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# 5

## The Life Narrative at Midlife

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### Abstract

*In a remarkably prescient chapter, Bertram Cohler (1982) reimagined the problems and the potentialities of psychological development across the life course as a distinctively human challenge in life narration. This chapter situates Cohler's original vision within the intellectual and scientific matrix of the late 1970s, wherein psychologists expressed grave doubts about the extent to which human lives may demonstrate consistency and coherence. By focusing attention on human beings as autobiographical authors rather than as mere social actors or motivated agents, Cohler moved the conversation away from dispositional personality traits and developmental stages and toward the emerging concept of narrative identity. Over the past 30 years, research on narrative identity has shown how people use stories to integrate the reconstructed past and imagined future, providing their lives with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning. At midlife, many adults struggle to solve the problem of generativity, aiming to leave a positive legacy for the next generation. Inspired by Cohler's original chapter, contemporary research reveals that the most generative adults in American society tend to construe their lives as narratives of personal redemption. As such, life stories may serve as valuable psychological resources for midlife adults, even as they reflect and refract prevailing cultural themes. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

In one of the most perceptive and prescient chapters ever written in life span developmental psychology, Bert Cohler (1982) imagined human development as an ongoing narrative project. Human beings are storytellers of the self, Cohler (1982) asserted. Across countless interactions and over the long course of development, people construe their lives as integrative stories, complete with settings, scenes, characters, plots, and themes. Stories bring together the reconstructed past and the imagined future, and provide messy human lives with some semblance of meaning, order, and purpose. In that “lives are much less ordered and predictable than formerly recognized” by social scientists, people strive to “maintain an intelligible narrative over time,” Cohler (1982, p. 210) suggested. When Cohler (1982) wrote *Personal Narrative and the Life Course*, developmental psychologists tended to conceive of human beings as (a) social *actors* who behave according to the role demands of human groups and (b) motivated *agents* who pursue personal goals and desires and aim to fulfill basic human needs. But Cohler (1982) turned their attention to the possibility that human beings are more than actors and agents. Humans are autobiographical *authors* too, and increasingly so as they move across the human life course.

### Actors, Agents, and Authors

Among the many intellectual problems that Bert Cohler (1982) sought to address in his visionary synthesis was a conundrum that vexed personality and developmental psychologists in the 1970s and early 1980s: *To what extent are human lives consistent and coherent?*

By the time Cohler wrote his chapter, many personality psychologists had lost faith in the idea that people behave in consistent ways across situations and over time as a function of their underlying dispositional traits. Reaching a crescendo in the late 1970s, the situationist critique argued against the efficacy of traits, even doubting that people possess internal and stable individual differences in personality (Mischel, 1968). To the extent that people show individual differences in behavior and emotion, the situationists argued, those differences are driven by the exigencies of social situations. As social actors, people mainly behave in accordance with situational demands and group norms.

Around the same time, many developmentalists were beginning to lose faith in the broad and integrative developmental claims made by stage theories, such as those proposed by Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson. Stage models sought to go beneath the surface of social action to expose underlying structures of motivation and cognition. For example, Erikson (1950) viewed human beings as motivated agents who seek to achieve developmentally appropriate goals, such as the goal of interpersonal trust (vs. mistrust—Stage 1 in Erikson’s scheme) in infancy and the goal of intimacy (vs. isolation—Stage 6) in young adulthood. Rather than envisioning human development

as an orderly unfolding of stages, however, psychologists in the late 1970s were beginning to appreciate how lives are rather more contingent and uneven than stage models would suggest. As motivated agents, people aim to achieve the goals that arise at any given moment in the life course as a function of that moment's exigencies. Changing life circumstances—unpredictable and serendipitous—trump normative developmental timetables.

For decades, then, the psychological constructs of dispositional *traits* and developmental *stages* had buttressed the conviction that human beings behave in characteristically consistent ways over time (as social actors) and that they pursue developmentally appropriate (stage-governed) aims and goals (as motivated agents). By 1980, however, these concepts had lost favor. Cohler (1982) accepted the prevailing critiques of traits and stages. Strongly influenced by perspectives from life-course sociology (e.g., Elder, 1975), he understood that human lives were complexly situated in culture and history, and subject to such unpredictable events as wars and recessions, changing personal circumstances, lucky breaks and personal tragedies, and everyday chance. In the midst of relentless social change and motivational unpredictability, however, people maintain a drive toward making meaning out of their lives, Cohler asserted. People perceive consistency and they create coherence, he argued, even if they do not behave in a trait-like manner and even if their own development fails to follow a predictable stage sequence. They perceive consistency and create coherence through *narrative*:

Studies of lives have suggested that the course of development may be much less predictable and well-ordered than previously realized. Rather than viewing personality development either in terms of continuing stability over time or in terms of a number of well-ordered phases or stages, lives seem to be characterized by often abrupt transformations determined both by unexpected and eruptive life events and by intrinsic, but not necessarily continuous, developmental factors, including biological aging. These events taking place across the life course are later remembered as elements of a narrative which provides a coherent account of this often disjunctive life course. The form of this narrative is based upon a socially shared belief in Western culture that all narratives, including history, literature, and biography, must have a beginning, a middle, and an end related to each other in a meaningful manner. (Cohler, 1982, pp. 228–229)

Today, personality and developmental psychologists have recovered from the doubts they experienced in Cohler's (1982) days regarding the concept of the trait. Thirty years of research on child temperament and adult personality development have convincingly shown that dispositional dimensions (such as positive emotionality and effortful control in children, and extraversion and conscientiousness in adults) are powerful predictors

of consistent behavioral and emotional trends in life, even as they change in response to social influences and gene by environment interactions (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Contra the claims made by situationists in the 1970s, individual differences in dispositional traits show high levels of heritability, increasingly robust stability over the life course, and impressive connections to such valued life outcomes as mental health and well-being, delinquency and crime, occupational success, divorce, and longevity (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). From infancy onward, dispositional traits track broad consistencies in behavioral and emotional performance from the standpoint of the person as a social actor (McAdams & Olson, 2010).

From the perspective of the motivated agent, developmental psychologists are even more skeptical today than they were in 1982 regarding the viability of broad-based stage models. However, they have articulated a range of conceptions that underscore the role of goals, plans, values, and other agentic features of personality development (Mroczek & Little, 2006). Life may not unfold as a neat developmental sequence, but motivated agents often manage to cope and gain control over the unpredictable challenges they face. In many lives, agents make developmental progress in establishing, maintaining, and actualizing their respective motivational agendas (Mischel, 2004). As social actors express consistency in behavior across situations and over time, motivated agents also demonstrate some level of personality coherence in the goals and values they pursue. Therefore, the concerns regarding consistency and coherence, so pressing in the fields of personality and developmental psychology in 1982, have largely subsided. Part of the impetus for Cohler's (1982) proposal, therefore, is no longer relevant today.

But Cohler's (1982) take-home points regarding personal narrative could not be more germane three decades after he made them. The past 30 years have witnessed a remarkable upsurge of interest among social scientists in the idea of life narrative (e.g., Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Sarbin, 1986; Schiff, Chapter 1 of this volume). The turn toward narrative, both as a methodology for scientific inquiry and as an integrative conception for human lives, can be seen in fields as divergent as sociology, clinical psychology, and neuroscience. Within personality and developmental psychology, the central concept around which a great deal of theory and research revolves is *narrative identity* (McAdams, 1985; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). Refining an idea that runs throughout Cohler's (1982) paper, contemporary personality and developmental psychologists define narrative identity as an internalized and evolving life story that reconstrues the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to affirm threads of continuity and coherence in a person's life. Human beings are social actors at birth, and they begin to articulate personal goals and values in their childhood years. But it is not until late adolescence and young adulthood that people begin to work on their

narrative identities in full force, taking on the psychological perspective of the self-reflective autobiographical author (McAdams, 2013a).

The personal construction of narrative identity in late adolescence and beyond builds on the storytelling skills and inclinations that begin to emerge in childhood. By the time children reach what Cohler (1982) described as the *age 5–7 shift*, they have internalized conventional norms regarding how to translate personal experiences into coherent stories (Fivush, 2011; Mandler, 1984). They know, for example, that stories begin with a motivated protagonist (an agent) who wants something. The protagonist sets forth to accomplish his or her goal, but the pursuit of the goal meets some form of complication, be it an obstacle, a challenge, or an unexpected turn of events. A plot then develops, playing out across a temporal landscape of action and consciousness. The story finally ends with some sort of resolution to the tension that accompanied the goal pursuit in the first place. Whereas Cohler (1982) couched the early development of narrative inclinations in terms of Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex, contemporary researchers tend to focus on emerging cognitive skills (such as the ability to understand that other agents have minds containing desires and beliefs) and the everyday practice in storytelling that young children enjoy in conversations with parents, teachers, and peers (Fivush, 2011; Miller, Chen, & Olivarez, Chapter 2 of this volume).

Whereas grade-school children can tell coherent stories about their personal experiences, they do not yet see their full lives as ongoing narratives writ large, stories that they both work on (as narrators) and live out (as protagonists who pursue goals and make meaning over time). As Cohler (1982) suggested, adolescence ushers in a broader understanding of time and the life course, paving the way for narrative identity. "For the first time in the life course, the present is seen as situated between past and future," Cohler (1982, p. 218) wrote, in reference to adolescence. The autobiographical author now faces the challenge of reconstructing the past so that it connects in a meaningful way to what the future is anticipated to be.

Habermas and Bluck (2000) have shown that connecting the past to the future through narrative identity requires the actualization of a suite of cognitive and experiential facilities that do not typically come online until the adolescent years. For example, adolescents (but typically not children) are able to connect disparate personal events into causal chains in order to explain how they came to hold a particular point of view or express a particular characteristic of the self—a facility that Habermas and Bluck (2000) term *causal coherence*. Adolescents are also able to derive a theme or conclusion about the self from a set of exemplary life events, expressing *thematic coherence*. In everyday social interactions, adolescents and young adults draw upon increasingly sophisticated skills of autobiographical reasoning to share stories about their lives, editing and transforming their respective understandings of their lives in the process, as selves create stories which, in turn, create new selves (Habermas & Hatiboğlu, Chapter

3 of this volume; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Over time, narrative identities emerge and take psychological hold, as authors articulate clearer, more coherent, and more convincing stories about how they have come to be the persons they are becoming.

### **Narrative Identity in Midlife**

In tracing the development of personal narratives over the life course, Cohler (1982) highlighted three developmental epochs. In the age 5–7 shift, children convey their subjective experiences through stories about desire, belief, and goals. They now feel that they are characters in a larger emotional drama, motivated agents who strive to fulfill their inner needs and wants. In adolescence, people take ownership of the dramas themselves. They become full-fledged autobiographical authors who create narrative identities as they live them out. For the third epoch, Cohler (1982) jumped ahead to *midlife*.

In the early 1980s, the idea of a *midlife crisis* was new and cutting-edge, and it stimulated a wealth of theorizing regarding the psychology of adult development (Jacques, 1965; Levinson, 1978). A major theme in this literature was that midlife ushered in an increasing awareness of life's finitude: "A major consequence of the attainment of midlife is the recognition that more than half of one's life may already have been lived," Cohler (1982, p. 223) wrote. "Such recognition leads to a foreshortened sense of the lifeline and, in turn, to increased awareness of mortality, or the finitude of life" (p. 223). As a result, midlife adults may become more introspective and reflective as they age. They may focus more attention on the past than they have before, Cohler (1982) suggested, serving to enrich their narrative identities and to reveal more nuanced understandings of the self. Indeed, contemporary research suggests that midlife adults engage in more sophisticated forms of autobiographical reasoning than do younger adults and adolescents, expressing deeper insights into how their life's journey has shaped who they are (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006).

Moreover, Cohler (1982) argued that midlife adults tend to use personal narratives about the past "to solve problems in the present" (p. 224). Not only was Cohler one of the first psychologists to understand that people conceive of their lives in narrative form, but he also realized that people do so *for a purpose*. Life stories function to solve general identity problems for most people—the broad psychological problems regarding coherence and continuity in life. Stories tell us who we are, who we were, and who we will be. But stories also manage to address more particular problems that may arise at specific points in the life course. For example, young adults (and others) may use their stories to attract potential mates and establish intimacy with others. Parents may draw upon their own life stories to instruct their children in the ways of the world. For midlife adults, many of the greatest challenges in life may revolve around the issue of generativity,

or the concern for establishing, maintaining, and guiding the next generation. Erikson (1950) identified *generativity versus stagnation* as the central developmental challenge for midlife adults. In their roles as parents, teachers, mentors, leaders, and stakeholders in society, midlife adults strive to promote the well-being and success of younger people, those who will follow them in the sequence of generations. When midlife adults fail in this task, as they often do, they may feel that their lives are stagnant, or they may be so preoccupied with their own well-being that they cannot find space in their lives to be of service to others.

How, then, do life stories help midlife adults solve the problem of generativity? This question has animated a line of research in personality and developmental psychology that owes much of its inspiration to Cohler's (1982) vision. Beginning with McAdams (1985), my own research on narrative identity has paid special attention to the life stories constructed by especially generative midlife adults. How do the most generative adults in society—caring and productive adults who are demonstrably committed to promoting the well-being of future generations—make sense of their own lives? Research conclusively shows that adults who score high on well-validated measures of generativity tend to be involved in a wide range of challenging life activities, as they commit themselves to making a positive difference in the realms of family, church, community, politics, and society writ large (McAdams, 2001; Rossi, 2001). While these commitments are significant sources of fulfillment, they also bring with them more than a fair share of frustration. Generativity is hard work. You need a good story to get you through.

Findings from qualitative case studies and quantitative assessments of life narrative protocols suggest that highly generative adults in American society tend to construct their lives as narratives of personal *redemption* (McAdams, 2013b; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; see also Colby & Damon, 1992; Walker & Frimer, 2007). In redemptive life stories, the protagonist repeatedly encounters setbacks, failures, losses, and disappointments. But negative events are often redeemed by positive outcomes as the protagonist continues to grow and prosper.

Redemptive life stories often begin with the protagonist experiencing an early blessing or advantage. As the midlife narrator recalls childhood today, he or she enjoyed a special status in the early years, perhaps an especially loving relationship with a relative or teacher, or a skill, talent, or proclivity that distinguished the protagonist from others. At the same time, the protagonist was especially cognizant of the misfortune of others. Compared to less generative adults, for example, adults scoring high on self-report measures of generativity are about three times more likely to highlight early experiences of witnessing the suffering of others when telling the stories of their lives. The stories implicitly suggest that the main character enjoys an early advantage in life while other characters in the story

may suffer greatly. The story suggests this: “I am blessed, but others suffer. I am the gifted protagonist who journeys forth into a dangerous world.” Over the course of the redemptive narrative, the protagonist experiences pain and misfortune, too, but these negative events are often followed by positive outcomes, or else the protagonist gains insights and strength from suffering. Adversity is overcome, sins are washed away, what almost kills me makes me a stronger person in the long run. In gratitude for the blessings received and in response to the suffering witnessed in the lives of others, the protagonist resolves to leave a positive mark on the world, consolidating a commitment to future generations.

Redemptive life stories help to solve the problem of generativity by affirming the commitments and justifying the hard work that living a generative life entails. As an autobiographical author, the midlife adult recalls his or her own early blessings and the painful misfortunes of other people, suggesting that he or she has been called or mandated—by fate, luck, God, whatever—to live a life of service to others. Generativity becomes a kind of personal mission, justified in narrative by the early blessings received and the fact that the world needs you, for you are blessed and others suffer. Moreover, the burdens that come with generativity may seem lighter if one’s story confirms the expectation that personal setbacks are often overcome, that suffering eventually gives way to enhancement, and that tough times today will result in prosperity and happiness tomorrow. For many generative adults, then, redemptive life stories serve as a psychological resource. They reinforce hope that generative investments will pay off in the long run, no matter how difficult and daunting the midlife challenge of generativity may appear to be.

The redemptive life stories told by highly generative midlife adults, as described in McAdams (2013b) and other places, also illustrate the power of *culture* in shaping the stories that people tell. For the most part, research on the life stories of highly generative adults has focused on *American* adults at midlife. The redemptive stories told by highly generative American adults evoke powerful metaphors and motifs that run through American culture, history, and heritage. As evidenced in popular fiction, television and movies, American religious traditions, and many other cultural expressions, Americans seem especially drawn to narratives of redemption. McAdams (2013b) identifies at least four canonical versions of redemptive stories that enjoy tremendous cachet in American history and in everyday discourse.

First, narratives of *atonement* track the move from sin to salvation, reflecting America’s strong Protestant heritage and the worldviews of the Massachusetts Bay Puritans who came to the New World in the 17th century. A second line of redemptive narrative tracks the move from rags to riches, the stories of *upward social mobility* in the United States, canonized as the American Dream. A third line recalls stories of emancipation, as in the slave narratives of 19th century America, tracking the move from oppression to freedom. The same kinds of *liberation* stories have historically

animated American social movements regarding civil rights, women's rights, and (most recently) the rights of gays and lesbians. Finally, narratives of *recovery* look backward to a golden age, a paradise lost that beckons to be refound, as in stories of recovery from illness, addiction, and abuse. Rising to fame shortly after Cohler (1982) published his classic chapter, Oprah Winfrey has probably been the most influential American spokesperson for narratives of recovery in the past 25 years, living a recovery story herself and teaching others how to understand their lives in the same way.

Culture provides a menu of images, metaphors, plots, and characters for the making of narrative identity. Autobiographical authors sample the menu that their culture presents them. They appropriate culturally valued narrative material in ways that capture, as well as contour, their own personal experiences. As Hammack (2008) has argued, culture presents autobiographical authors with *master narratives* over and against which one's personal identity may be compared (see also Hammack & Toolis, Chapter 4 of this volume; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). American stories of atonement, upward mobility, liberation, and recovery may function as master narratives for many highly generative American adults, who find that their own experiences can be readily assimilated to a canonical redemptive form. But for many people, master narratives of culture may become objects of rejection or resistance. An autobiographical author may self-consciously construct a narrative identity that defies the conventions of a master narrative. The person may reject a master narrative because his or her own personal experiences may diverge dramatically from cultural expectations. Or the person may believe that cultural expectations are oppressive or immoral, serving to reinforce values that are contrary to what the person holds to be true and good. As Cohler (1982) recognized, personal narratives do not always line up nicely with the broader stories that may prevail in any given culture and at any particular historical moment. Authoring a life story is a tricky affair, a psychocultural activity of self-creation and re-creation, operating within the tense and dynamic space that lies between phenomenal experience and cultural reality.

### Conclusion

In his last paragraph, Cohler (1982) critiqued psychological science for its dependence upon the methods and models of the natural sciences. If people understand their own lives as ongoing narratives, Cohler reasoned, perhaps empirical psychologists themselves should revamp their research paradigms to accommodate the principles of narrative inquiry:

Acceptance of the narrative approach means accepting a different criterion for judging the adequacy of scholarship in this field than has been used over the past several decades in the behavioral sciences. However, the narrative approach may be more appropriate for the subject being studied, and may

eventually provide better understanding of the factors shaping subjectively interpreted intents, than the explanatory models of the natural sciences. This interpretive approach to the study of the person parallels the approach usually used by persons in the successive interpretations or reconstructions of their own history as a personal narrative across the course of life. (Cohler, 1982, p. 229)

As Cohler (1982) saw it, it may not be enough for psychological scientists merely to recognize the importance of life stories and then subject this complex topic to conventional empirical scrutiny. Psychological scientists need to go one step further, Cohler said. They need to become storytellers themselves. They need to adopt the means and modes of life narration in the very act of studying how human beings narrate their lives (Freeman, Chapter 7 of this volume). Cohler's (1982) vision for a more interpretative science of persons was not new, of course. Wilhelm Dilthey (1900/1976) made much the same argument over 100 years ago, in imagining a hermeneutical human science, or what he called the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Since then, many other critics of conventional scientific practice have argued forcefully for a science of persons that is less reductionistic and mechanistic than what psychological scientists typically prefer, a science that privileges the subjective interpretations and interactions of the scientist himself or herself (Gergen, 1982; Stern, 1938).

These kinds of critiques picked up new steam in the 1980s and 1990s as advocates for narrative approaches reimagined psychological investigation as narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1988; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Indeed, Cohler's (1982) vision became partly realized in the rise of a strong interdisciplinary movement focused on *the narrative study of lives* (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). As a result, social scientists of many different stripes seem, over the past two decades, to have become more accepting of narrative approaches to research, especially when these approaches involve the collection of narrative data through structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire methods, and the use of validated content-analysis systems to code the data (McAdams, 2012). They also value narrative case studies and other purely qualitative expositions as vivid illustrations of theoretical ideas and vehicles for the discovery of new theory. Nonetheless, most researchers are reluctant to discard completely the canons of rigorous scientific inquiry, which include objective operationalization of variables, empirical hypothesis testing, and replicability of observations. It is not clear how far one should go in embracing a purely interpretive, narrative-based approach to the human sciences. Like other people, scientists may be storytellers. But good science, even good psychological science as applied to human lives, seems to rely on principles of inquiry that are somewhat different from those that make for a good story. This is to say that storytellers enjoy a certain kind of freedom that science typically forswears.

Over the past 30 years, then, personality and developmental psychologists have adopted a range of conventional scientific methods to explore the life story at midlife. While they have not fully embraced Cohler's (1982) call for a radical rethinking of scientific methods themselves, researchers have made remarkable progress in making sense of how adults make narrative sense of their own lives. A full psychological understanding of adult lives at midlife requires a careful consideration of how midlife adults, as social actors, perform their daily roles; how they strive, as motivated agents, to attain their most cherished goals and values in the future; and how, as autobiographical authors of the self, midlife adults make meaning out of it all—past, present, and future—through life narrative.

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