]. Importantly for our purposes, these approaches all emphasize the ways that adolescents and adults narrate an event as having *caused* changes in the self.

Negative transformations are also possible; in one paper, Pals [2006] explicitly considers two of these 'via' case studies of individuals' life stories. In one, contamination sequences take on a particular form, in which negative experiences are so threatening that they force someone to narrow her sense of identity and 'prune' problematic life domains. Negative relationship experiences *cause* the person to decide not to pursue relationships at all – thus ridding her identity of a (romantic) relational component. In another case reviewed by Pals, growth is limited because the life story separates positive trajectories, in which positive events lead to positive self-development, and negative trajectories, in which negative events to negative self-development [see also McAdams' notions of isolation or dissociation as narrative de-

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fenses in McAdams, 1998].[1] This type of organization precludes the redemptive possibility of finding growth in adversity – of seeing that negative events cause positive changes (or, considering the corrupting nature of power, how positive events might cause negative changes).

In fact, a wide array of findings on negative events in the life story generally points to the importance of the experience of tension [Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004] or the acknowledgement of a negative impact [Pals, 2006] as necessary for people to construct positive changes in the self that result from experiences [see also Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; King & Patterson, 2000]. In other words, to construct a connection in which negative experiences result in a changed, improved self, people must acknowledge the negative or stressful impact of that experience first.

The presence of integration, insights, accommodative changes, redemptive sequences, and other indicators that the self is positively changed as a result of experiences are linked to higher well-being [Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; King & Patterson, 2000; King & Raspin, 2004; Pals, in press]. These same narrative characteristics have also been related to indicators of psychological maturity, such as ego-development [King & Patterson, 2000; Pals, in press] or generativity [McAdams et al., 1997, 2001]. In other words, adults who tell stories that account for how their lives have changed them in positive ways are likely to be both happier and more mature. It is likely that the causal arrow in this finding runs in both directions. That is, that telling the 'right' story may promote ego-development and subjective well-being, both idealized endpoints of adult development. But creating such stories also depends on the development of the person telling the story. That is, those with higher levels of ego maturity and well-being may be better poised to tell the adaptive story.

If our goal is to understand how individuals develop their life story in adolescence and adulthood, there are several limitations to these findings. First, because researchers begin with excerpts of the life story, their work does not examine *the selection of events for the life story*. Further, the focus has been on only two types of self-event relations, broadly defined, and in the adult research, almost exclusively on change in the self caused by events. In contrast to autobiographical memory research, life story work has not typically examined populations from different cultures. Finally, this work has been primarily concerned with well-being and psychological maturity as outcomes of narrative growth. In contrast, the question of growth of the life story in adolescence and adulthood has not been examined. We believe that the construction of self-event relations in narratives is crucial for understanding how people add, or do not add, episodes to the life story. That is, a focus on self-event relations can illuminate the process by which the life story itself develops, although it has not been employed this way to date. A first step in this regard is to examine the varieties of self-event relations that are evident in narratives about personal experience. Next, we present the taxonomy that we have developed over the last several years.

[1] This is a narrative analogue of what Showers [Showers, Abramson, & Hogan, 1998] has called compartmentalization, which is a way of structuring the self in which positive attributes and negative attributes are separately represented. Showers has suggested that this way of dealing with positive and negative self-attributes is adaptive for coping with negative emotions.

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A Taxonomy of Self-Event Relations

In developing our proposed set of relations, we have examined a wide range of narratives drawn from ongoing work. Table 1 gives an overview of the sources for the taxonomy we have developed. As shown there, the samples include both college samples drawn from an introductory psychology subject pool, and adult lifespan samples drawn from the larger community. In some cases we have examined narratives about everyday experiences, while in others we have focused on events that are already part of people's life stories. In some cases we have examined stories delivered in conversation to a close friend, while in others we have examined written narratives or narratives elicited in structured interviews. As shown in table 1, our samples were predominantly European-American, although in one study [Pasupathi & Mansour, in press, Study 1], we were able to show, tentatively, that African-Americans and European-Americans did not differ appreciably in their use of self-event relations.

Based on that work, we argue for four possible self-event relations in narratives, as well as the possibility that no such connection is made explicitly [McLean & Thorne, 2006; Thorne et al., 2004]. Next, we define these five possibilities for self-event relations and consider their developmental import. We begin with a focus on events *without such connections*. For example, consider the following story (table 1, row 5):

> In July 1997, I took a raft trip on the middle fork of the Salmon River in Idaho. This was a self-guided trip without 'guides'. The trip preparation was uneventful, but from the time we left Boise it was anything but on the way to the launch site one of the vehicles.

Here, the storyteller provides a clear, if skeletal narrative, but does not provide any sense of how the experience fits with his self-conceptions. Notably, the rafting trip could be described as reflecting a love of risk and adventure, or as having revealed a previously unrecognized pleasure in risk, or even as having caused the person to avoid such trips forever in the future. As articulated, however, it does not explicitly indicate any of these things.

No-connection narratives are quite prevalent; and as shown in table 1, they constituted the majority of narratives in all but one sample. Other researchers also find that the majority of narratives do not contain any personal insights, self-transformations, self-stability, or related content [McLean & Thorne, 2006; Thorne et al., 2004]. This is true both for heterogeneous, everyday events [e.g., Pasupathi, 2006; Pasupathi & Mansour, in press], as well as of more momentous, or self-defining events [McLean & Thorne, 2006; Thorne et al., 2004]; it is also true across modalities (table 1). Given the prevalence of narratives that do not explicitly link events to the self, even among narratives that are quite reasonably considered part of the life story, they are important to consider. Two issues arise in interpreting narratives without self-event relations. The first is whether this means that the event is unrelated to participants' sense of self. The second is, assuming that the lack of self-event relations truly reflects participants' views, the developmental implications of such narratives.

First, the absence of evidence that people make a narrative link on a particular occasion does not constitute evidence that people actually believe there to be no re-

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lation between the experience and their sense of self. For example, in pilot data from 22 participants whose narratives involved no connections between self and experience, fully 12 subsequently acknowledged some change in their self-views as a result of the experience, when directly queried. Twenty of these 22 participants, when prompted, also judged that the experience illustrated some stable quality they possessed. Such prompting may also occur in everyday settings when people talk about experiences with friends and family.

Second, the connection between events and selves is already embedded within the discursive context. Asked for turning points or crises, people may not explicitly include a self-event relation because that relation is implied or articulated in the interviewer's question. Because people in conversations preferentially highlight novel information over that which has already been established [see Clark, 1996], asking for a turning point may, ironically, constitute a shared understanding between interviewer and interviewee that this event caused change in the person's sense of self. In other words, the production of self-event connections in discourse is intrinsically collaborative, and no-connection narratives must be interpreted within the discursive context that elicited them.[2]

Finally, no-connection narratives may be important for identity, in particular, as they are told [McLean & Thorne, 2006; Pasupathi, 2006]. The lack of a self-event connection made by the participant is not the same as saying that the narrative contains no information about the storyteller, or that the narrative is 'without meaning'. In fact, *all* of our no-connection narratives push the reader to make inferences and draw conclusions about the characteristics of the storyteller and main character, as well as communicating many other meanings. Thus, in being communicated, such 'no-connection' stories are likely to be understood and interpreted in ways that do create identity – both for participants and for their audiences.

When the absence of self-event relations is real – that is, it reflects how the person thinks about the experience, one implication is that an event is not likely to become part of the person's life story, and may be more likely to be forgotten over time. In many cases, such as when events are relatively unimportant, there are likely few developmental consequences for drawing no link to the self.

In other cases, however, the integration of experiences with the self may be of great importance for mental and physical health [Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999]. When an important event remains unconnected to the self and unincluded in the life story, this at best diminishes individuals' opportunities for growth and self-insights [King & Patterson, 2000; King & Raspin, 2004; Pals, 2006], reducing both the complexity of self-conceptions and the capacity of the life story to do its work in providing continuity. At worst, it can create incoherence between events in the person's life, and their way of thinking about themselves – and such incoherence, in domains like at-

[2] A methodological corollary to this notion is that narrative researchers will always 'get what they asked for.' If the question is how individuals construct self-experience relations (or indeed, any other type of narrative content of interest) under 'optimal' conditions, explicitly requesting such connections in an interview or questionnaire makes sense. If the question has to do with spontaneous and unprompted constructions, those explicit requests are problematic. If the question has to do with ecologically valid examinations of how people create those connections, we would argue for the importance of everyday conversations as a window onto that process.

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tachment, is linked to poorer mental health and relationship functioning [Main, 1995]. So, an inability to integrate experiences with the self may compromise the individual's development over time.

Self-Event Relations That Maintain Stability

One of the most common types of self-event links we observed in our data involved the self explaining the experience or being illustrated by the experience. In *explain/illustrate* links, the self 'causes' the experience to occur, and the relationship constructs continuity through stability. For example, consider the following story (drawn from table 1, row 5):

> Late last year a close friend hosted a Christmas party at a rental in Park City. She knew that I was a pretty good cook and invited me to cater it. My friend (we'll call her Lois), is around my mothers age, so I didn't really expect to be invited at all. Therefore, I was flattered when she included me, if only as the help. Lois provided some of the recipes and asked me to come up with some of my own. She gave me the credit card and sent me to the market for the ingredients. Eight hours later the guests began arriving just as I dished up the last menu item. Things went even better than expected.

The catering experience here is explained by the storyteller's talent (and details about the experience, such as being asked to contribute recipes, serve to further elaborate and illustrate this self-concept). This type of self-event relationship appears to emerge in mid-adolescence [Habermas & Paha, 2001], and if the results of Habermas' study are generalizable, probably follows shortly after the emergence of struggles with abstract traits, in late childhood and early adolescence [Harter, 1998].

Another class of self-event relationships was less prevalent in our data, but will sound strikingly familiar to social psychologists and also resonate with ideas about defense mechanisms in narratives [McAdams, 1998]. People sometimes narrated experiences in ways that explicitly raised (typically negative) implications for the self, and then *dismissed* those implications. As seen in table 1, this construction was especially prevalent in our sample of narratives about self-contradictory events – and in fact, that sample was the only sample in which the majority of events involved a self-event relation, and the bulk of those events were narrated with a dismiss connection. Often, the dismiss connection was established by attributing the behavior to exigent circumstances (fear of being hurt), and by emphasizing the fact that the behavior occurred once and was not repeated (first and last time…). For example, drawn from table 1, row 6:

> At a conference in San Antonio, I met a man in the hall after the conference. We had several drinks, enjoyed each others' company, walked along the River Walk until the early morning. At some point, he persuaded me to return to his hotel room with him. Once there, I realized that I had done an incredibly stupid thing. I felt that if I refused his advances, I could end up hurt – so I went along with him – he was much larger than I am and managed to leave without waking him. First and last time I did anything like that.

Another example of a *dismissal* (table 1, row 6) employs mitigating circumstances (the challenge of the course), and minimization (not copying the whole test).

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> I know that this may seem silly, because a lot of people do it, and it was 4 years ago, but it is still embarrassing none the less. In high school when taking a test in my French class, a subject that I found very challenging, while taking a difficult test, I didn't know what to write, so I looked at the person's paper who was sitting next to me. I don't think that cheating is right and it is not as though I copied the entire test, or as if I smuggled in answers, but I did cheat.

In sum, there are at least two self-event relations that construct a stable sense of self. One is to view experiences as caused by, or illustrating, the existing, stable self. The other is to narrate unusual experiences in ways that dismiss any potential pressure they exert for change in the self.

Developmental Implications for Stability-Maintaining Connections

Both 'explain' and 'dismiss' relations construct a stable sense of self. Thus, in terms of the life story, they build a story about a stable, consistent self whose characteristics influence life experiences, and whose occasional deviations from that self can be explained by circumstance or chance. If people construct an explain relation, the resulting experience may or may not become part of the life story – if it is sufficiently good at illustrating the impact of a trait, or if it is a very salient example, it may serve as a nuclear episode of stability.

In terms of the self-concept, explain constructions tie a trait to behavioral evidence, thus serving to bolster and enhance the strength of self-conceptions. Not only might extraverts remain extraverted through accumulating extraversion-supporting experiences [Billig, Hershberger, Iacono, & McGue, 1996; Newman, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1997], they may also bolster stability by seeing their life experiences as explained by their own extraversion, thus providing ever more evidence that they are, indeed, extraverted.

Dismiss connections result in an explicit rejection of an experience from the life story. That is, dismiss connections represent an overt decision that an event is irrelevant to 'how I came to be me,' or a culling of the event form the individual's subjective theory of their own self-development. Dismiss events construct stability by explaining away an event that might otherwise create a press towards change. This can deprive individuals of an opportunity to develop a more complex and experience-consistent conception of themselves.

Dismiss connections indulged in too often can lead to a type of incoherence in the self in which behavior is disconnected from people's self-conceptions. In our exploratory data, for example, two individuals constructed dismiss connections for experiences that they reported having repeatedly. These individuals also reported extremely low levels of psychological well-being, suggesting that discounting the self-relevance of highly frequent experiences has a cost. A more severe example stems from a qualitative examination of sex offenders [Scully & Marolla, 1984]; participants (all rapists) were classified as deniers or admitters based on the characteristics of their narratives about their crimes. Deniers told dismiss narratives in our terms, blaming the victim for the crime. However, when the same individual commits repeated crimes, it becomes more and more difficult to see varying victims as responsible, rather than the rapist who is common to all the events. Moreover, the rapists who deny culpability also deny themselves the possibility for insights about

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their criminal history and how it might be changed in the future. This brings us to our next set of possible self-event relations – those which construct change in the self.

Rendering Discontinuity into Continuity: Expressing Change in Relation to Experience

In the narratives we have collected over the past several years, people often expressed how experiences had changed their sense of themselves. They did so in two different ways, however. We termed these two types of connection *cause* relations and *reveal* relations. While both relations express a change in the self, these relations differ in the nature of the change and consequently, in their implications for the life story.

As in earlier work by Habermas and colleagues, we also found examples where people attributed a change in their beliefs about themselves to an experience – the notion of experiences *causing* self-views to change. As shown in table 1, cause relations are quite common within the set of narratives that involved some type of self-event relation. For example, one participant (table 1, row 6) wrote:

> I've always wanted to write my autobiography but never found the time and when I did, I discovered I was not sure I wanted to expose my families secrets, sadness, failing, and unhappiness. I finally decided to go ahead but not tell anyone in my family. At first I wrote in a superficial manner – that was five years ago- now, I'm able to go more in depth and as I write, I've found more compassion for those people who shaped my life.

The emergence of compassion for others as a personal characteristic here results from the writing process, and particularly from being able to go into depth while writing.

Other changes caused by experiences in our data were negative. The following story (table 1, row 3) recounts a traumatic experience that led to fearfulness in general, and racist fears in particular, and in turn to a decision to face the fears and learn to survive.

> The one moment I can point to as a turning point was a time, umm, my first year at the University of Chicago where I was just beginning to like the school and I ah I wandered into the wrong part of town and got mugged and beaten and an amnesia about it and still don't remember it. Um, and that was a real trauma, both physical and mental and emotional, umm, for me and I went back to disliking where I was and what I was doing. And, that and the sort of the, what I had to do to get over it in terms of um, getting back to be comfortable with, with what I was doing and moving around and um, my sort of general, race relationship issues that go on in Chicago. So I didn't want to, it had been a- it had been a black street gang that attacked me. And I didn't want to see black people. Even though some, I mean, even though the people that I that I knew that were black I got along with fine, there was something about the unknown and it, it really drove me nuts to, to have to be that way. And so I was just sort of like frightened and unhappy with being frightened and ah, really it was a time when I had to I had to buckle down and face ah, make some changes.

These examples are classic ones of redemptive and contaminating stories, or positive and negative self-transformations. They share a common thread in the sense that they both articulate changes in the self *caused* by experience.

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One of the rarest, but most interesting self-event relations we observed we termed a *reveal* connection. Narratives with *reveal* relations argue that an experience revealed a previously possessed, but unrecognized, quality. For example, one woman (table 1, row 3) told about how the experience of seeing a film gave her words to express a self-perception she hadn't previously been able to articulate.

> A scene from *War of the Roses,* a Michael Douglas movie, pinpointed what I felt for many years but did not realize. It was a need for freedom. My marriage has been a very good one yet in some respects it might have been best if I had stayed single. I was an airline stewardess – still love airplanes and flying. At the time (1954), when you got married you could no longer continue flying so I took on other duties with the airline. Things were never the same and although I love my husband I'm afraid there will always be regrets.

Note that the need for freedom in this storyteller was not something that was caused by seeing the film, rather, it existed prior to the film and the film allowed her to recognize it.

Thus, *reveal* relations, while constructing a change in self-perceptions, do not locate the change in the self. Rather, they denote a change in how that object is perceived, usually implying that the new vision of oneself is more comprehensive, true, or real [Lakoff, 1994].

What Are the Developmental Implications of Change Connections?

Both types of change connections express how experiences have led to changes in the way people view and describe themselves over time. And, in so doing, they may form important components of the life story. So, one implication of constructing change self-event relations in general is a higher likelihood that experiences become part of the life story. Additionally, the two types of relations construct new qualities in the person's self-concept. As a consequence, they may also lead to changes in the self-concept. However, as with stability-promoting relations, change relations also may have different implications depending on which type of change relation is constructed, and this is especially true for the life story.

Causal relationships are future-oriented in terms of their impact on the life story. Because they acknowledge a change in the self, they do not require narrative re-accounting for past behavior that was inconsistent with the new self. However, they do imply that the future of the life story will now look different as a result of the new self, and that this particular event will become a turning point in that life story.

Revelations are different – they point to a past self that went unrecognized. This kind of discontinuity is potentially more troubling for people because revelations raise narrative questions about the pre-revelatory period in someone's life. That is, if this quality is and always was part of the self, why was this quality absent from past events, behaviors, and self-conceptions?

One case where revelatory narrative structures are common is that of sexual identity narratives, or coming-out stories [Brubaker, 2003 unpubl.; Savin-Williams, 1998; Whisman, 1996]. Researchers and theorists note several commonalities in such stories. First, and especially for men, the new sexual identity is seen as something that existed prior to the person's recognition of it [Brubaker, 2003 unpubl.;

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Whisman, 1996]. Second, once the individual identifies him or herself as homosexual, reconstructed early experiences of same-sex sexual attraction and experimentation are interpreted as showing or revealing the identity [Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1998]. These two features of coming-out stories are consistent with the idea that such stories construct identity change (from presumed heterosexual to identified homosexual) as a revelation of the always-present-but-unrecognized truth, and that this revelation creates pressure to find self-consistent behavior occurring prior to the identity change. This pattern is more consistent and perhaps stronger among sexual minority men than women. Moreover, the effect of larger cultural and sub-cultural issues is also evident [Whisman, 1996], in that the revelation narrative serves political purposes for the gay/lesbian community, and is thus one that individuals experience pressure to adopt. The case of sexual identity narratives, then, implies that reveal self-event relations reverberate both forwards and backwards in the life story, exerting significantly more change than causal relations.

Factors Related to the Construction of Self-Event Relations

Above, we outlined the types of self-event relations we have observed in a variety of narratives from our own research. As mentioned at the outset, that work is characterized by a reliance on predominantly European-American, middle-to-upper middle class individuals. Now we return to a consideration of contextual and developmental factors related to self-event connections. Other potentially important factors, such as the familiarity and expectedness of the events, or individual differences in personality, are beyond our present scope.

The Macro-Context: Culture

Broadly speaking, at least three different approaches to culture and cultural differences currently co-exist within psychology [e.g., Wainryb, 2004]. One is the notion that there are shared beliefs, attitudes, and practices that can be used to adequately characterize groups of people. People belonging to a particular group are consequently influenced by those shared beliefs and practices in a kind of 'top-down' fashion. A second approach emphasizes that there is substantial variability within any particular group in the extent to which individuals may endorse those beliefs, attitudes, and practices. One of the most prevalent dichotomies within these two approaches has been the idea of individualism and collectivism as capturing differences between cultures and within cultures [Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002]. Finally, the third, most recent approach arose as a critique of the first two, based on the sense that the first treats individuals as replicable units representing their culture, and the second implicitly treats individuals as replicable units in relation to themselves over time, thus obviating the notion that individuals develop. This contrasting approach suggests that culture, in the sense of shared beliefs, practices, and attitudes, emerges from the interplay of individuals in countless interactions over time, with those interactions involving conflict, cooperation, negotiations, power dynamics and other dynamic processes

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[Gjerde, 2004; Turiel & Perkins, 2004]. As an emergent product, then, any characterization of a culture, or of individuals within a culture, will be incomplete, overly static, and excessively monolithic. Below, we consider intersections of culture and the construction of self-event relations, focusing first on the first two ideas about culture, and ending with a consideration of the latter, more complex and recent way of thinking.

In fact, one must first ask whether the issue of personal identity itself varies in salience across different cultures, because if this issue varies across cultures in systematic ways, one might expect that the construction of self-event relations by individuals within those cultures would, on average, vary. Some have argued that in cultures or groups where the self is construed as more collective and interdependent, and more contextually variable [Cross et al., 2003], people may experience less continuity in their sense of themselves, and may strive less to achieve a sense of personal identity. Others, however, [Chandler et al., 2003] argue that the need to construct a sense of personal continuity is a human universal. This is an issue where conflicting data [Chandler et al., 2003; Tafarodi, Lo, Yamaguchi, Lee, & Katsura, 2004] suggest important directions for future work.

Within the context of personal storytelling, we have already noted that existing findings document cultural variation in the way autobiographical narratives are typically constructed, with some groups (e.g., Americans) providing vivid, detailed personal memories that provide the individual's unique perspective on an experience, and others (e.g., Chinese) emphasizing relational and moral themes rather than personal uniqueness, and providing less vivid detail and elaboration [Han et al., 1998; Wang, 2004]. Such findings are often framed within the dynamic of individualism and collectivism, thus falling into the first approach from above. Importantly, Fivush and colleagues [Reese & Fivush, 1993] have documented related variations in detail and vividness within US samples, consistent with that second emphasis on within-culture variability. These documented differences imply both individual and cultural variability in the extent to which people will construct self-event relations during storytelling, and potentially in the nature of the self to which experiences are related. Specifically, more vivid, individuated, and elaborated accounts, whether within a group or between groups, offer a higher likelihood of constructing some link between the event and the individual's sense of self. Further, to the extent that individuals in one group, on average, emphasize moral and interpersonal issues, the kind of conclusions that those individuals draw will, again on average, be more likely to link to moral and interpersonal aspects of the self.

Along these same lines, in Western, industrialized cultures, people are believed to engage in biased reasoning about themselves in order to enhance their valuing of themselves (self-esteem) or to affirm the accuracy of their sense of self (self-verification) [Greenwald, 1980; Morling & Epstein, 1997; Swann, 2000; Tesser, 1988]; such variations are confirmed by meta-analyses, although they are clearly oversimplifications [Oyserman et al., 2002]. The existence of a *self-enhancement motive* generates several predictions about the generation of self-event relations. First, explanatory relations are more likely for events that people perceive as positive in their implications; likewise, dismiss relations are more likely for events that people perceive as negative. This is, in fact, consistent with much of our data, and also consistent with work on perpetrator and victim narratives by Baumeister and others [Baumeister, Stilman, & Wotman, 1990]. In that work, people describing events in which they

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were perpetrators construct narratives that minimize and mitigate the implications of those events for their sense of self. The prevalence of a self-enhancement motive has been clearly challenged by cross-cultural work [Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama et al., 1997]. Based on existing evidence, cultures almost certainly will differ in terms of motivational contributions to self-event relations. Consider the findings of Kitayama and colleagues [Kitayama et al., 1997], which showed that for Japanese individuals, negative events and self-criticism were more relevant to self-esteem, while for Americans positive events were more relevant to self-esteem. Culturally rooted variations in the biases that individuals bring to determining which events are even self-relevant may, in turn, change the prevalence of different types of self-event relations that we observe, and the nature of life stories.

A more complex approach to culture, more consistent with the third approach we sketched out briefly, might begin by viewing the construction of self-event relations as an individual act that negotiates the subjective experience of the storyteller with a set of cultural frames that are available for his or her appropriation [Gjerde, 2004; Thorne, 2003; Turiel, 2004; Wainryb, 2004]. Such frames may be variably available across and within cultures, consistent with the above approach to studying culture. Moreover, such frames may offer individuals contradictory possibilities from which to make sense of their individual experiences, and individuals may alter their adoption of one or another frame over time. As a consequence, in the context of telling stories, people may resist, adopt, and adapt the prevailing assumptions of their cultures.

Thus interpreted, some of the broad brushstroke differences outlined above can be understood as available frames, and the task remaining is to examine when and how those frames are created, adopted, altered, or resisted by individuals. For example, one of the prevailing frames within US culture, and individualistic cultures more broadly, is a frame within which people's experiences are revealing about their character traits [see Oyserman et al., 2002, section on attribution]. When people define an experience, then, as self-contradictory, it demands explanation. Thus, it is not surprising that, in table 1, the only context in which the majority of narratives involved a self-event relation was that of self-contradictory experiences. Moreover, the majority of relations constructed in that context were dismissive. In fact, the work of Baumeister et al. [1990] reviewed above can be reinterpreted in this light. Moral transgressions that a person perpetrates imply that the individual perpetrating is morally bad – and is bad in the sense of enduring character. The narrative strategies identified by Baumeister et al. not only defend the self against these implications, they also implicitly engage in negotiation with the cultural frame in which experiences can be taken as indicative of character.

Within any group, such frames are not equally available for appropriation by all members. For example, Thorne and McLean [2003] suggested that for male adolescents telling stories about traumatic experiences, the frame of invulnerability and heroism exemplified by John Wayne is encouraged, while for female adolescents, the frame of caring exemplified by Florence Nightingale is preferred. In fact, Thorne and McLean examined the degree of support for these two frames via an examination of how much listeners appreciated or supported stories told within those frames. This brings us to the issue of proximal contexts – the specific situations in which people construct narratives.

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The Proximal Context: Listeners and Proximal Goals

The larger implications of cultures for how individuals construct narratives about self and experience must be mediated by proximal occasions for constructing personal stories. For example, the on-average differences in adults' personal memory narratives across East Asian and European-American groups are believed traceable to differences in the way that parents and children collaboratively construct narratives in the two groups [e.g. Wang, 2004], as parents teach children about how one constructs such narratives [Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Fivush & Nelson, 2004]. Proximal contexts, then, shape development over larger periods of time, perhaps especially as they provide for repeated encounters with similar narrative practices.

Proximal contexts entail varying audiences and goals for engaging in narration. These factors are also likely to affect whether, and what sort, of self-event relation is constructed [McLean & Thorne, 2006; Pasupathi, 2001]. From a discursive perspective, audiences require justification for why they should hear a story – the presence of a self-event relation may in fact serve that purpose, particularly in cultures like the United States, where the construction and presentation of self is a major element of interpersonal encounters. Further, audiences themselves serve as co-narrators [Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Clark, 1996; Pasupathi, Stallworth, & Murdoch, 1998] and consequently, audiences may explicitly request self-event relations or elaboration of such relations, or may even provide them. For example, in some pilot data on conversational narration by adolescents to parents [Pasupathi & Richardson, 2005], one parent pointed out that her daughter's selection of courses for her freshman year in high school actually was explained by a long-standing interest in sewing, present from early childhood. This act is entirely consonant with a larger cultural context in which traits are viewed as stable and consistency over time is valued, and in which traits are preferentially used as explanations for behavior.

People also bring their own goals to the occasion of constructing narratives [Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky, 2004; Marsh, Parada, & Ayotte, 2004; McLean & Thorne, 2003; Pasupathi, in press], and these may also influence self-event relations. Previous work shows that people who construct narratives in search of meaning include more explicit insights in those narratives [McLean & Thorne, 2003], including self-event relations, and report having gained more insight from the event itself [Pasupathi & Mansour, in press]. Of course, individuals' proximal goals may be linked to overarching capacities and motivations, particularly, developmental ones.

Developmental Influences: Chronological Age and Self-Event Relations

In our opening, we noted that the problem of personal identity and the emergence of a life story are contoured, in part, by chronological age. So it makes sense that chronological age also may relate to the creation of self-event relations. In fact, as noted, age is clearly associated with whether and what type of self-event relations are constructed in the first place [e.g., Habermas & Paha, 2001; Pasupathi & Mansour, in press]. Work by Chandler and colleagues suggested increasing complexity across adolescence in the way adolescents reasoned about their own personal continuity and that of others [Chandler et al., 2003].

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In part, the relations between chronological age, life stories, identity, and self-event connections can be linked to capacities and motivations that also change with age. For example, to link events to the self, individuals must have some moderately stable sense of self in the first place. Trait self-descriptions are believed to emerge by middle childhood [Harter, 1998], but self-conceptions may become especially stable after the end of early adulthood [Roberts & Caspi, 2003], again confirming the importance of adolescence and early adulthood for development of the life story. Finally, individuals must be striving to create a coherent, continuous sense of self – and again as noted, this striving is believed to become salient in adolescence [Chandler et al., 2003; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Harter & Monsour, 1992; Marcia, 1966], and to continue to be salient across the lifespan [Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Donahue, 1994; Swann, 2000; Troll & Skaff, 1997]. The need to create both continuity and meaning via remembering the past is also posited as a special task of late life [Butler, 1963; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Staudinger, 1989]. Thus, self-event relations in narratives serve to account for how individuals have developed across adolescence and adulthood, but at the same time, that development – especially in terms of reasoning capacities, sense of self and motivations – will influence the creation of self-event connections in narratives.

Future Directions and Conclusions

Above, our primary goal was to outline possible self-event relations and their implications for the development of the life story. Here, we focus on two major issues: (1) whether the creation of self-event relations when narrating personal experiences increases the likelihood that an experience becomes part of the life story, and (2) how self-event relations fit into the larger issue of personal identity.

From Event to Story to Life Story

Do self-event relations relate to the growth of the life story in the ways we have suggested? Testing this proposal requires tracking people's stories over time, and poses some complex methodological issues. One possibility is to return to the roots of autobiographical memory research [e.g., Linton, 1986], to ask participants to track the most memorable events of the day or week, and then to follow those events over the next few years. Such events are sufficiently important to be declared memorable, but many (most) are not life changing. An alternative is to track events occurring during a major life transition, using diary methods, for similar reasons – such episodes are likely to contain at least some experiences which make it into the life story 'proper.' Relatively new developments in statistical methods, particular in terms of nested models, provide new and powerful ways to analyze data of this type [Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002].

Further, McAdams [1996] has argued that the life story is almost never created in its entirety; rather, parts of it are selectively constructed on occasion for particular purposes. Thus, to evaluate whether something is part of the life story may require some compromises or 'substitute' assessments. There are many possibilities, includ-

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ing asking individuals to rate the extent to which this event 'ought to be in my autobiography.' Researchers will need to find ways to examine life story potential or likelihood in relation to specific events.

Returning to the Issue of Personal Continuity

Our exploration of self-event relations was motivated by a concern with the problem of personal identity, and our belief that the creation of a life story, and especially the creation of links between self and experience in that process, provides individuals with a resolution to this problem. As we close, we want to return to this problem and to a consideration of our own approach, versus that of the only other directly related work of which we are aware [Chandler et al., 2003]. Like us, Chandler and colleagues believe the problem of personal continuity is fundamentally developmental, and that this problem is particularly relevant in adolescence. They view the resolution of the problem as a crucial step for adolescents to commit to their own future selves, and have provided evidence that a failure to do so is associated with suicide risk. Methodologically, Chandler and colleagues drew from their backgrounds in social cognitive development. The resulting method for examining how individuals resolve issues of 'sameness-in-change' is a set of interview procedures designed to provide the interviewee with evidence that he or she has changed over time, and then to ask how the interviewee can warrant their own continuity in the face of such change. The use of this procedure has allowed Chandler and colleagues to identify cultural, developmental and individual differences in the level of sophistication with which participants resolve issues of continuity, and the strategies they may employ to do so. Specifically, Chandler and colleagues propose that people may construct a sense of continuity via essentialist strategies, which seek to identify some core aspect of the person that remains the same; or narrative strategies, which involve the construction of a set of narratives that account for changes and sameness. Further, in normative populations, older adolescents generally employ more sophisticated versions of either type of strategy. Here, we want to consider how our own approach relates to the work of Chandler and colleagues.

We proposed that personal identity is achieved via the construction of a life story that links ongoing experiences to a sense of self – whether through stability or change. Moreover, we suggested, the process by which the life story grows can be examined via looking at the types of links people create between self and experience when constructing everyday narratives. We believe that this approach, grounded in narrative and autobiographical memory approaches to the issue of personal identity, complements the interview approach of Chandler and colleagues. As Chandler and colleagues noted, (most) people do not actively wander around focused on the issue of personal identity. Rather, their sense of identity may be challenged on occasion, and when such challenges arise, they need to be able to resolve them in a coherent way. The interview creates such a challenge and asks for its resolution. We believe an autobiographical narrative approach can tap the everyday ways in which continuity is challenged, such as the experience of 'not like me' events, and the everyday ways in which continuity is restored. Further, the existence of an interview assessment could permit us to examine whether those who score highly on the interview are also more likely to spontaneously create self-event relations in narratives.

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Summary and Final Words

Here we have proposed a taxonomy of self-event relations in autobiographical narratives. That taxonomy provides strategies for constructing both stability and change in the self across time, thus achieving a sense of personal identity. Armed with this taxonomy, we can approach questions related to two important developmental aspects of autobiographical narration. The first set of questions concerns how life stories develop over adolescence and adulthood, specifically as new episodes are added to them. Self-event relations can help us understand which events become important pieces of an individual's life story, and which are less likely to do so. Further, self-event relations help us to understand how the life story, and smaller narratives that compose it, serve the purpose of creating personal identity over time. These questions are at the center of the paper.

A second developmental issue that this taxonomy allows us to address is the relation of experiences to changes in self-conceptions over time. That is, self-event relations also provide a way to examine how individuals construct a sense of self out of their own experiences. We have touched on this issue throughout the paper, although it was less central. The issue of how experiences shape the self is an old one, but direct examinations of the way that experiences inform self-understanding have fallen aside in favor of explorations of multiplicity, structure, and valence of those self-understandings. In our view, self-event relations offer an opportunity to take up earlier questions about experiences and self-conceptions, along with a way to retain individuals' agency in shaping those relations through storytelling.

As human beings, armed with conscious awareness of past and future and our own changes over time, we must all account for the vicissitudes of change and stability that constitute our individual lives. In constructing relations between who we are, and what we experience, we create the autobiographies that make sense of our own development. Stories are potentially rich resources for developmental researchers, but must also be read with an eye to the different precious metals they might contain. Self-event relations represent one such vein, well worth more mining.

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