The State of the Story in Personality Psychology

Barbara A. Woike*
Barnard College

Abstract
Personality psychologists have been studying narratives for decades. Their work offers significant insights into the meaning of the stories people tell. This article highlights some historical antecedents as well as the latest research findings from the growing area of personality psychology that focuses on narrative approaches. First, narrative research in personality shows that imaginative stories reveal enduring implicit motivations linked to affect, thought, and behavior. Second, autobiographical stories play a significant role in self-development and personal identity formation. The narration of one’s story is a process influenced over the life span by age-related capacities and various psychological needs that occur in social and cultural contexts.

Currently, there is intense interest in narratives, memoirs, and autobiographies. Everyone seems to be writing a memoir. This is not to even mention the media explosion of telling all to everyone via everything from talk shows and reality TV to YouTube. For instance, the blog site LiveJournal records over 200,000 entries per day. How can we understand these highly personal and emotionally evocative stories? And what is the larger message carried by them? Personality psychologists have been studying narratives for over half a century. Their work offers significant insights into the meaning of our stories. This article highlights some of the major research findings from the growing area of personality psychology that focuses on narrative approaches.

Throughout the history of personality psychology, there has been a core group of researchers who have found that questionnaire methods could not estimate the complexity of human thought, feelings, and behavior. Thus, they turned to content and narrative analysis as an alternative that provided less structure and greater insight into the richness of the subjective experience of the individual (Smith, 2000). As a methodology, the analysis of narrative descriptions of people’s experiences offers several advantages to studying aspects of personality that can not be captured by questionnaires (Woike, 2007). Narrative analysis may be a particularly good choice for researchers interested in complex, subjective experiences, as well as intentions, patterns of reasoning, and attempts to find meaning in personal experiences.
Some personality psychologists have argued that individual differences are most easily detected in situations that are loosely structured so that the person cannot rely on external social cues on how to act, think, and feel (Woike, 2007). Participants may find that the narrative format gives them more freedom to explore their thoughts, feelings, and reactions in ways that they had not done previously. Their stories may reveal innermost thoughts, frames of reference, emotional reactions, and cultural assumptions that may or may not be accessible by other methods. For these reasons, many personality researchers find the narrative approach invaluable.

This article reviews research demonstrating that imaginative stories reveal enduring implicit motivations linked to affect, thoughts, and behavior. Auto-biographical stories play a significant role in self-development and personal identity formation. They are influenced over the life span by age-related capacities, various psychological needs, as well as social and cultural contexts.

The Role of Narratives in Revealing Motivations

Henry Murray is generally credited for the emergence of interest in the story as a portal into the study of personality. In 1935, Morgan and Murray developed the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which consists of a series of black and white drawings of one or more person(s) engaged in ambiguous activities. The idea was that people would project their concerns desires and wishes onto the ambiguous stimuli – thus, when asked to tell a story about each of the pictures, people’s concerns and preoccupations would be revealed in their stories. Attributing them to the fictional characters in a story allows people to express desires that they might be uncomfortable attributing to themselves, or might not even be aware of.

Based on this original work, the research programs have used ambiguous pictures like the TAT to reliably identify three motivations: achievement, power, and intimacy. The achievement motive is described as a desire to meet a personal standard of excellence (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). The power motive is a need to control and influence another person, groups, or the world at large (Winter, 1973). The need for intimacy is a communal motive that refers to a desire to experience warm, close, and communicative exchanges with others (McAdams, 1985).

In general, it seems that people do not have conscious access to their motives as assessed with the TAT. Because implicit motives seem to operate outside of a person’s conscious awareness, they are fundamentally distinct from personality motives measured with self-report tests (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Schultheiss, forthcoming 2008). In fact, the correlation between implicit and self-reported measures of motivation is close to zero (Schultheiss & Pang, 2007). Implicit motivation tests, like the TAT, measure preferences for particular types of emotional experiences, whereas self-report questionnaires measure cognitively elaborated aspects of the self and learned values. Many studies support this distinction by
demonstrating that implicit and self-attributed motives differ in their association to behavioral incentives and outcomes and seem to be associated with different cognitive processes as well. (see Schultheiss, forthcoming 2008; Woike, forthcoming 2008 for reviews).

Below are a few interesting findings that emphasize the power of these implicit measures of motivation. For one thing, perceptual images are more likely to be encoded if the images evoke the motive-related affect – for instance, a smiling face for someone with a high need for intimacy, or a successful shot into the wastebasket for a person with high implicit need for achievement. Researchers have found that implicit motives do indeed determine their selective attention to social stimuli. And, implicit motives may be particularly attuned to nonverbal information. For instance, Schultheiss and Hale (2007) found that people with strong implicit power or intimacy motivation paid more attention to facial expressions indicating dominance and friendliness respectively. Woike, Bender, and Besner (forthcoming 2008) found that in conditions that engaged their motive, those with a strong need for achievement showed superior performance on achievement-related memory tasks than those low in the motive or those in the neutral (non-achievement related) conditions.

Thus, the imaginative stories that people tell to ambiguous pictures can and do predict very specific patterns of thought and behavior. One may ask do people tell the same kinds of stories about their own lives as they do to these ambiguous pictures? It seems so. When people are asked to write narratives about important and emotional experiences, the influence of implicit motives is clear. Implicit motives are consistently reflected in the content of important and emotional autobiographical stories. When people are asked to describe significant and/or emotionally-involving life experiences, those with strong achievement or power motives are consistently more likely to recall experiences about achievement, dominance, and self-mastery, whereas people with strong intimacy motives are more likely to recall experiences pertaining to love, friendship, and social belonging (e.g., McAdams, 1985; Woike, Gershkovitch, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999; Woike, Mcleod, & Goggin, 2003). Data from longitudinal diary studies show the same pattern as autobiographical narratives collected at one point in time (Woike, 1995; Woike & Polo, 2001). The pattern has been replicated in controlled memory retrieval experiments, further suggesting that implicit motives influence the memory for motive-relevant experiences (Woike, Lavezzary, & Barsky, 2001). Thus, the stories people tell reveal significant and enduring patterns of motivational preferences which in turn influence affect, thought, and behavior.

The Role of Stories in Self-development and Identity Formation

The stories people tell about their lives have significant implications for their identities and self-understanding. In 1985, Dan McAdams put forth
a model of identity as being rooted in one’s personal life story. According to this view, an individual's life story is an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that serves to integrate disparate roles and to bring together the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future. In this way, the life story may be viewed as an extended but selective autobiography of personal experiences and interpretations of those experiences and interpretations of those experiences that provide unity and purpose to the person (McAdams, 1993). This pioneering work has served as a foundation for many great advances in understanding the role of narration in personality and self-concept development.

Life stories unfold sequentially as the person grows from infancy to adulthood. Parent–child reminiscence is one of the first contexts for children to develop self-understanding through stories. Research shows that parents socialize different patterns of emotional elaboration and evaluation with their children (e.g., Harley & Reese, 1999). Parents who use a high elaborative style provide more narrative structure for children by making evaluative comments and questions, offering and eliciting more information, and being supportive of the child’s view in the conversation. In contrast, parents with a low elaborative style tend to repeat questions, switch topics quickly, and do not elaborate on the details of the event. Over time, children of highly elaborative parents have been found to be more evaluative of their own narratives, even when controlling for related developmental skills (e.g., Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997). And, children of mothers who were trained to be more elaborative had more complex narratives than controls 2 years after the intervention (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999). Thus, based on these early parent–child reminiscences, the child may emphasize evaluative and emotional information that may in turn have consequences for one’s later life story.

Regardless of the elaboration style of parents, the capacity to narrate is constrained by the development of cognitive capacities. Very young children lack the psychological understanding such as theory-of-mind and related abilities to connect experiences with the self-concept in a coherent way. In adolescence, the need to form a personal identity emerges from an interaction of cultural and societal demands and both maturational and psychological age-specific requirements (Erikson, 1982). Identity formation involves developing as a reflective, cohesive self-conception on a variety of important dimensions related to different roles, expectations, beliefs and values – as well as preferences and abilities.

Habermas and Bluck (2000) introduced the concept of autobiographical reasoning as the process by which the life story is formed in adolescence. From research on social–cognitive development, they have identified four specific cognitive skills used to create a coherent in the life story. First, temporal sequencing of distant experiences begins to develop during the grade school years, followed by the acquisition of the second quality, the cultural concept of biography by about age 10. Many studies point to
the emergence in early adolescence of a stable self-conception that can be used to integrate diverse events and thereby create a sense of causal coherence. Evidence also suggests the biographical conceptions of how people change due to life experience while nevertheless remaining the same person emerge in mid to late adolescence. The ability to thematically interpret past experiences begins to develop in mid to late adolescence and may continue into adulthood. These are cognitive tools necessary for autobiographical reasoning and for forming a stable sense of identity in adolescence and beyond.

Autobiographical memories differ in their degree of specificity in ways that have implications for the self-conception and personal identity. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) described a framework of autobiographical memory in which there are three levels of memory specificity: lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge. Lifetime periods represent knowledge about common features of a particular period with identifiable beginnings and endings. Such knowledge might include significant others, common locations, and activities. Examples of lifetime periods might include ‘the college years’, ‘the time after my parent’s divorce’, or ‘my first teaching job’. Lifetime periods represent more than a temporal boundary in memory; they also represent thematic knowledge about common features of the period. The reminiscence bump, a well-documented phenomenon, is consistent with the claim that autobiographical memories are generally organized by lifetime period (e.g., Conway & Holmes, 1994). Adults tend to recall more memories from the approximate ages of 15 to 25 than other periods (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1988). The reason for this increased ability to recall memories from this period may be due to its role in identity formation and the number of first experiences (e.g., dating, learning to drive). Two overarching themes that might organize memories from the reminiscence bump period appear to be relationship and work themes (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). There is also some indication that memories from this period are especially rich in emotional and motivational content (Thorne, 2000).

General events are more heterogeneous than lifetime periods and may encompass both repeated events (e.g., vacations at the beach) and single events (e.g., the trip to India) that comprise a common theme. Thus, general events may group specific and unique events from a specific time period (e.g., how I spent my summer vacation), or they may link a set of similar actions that have been repeated on numerous occasions (e.g., my morning routine). The organization of these repeated actions in autobiographical memory may be guided by specific goals.

Event specific knowledge is part of general events which are in turn part of lifetime periods. This information is about a single event that occurred at a discrete point in time in an individual’s life. Pillemer (1998) has studied people’s recollections of momentous events in their lives, defined as single moments that are recalled with rich imagery and in great
detail. There are four kinds of the vividly recalled events. Originating events mark the beginning of the story. Turning points involve making a significant change in the story. Anchoring events provide stability, and analogous events emphasize a similar pattern across events in the person’s life story. Together, these most salient episodes are woven into a life story.

In a similar vein, Singer and Salovey (1993) used the term self-defining memories to describe vivid, affectively charged memories that are often related to important unresolved themes or enduring concerns in a person’s life. The affective quality of self-defining memories seems to be a function of the relevance of the memories to the attainment of the individual’s most desired goals. The finding holds not only for memories relevant to attainment of approach goals, but also for memories about active efforts to avoid undesired outcomes (Moffitt & Singer, 1994). Well-adjusted students with moderate levels of self-restraint expressed self-defining memories that were richer in meaning and personal significance, whereas more repressed and defensive students described memories that were overly general and lacking in emotional detail (Singer & Blagov, 2004). Self-defining memories exhibiting growth and insight are associated with psychological well-being and higher levels of psychosocial maturity (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Singer, King, Green, & Barr, 2002). Self-defining memories may also be employed to regulate mood. Non-depressed people recall more positive self-defining memories after a negative mood induction than depressed individuals, and the positive self-defining memories of depressed people are less specific than those of their non-depressed counterparts (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004). Thus, self-defining memories are linked to central goals or conflicts within the individual and may provide integrative lessons or insights as well as play an important role in mood regulation.

Researchers have suggested that self-reported autobiographical memories serve three distinct yet overlapping functions (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2004). First, autobiographical memory serves a directive function for present and future thought and behavior (Pillemer, 2003). Research has found that people report remembering past events and the lessons they learned from them as useful in guiding their present and future behavior. Second, autobiographical memories serve to maintain self-continuity as the personal past may preserve a sense of being coherent person over time. And finally, as a social function autobiographical memory serves to develop, maintain and nurture social bonds (e.g., Nelson, 1993; Pillemer, 1998).

The process of creating a life story to integrate one’s experiences is intrinsically social. One can not create a life story in a vacuum. The notion of the situated story emphasizes the fact that virtually all narrative accounts of personal memory are created within specific situations, by particular individuals, for particular audiences, and to fulfil particular goals (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Situated stories can be created internally and/or externally. A story does not have to be told to others for it to play an important role in the self development. But research shows that a surprisingly
large number of people tell stories of highly personal experiences soon after they occur (Thorne, 2000). The practice of sharing stories of most salient and self-defining episodes may help people articulate and clarify the meanings and the nature of their self-defining memories with each new telling. In this way, situated stories may be used to develop and to maintain the self-concept. Self-development through situated stories may be viewed as a lifespan process, beginning in early childhood and extending to old age, and that process is situated in a larger milieu of cultural expectations (McLean et al., 2007).

Pasupathi (2001) has studied the role of the listener in story telling. In both experimental and non-experimental settings, it has been found that listener behavior changes how elaborative the story is in the moment of telling, with effects that are evident on subsequent remembering of the event. People who tell stories to distracted listeners employ less interpretive, psychological language that connects a series of events with their own subjectivity and come to perceive the event they talked about as less consistent with their sense of self (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005).

In midlife and beyond, people become increasingly concerned with making commitments that promote the well-being of youth and the next generation, or what Erik Erikson (1982) referred to as generativity. Life stories pertaining to mid-life often reflect these concerns. McAdams (2005) finds that Americans at mid-life who are particularly generative overall tend to tell a certain kind of story about their lives. In these stories, the protagonist (i) enjoys an early family blessing or advantage, (ii) is sensitized to the suffering of others at an early age, (iii) is guided by a clear and compelling personal ideology that remains relatively stable over time, (iv) transforms or redeems bad events into good outcomes, and (v) sets goals for the future to benefit society and its institutions (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). McAdams (2006) argues that these redemptive stories reflect certain quintessentially American themes.

For both midlife adults and students, the tendency to construct life stories in which bad events are ultimately redeemed into good outcomes is associated with greater psychological well-being (e.g., McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). In contrast, studies of people’s stories of what might have been show that, although people may be quite motivated to tell stories that help them come to terms with their difficult and regrettable choices, but there is no correlation between the complexity of the story and happiness (King & Hicks, in press). Taking a longitudinal approach to the question of narrative processing and self-development, Pals (2006) found that exploratory processing (i.e., grappling with complexity of the experience, exploring its meaning, and actively interpreting its transformation impact) of difficult life experiences in mid-life was mediated by coping openness at age 21 and predicted emotional maturity at age 61.
Narrating one’s personal life experiences can have a transformative influence on identity and serve to integrate disparate aspects of the self (Singer & Blagov, 2004). The telling of personal stories allows people to make sense of difficult or discordant events and to integrate these experiences with their life story. More specifically, personal narratives play an extremely important role in making meaning of traumatic and difficult personal experiences (Pennebaker, 1997). Research shows that translating personally difficult experiences into words has long-term health benefits. People are asked to write about their ‘very deepest thoughts and feelings about an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life’ (Pennebaker, 1997; p. 162) over a period of days. Four linguistic factors from their writings reliably predict improved physical health. First, the more positive words people used, the better their subsequent health. Second, moderate use of negative emotion words was associated with better health, whereas very high or very low numbers of negative emotion words used correlated with poorer health. An increase in both causal and insight words over the course of the writing was strongly associated with improved health (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Finally, flexibility in pronoun use reflects an ability to change perspectives and relates to positive health outcomes (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003). Thus, people who benefited the most from writing began with poorly organized positive and negative descriptions and progressed to a reasoned, flexible, coherent story by the end of the writing assignment.

In sum, the narrative approach has allowed personality psychologists to make significant advances in understanding implicit motivations and the processes involved in self-development and identity formation. The approach also provides avenues for studying the integration of difficult experiences into the life story and the role of personal stories in mood regulation, subjective well-being, and physical health. Personality psychologists have only begun to consider the effect of social (e.g., McLean et al., 2007) and cultural (e.g., McAdams, 2005) contexts on personal stories.

Short Biography

Barbara A. Woike received her doctoral degree in Psychology from Michigan State University in 1992 and has taught courses in personality, developmental, and social psychology as well as research methods and statistics courses for 15 years. She is currently an Associate Professor at Barnard College, which an undergraduate women’s college affiliated with Columbia University. Her current research pertains to the influence of personality motivation on memory processes and motivational conflicts between love and work. Her research has been supported by the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Science Foundation. Her articles have been published in professional journals such as the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. She is an Associate Editor of the Journal of Research in Personality.
Endnotes

* Correspondence address: Department of Psychology, Barnard College, Columbia University, 3009 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, USA. Email: bw81@columbia.edu

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