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Exploring Psychological Themes Through Life-Narrative Accounts

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My task in this chapter is to introduce and illustrate an approach to narrative analysis that enjoys considerable currency in cognitive science and in contemporary personality, developmental, social, clinical, and cultural psychology. The approach takes as foundational the propositions that (1) people construct and internalize stories to make sense of their lives, (2) these autobiographical stories have enough psychological meaning and staying power to be told to others as narrative accounts, and (3) these narrative accounts, when told to psychological researchers, can be analyzed for content themes, structural properties, functional attributes, and other categories that speak to their psychological, social, and cultural meanings.

Over the past decade, narrative approaches to psychological inquiry have impacted many forms of psychological research. Cognitive scientists study the nature and course of autobiographical memory and its role in identity development (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Thomsen & Berntsen, 2008). Developmental psychologists examine the origins of story comprehension and storytelling in childhood (Fivush & Haden, 2003) and the emergence of life-story schemas in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Personality psychologists chart relationships between life stories, personality traits, and psychological well-being (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; McAdams et al., 2004) while arguing that a person's internalized and evolving story of the self—what many psychologists today term *narrative identity*—constitutes a distinct layer of personality itself (McAdams, 2008; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Social psychologists explore how selves are narrated and performed in particular situations and social contexts (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Cultural psychologists describe how individuals appropriate and negotiate society's master narratives in the making of self (Hammack, 2008). Clinical and counseling psychologists cast an empirical eye on psychotherapy as a major venue for life-story transformation (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008; Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004). And psychological scientists have developed a range of new methodologies for collecting and analyzing life-narrative data (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; King, 2003).

Across the many different arenas of empirical research, the psychological study of life narratives tends to take one of two very different forms. In what philosophers of science call the *context of discovery* (Reichenbach, 1938), researchers may explore open-ended narrative accounts for broad patterns, themes, images, and qualitative characterizations in order to generate new theories about lives or to understand a single (and typically noteworthy) life in full. In the *context of justification,* by contrast, researchers may seek to test hypotheses as they play out in many different lives, typically employing well-validated coding systems and some form of statistical analysis. These two contexts for psychological science complement each other: Qualitative discovery research generates new hypotheses to be evaluated in systematic ways, and the results of hypothesis-testing studies inform new narrative explorations.

In what follows, I highlight three representative attempts to analyze life-narrative accounts, drawn from research that my students and I have conducted over the past decade. Operating purely in the context of discovery, this chapter's first example is a qualitative study of how especially creative academics narrate their professional and personal lives (McAdams & Logan, 2006). The second example—documenting a 15-year long research program on *the redemptive self*—illustrates how insights gained from the context of discovery can be tested as hypotheses in the context of justification (McAdams, 2006; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). The third example illustrates the reverse process—how quantitative findings from hypothesis-testing studies on the life narratives of political conservatives and liberals (McAdams & Albaugh, 2008; McAdams et al., 2008; McAdams, Hanek, & Dadabo, under review) can be applied, in an

exploratory and provisional manner, to the single case—in this instance, the life and presidency of George W. Bush (McAdams, 2011).

Narrative in the Context of Discovery

In the context of discovery, a psychological researcher explores a particular phenomenon in detail in order to develop new ways of describing and understanding the phenomenon. The phenomenon might be a particular psychological process, a psychologically significant situation or experience, or even a noteworthy individual life. The research process is largely *inductive*—that is, the researcher begins with concrete observations of the phenomenon itself and attempts to develop a more abstract description of or theory about the phenomenon. In life-narrative research, the phenomenon to be observed (and interpreted) is likely to be a set of psychologically rich and detailed autobiographical stories, often derived from interviews of people who present some sort of problem or question for the researcher. The researcher aims to address the problem or question by examining the stories in depth. The researcher does not have ready-made answers for the problem or question. (If answers already existed, there would be no need to do research in the context of discovery.) Based on past reading and experience, however, the researcher probably has a few hunches.

In the first example of life-narrative research in psychology (drawn from McAdams & Logan, 2006), I describe an exploratory study of the life stories told by 15 university professors who have made significant scholarly contributions to their respective disciplines. Beyond stand-alone autobiographies, few empirical studies have systematically examined how academics narrate their scholarly lives and how those narrations may or may not relate to their lives outside the world of research and scholarship. What kinds of stories do creative academics in the arts and sciences tell about their own scholarly work? How do they describe the development of their intellectual projects, collaborations, and insights? Do their narratives of creative work bear any resemblance to the stories they tell about their personal lives? These were the research questions that guided our exploration. Based on our reading of the scattered research literature on creativity (e.g., Gardner, 1993; Gruber, 1989), we began with a few hunches that provided some guidance for our exploration, but if truth be told, we were pretty clueless about what, if anything, we might discover.

Adapting a life story interview protocol used in past studies (McAdams, 1993), we asked each participant (all esteemed professors from a research university) to describe the overall trajectory of his or her scholarly life and

then to focus on four particular scenes that stand out in the story: an opening scene (describing how interest in the area of scholarship may have originated), a professional high point, a low point, and a turning point. Extending the story into the future, we also asked the participant to imagine the next chapter in the professional story. We then asked each participant to narrate according to a similar format the story of his or her personal life, focusing on family and relationships. Finally, we asked each professor to consider any connections or relations he or she may see between the two narrations invoked—that is, between the professional story of creative work and the personal story of family and interpersonal relationships. Ranging in length from one to two hours each, the interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. For our analysis, we focused on the typed transcriptions.

Whereas some researchers examine moment-by-moment utterances (Wortham, 2001) or employ computer programs to search for key words in extended discourse (Pennebaker & Stone, 2003), most psychological research on life narratives involves a careful reading of transcribed interview texts with an aim of either finding (context of discovery) or coding (context of justification) psychological themes. A psychological theme is not likely to be indicated by any particular word, nor captured fully in a phrase or single sentence. Instead, a theme is typically drawn as an inference from an extended passage of text. In the context of discovery, it is not necessary to specify strict or formal parameters for determining themes. In order to cast the widest possible exploratory net, the researcher needs to read the narrative passages with an open and discerning mind, searching for ideas that strike the ear as especially salient, recurrent, surprising, or potentially revealing of central psychological dynamics and issues (Alexander, 1988).

Every researcher goes about the business of discovery in a unique manner. But in most cases, discovery research with life-narrative accounts proceeds in ways that roughly approximate what Strauss and Corbin (1990) described as a *grounded theory* methodology. This is to say, the themes derived by the researcher from his or her reading of the interview text are grounded in the data of the texts themselves. As the reader moves through the text, he or she repeatedly notes significant excerpts, keeps a running tally of tentative inferences, and gradually develops a set of integrative themes that appear to capture something interesting or important about the texts. It is critical that the themes derived be amply supported by verbatim textual examples. Discovery research proceeds mainly from the bottom up: The researcher begins with the data and moves toward abstractions as themes. At the same time, researchers typically hold some theoretical predilections that implicitly, if not explicitly, help to guide the search for themes. Even in the context of

discovery, researchers do not start out as blank slates. Nonetheless, the scientific goal in the context of discovery is to gain new (albeit provisional) insights—not to confirm predetermined categories.

I began the analysis by reading through all 15 of the interview transcripts, taking notes and developing ideas as I moved from one interview to the next. On first blush, I was struck by the extent to which each professor described a unique story of creative accomplishment. Eventually, however, I began to note some similarities across the interviews. For example, nearly every one of the respondents could recall a clear and vivid scene or demarcated period, typically from childhood or adolescence, wherein a specific intellectual question emerged in their minds, a question that was to guide their creative work for the rest of their lives. A professor of computer science, Jerry Dennett[1] recalled how, in a sixth-grade science class, he became fascinated with the idea of building the perfect robot. A professor of history who uses sociological theory to explain recent historical events, Sal Manheimer traced his intellectual passions back to the question that obsessed him as a high school student: How can you explain the Vietnam war? A scholar of medieval religion and literature, Laura Rubin felt like a fish out of water growing up as a secular Jew in a working-class family. Even as a child, she was obsessed with this question: "How do you find God in the world?" Confirmed atheists, her parents channeled their passion into leftist politics. Their daughter readily adopted these political views, and she even tried to be an atheist. The politics stayed with her, but the atheism never took:

> I wasn't designed to be an atheist. I was a very bad and unhappy one. I was always trying, even in childhood, to get some kind of religious observance into the family. I remember my grandmother, the one who lived until I was 9. She taught me how to light the Hanukah candles, and how to chant the prayers, and I thought that was cool. So I begged and pleaded with my parents, can we light the Hanukah candles, can we have a menorah? My dad was like, come on, but my mom was like, humor her, she wants something to believe in. And I remember saying, no, that's not it. I want something to *celebrate*. I think that is still, for me, what spirituality is about. (McAdams & Logan, 2006, p. 97)

Rubin pursued her interests in spirituality and religion through college and graduate school. Today, she is one of the world's foremost experts on spirituality in medieval Christian Europe. Jerry Dennett followed up on his childhood question, too. How do you build the perfect robot? In graduate school, Jerry developed programs and protocols that governed how robotic devices perceive the environment. His research team designed especially nimble robots that performed tasks efficiently and moved through space in a graceful

manner. Research groups at other universities, by contrast, designed what Jerry described as clunky "behemoths that moved really slowly"—"you had to have spotters to make sure they didn't run into people." He also said that the hulky robots from rival labs "really offended our aesthetics" (McAdams & Logan, 2006, p. 94). For Jerry, the perfect robot is a graceful, efficient, and beautifully self-regulated machine. Throughout Jerry's interview, the aesthetic of graceful self-regulation stands in sharp contrast to experiences in his professional and personal life in which things run wildly out of control. For example, Jerry has fallen in love with women he described as histrionic and emotionally mercurial five times in his life. He is deeply attracted to women of this sort, poorly self-regulated though they may be. In each of these relationships, Jerry tried (and failed) to exert a calming and organizing influence on these women's lives. He concedes that it is easier to design the perfect robot.

Laura Rubin's and Jerry Dennett's cases illustrate themes I found across many of the life-narrative interviews in this exploratory study. Although each interview protocol contained its own unique variations, a common sequence of events could be discerned. Inductively moving from the concrete data to a provisional abstraction, I sketched out the following 4-step model: (1) The protagonist in the story encounters a grand question or problem in childhood or adolescence that guides his or her intellectual pursuits thereafter, akin to what Gardner (1993) described as a *crystallizing experience* in creative work. (2) The question gives birth to an *idealized image* of something (the graceful, self-regulated robot) or some state of social reality (a unified religious community) that the protagonist longs to create or become. Over time, the protagonist commits the self to the realization of the image. (3) As the image matures and develops in the mind and life of the protagonist, it recruits more and more positive emotion, such as joy and excitement, and it becomes elaborated into a personal *aesthetic*. The aesthetic is an implicit conceptualization of what qualities give a thing or experience its beauty or well-formedness. (4) The constellation of early question, idealized image, and personal aesthetic sets up a corresponding *dialectic* or conflict in the narrative (Gregg, 1991), pitting contrasting proclivities or trends in the protagonist's creative work against each other (for Jerry, self-regulation versus chaos). The dialectic may also come to organize aspects of the protagonist's personal life as well, integrating domains of work and love through opposition.

Narrative in the Context of Justification

My first example illustrated how a researcher might explore life-narrative data in the context of discovery for the purpose of developing a provisional theory

or model aimed at describing or explaining a phenomenon (e.g., creative work in the lives of academics) about which little is currently known. Exploratory research of the sort I described constitutes a first step in psychological science: building theories, generating hypotheses, developing insights. The second step, what philosophers of science call the *context of justification,* involves testing the validity or veracity of the theories, hypotheses, or insights derived from the first step.

My second example begins with the psychosocial construct of *generativity,* identified by Erik Erikson (1950) as a prime challenge of middle adulthood. Generativity is an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations, through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and engaging in a wide range of activities aimed at leaving a positive legacy of the self for the future (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Psychologists have developed a range of questionnaire and observational measures to assess individual differences in generativity. A significant body of research shows that people who score high on self-report measures of generativity tend to be more effective parents, have broader social networks, are more involved in political activities and religious organizations, engage in higher levels of volunteer work in the community, and enjoy higher levels of mental health and well-being compared to adults scoring lower in generativity (McAdams & Logan, 2004). Psychosocially speaking, highly generative adults seem to rise to the occasion when it comes to the daunting challenges of midlife. What enables them to do so? One possibility is that they have developed particular kinds of life stories—narrative identities—that are well-designed to support their generative efforts. The question at the heart of this chapter's second example of life-narrative research, therefore, is this: What kinds of life stories do highly generative adults construct to support and give meaning to their generative efforts?

As in McAdams and Logan (2006), my research team (5 graduate students and myself) began with a small set of life-narrative interviews. After administering well-validated self-report measures of generativity to a sample of midlife American adults, we called back for interviews those adults scoring especially high or especially low on generativity. In each interview, the participant described (1) the major chapters in his or her life story, (2) eight key scenes in the story (such as high points, low points, and turning points), (3) hopes and plans for the future, and (4) religious and ethical beliefs and values (see McAdams, 1993). We then selected eight interviews from adults scoring high on our questionnaire measures of generativity and eight from a demographically matched sample of adults scoring especially low in generativity. As in my first example, we poured over the interview texts to discern broad psychological themes. However, in this case the aim of the inquiry was to discover broad thematic differences between the two groups. Guided in part by the theoretical literature on generativity, we sought to delineate

themes that clearly distinguished the stories told by highly generative adults from those told by less generative adults. Over the course of many lab meetings spanning nearly half a year, we compared our notes on the 16 cases and debated over the best ways to characterize the differences between the two groups. Eventually, we arrived at a provisional list of six or seven themes that seemed to do the trick. Most prominent among the themes was what we called a *redemption sequence*—the movement in a scene from an emotionally negative situation to a positive ending or result. Highly generative adults seemed much more likely than their less generative counterparts to narrate scenes of redemption.

Next, we moved directly into the context of justification. Here the rules are strict and spelled out in obsessive detail in many books and articles on hypothesis-testing research in psychological science. When it comes to life-narrative studies, the rules for hypothesis-testing research include the following: (1) Detailed coding systems must be clearly spelled out in order to quantify thematic trends, (2) multiple coders must code the narrative texts blind to the identities of the participants (in our case, coders must not know the generativity scores of the participants whose stories they are coding), (3) coders must achieve some acceptable level of inter-coder reliability or agreement, and (4) a sufficient number of narratives must be coded in order to afford statistical tests of the hypotheses proposed. In McAdams et al. (1997), we followed all four of these steps to see which of our original themes would survive rigorous hypothesis testing. We developed scoring rules for each of the themes, and we trained scorers to achieve acceptable levels of reliability across many interview texts—ultimately yielding quantitative indices that were then subjected to statistical tests. We tested the ability of our themes to differentiate adults with respect to generativity in a new sample of 40 highly generative and 30 less generative adults. We found empirical support for some, but not all, of the themes we originally generated. The surviving themes were subjected to further tests and refinement in subsequent studies, and eventually they came to comprise a model describing a common life-narrative prototype told by highly generative adults, a model I call *the redemptive self* (McAdams, 2006).

The redemptive self consists of five interrelated themes: The protagonist of the story (1) enjoys a *special advantage,* (2) witnesses *suffering or injustice* in the lives of others during childhood, and (3) consolidates a sense of *moral steadfastness* by the end of adolescence; as the protagonist moves through life, he or she (4) repeatedly encounters negative events that are transformed into *redemption sequences,* providing hope and confidence for the future; as the protagonist looks ahead in life, he or she (5) sets forth *prosocial goals*

aimed at improving the lives of others and leaving a positive legacy of the self. Coding rules have been established and validated for each of these five themes. Let us consider in some detail the theme of redemption sequences.

In order to score life interviews for redemption sequences, the coder must first demarcate passages of text to be coded. In nearly all of the studies my students and I undertake on redemption sequences, we focus on interview or written accounts of particular *scenes* in the life story, such as high points, low points, and turning points. For each scene, the participant is typically asked to provide a short narrative account that tells what happened in the scene, what led up to the event, who was involved, what the participant was feeling and thinking in the scene, how the scene ended, and what, if anything, the scene means in the context of the participant's full life story. Here is a short example of a turning point scene, told by a 62-year-old African American retired police chief, who happened to score very high on self-report measures of generativity:

> [My turning point] was back during [a time when I had] thoughts and feelings about not taking the promotional exam the [police] department had. Even thinking about leaving the police department because I felt it was a hopeless thing that a black could ever be a police chief. . . . And it was at the time I was assigned to be the bodyguard for Dr. Martin Luther King [during a brief visit to the Chicago area]. And he was here, I think, maybe two, three days. And so I spent some time with him. You know, when he was at the hotel and places where he went to speak and all. . . . He was getting ready to leave, and he was standing in front of the hotel and waiting for transportation to take him to the airport. And we started talking, and I told him how frustrated I was about the fact that no black had ever been promoted and I was still frustrated until then. Maybe it's time to move on, because I didn't see there was anything that was gonna change. And he just said a couple of things, just very briefly he said, you know, he said, "Never give up." And that was basically the end of the conversation. And I thought about that before, but when *he* said it to me, and the way he said, "Keep the faith," you know, and "Never stop dreaming the dream," you know. And I held on to that, and I went on, and things changed. . . . He turned me around from walkin' out the door. (McAdams & Bowman, 2001, pp. 3–4)

The coder reads the entire account of the event, like the one above, and determines whether or not the account contains redemptive imagery. The essential characteristic of redemptive imagery is a movement in the story from a demonstrably negative to a demonstrably positive situation. Negative situations are often described in terms of the protagonist's emotional state,

as in the preceding passage that says the protagonist perceived "a hopeless thing" and felt "frustrated." Negative emotional states include those expressing fear, anxiety, dread, anger, sadness, depression, guilt, or shame, among other emotional expressions. Also relevant are physical pain, injury, and sickness. In other instances, the narrator may not explicitly describe a negative feeling, but the event itself is an especially negative one—for example, the death of a friend, divorce, major failure, poverty, addiction, broken relationships, being fired from a job, and so on. Minor setbacks and daily hassles, however, do not count.

If the coder determines that the opening situation in the scene is indeed decidedly negative, then the coder looks to determine if the negative situation gives way to a demonstrably positive outcome. Positive outcomes are often indicated by emotional states such as joy, happiness, excitement, and love, but they can be expressed in many other ways, as well. In the preceding case, the narrator indicates that "things changed" and "I went on." (Later in the interview, the reader learns that the protagonist did take the promotional exam and eventually became the first African American police chief on the force.) Especially common are redemptive moves wherein the narrator steps back from the in-time narration of the event itself and derives some kind of conclusion, credo, lesson, or insight. The bad event "ended up making me a better person," or "taught me to love my family," or "toughened me up for the challenges ahead."

Redemptive moves come in many different forms. They may be expressed in terms of personal sacrifice, atonement, liberation, recovery, upward social mobility, or experiencing growth or fulfillment. Here I list a few examples from the hundreds we have encountered in life-narrative research. In each example, I express the core of the redemptive move, using the initial *P* to refer to the story's protagonist:

- P experiences painful labor and delivery → birth of a beautiful baby
- P nearly dies in a car crash → gratitude and new outlook
- P is rejected by boyfriend → P becomes more assertive and self-confident
- P is fired from job → P comes to see self as a "whole person"
- P suffers drug addiction → recovery, P takes responsibility for life
- Uncle dies → P feels greater empathy for others who have lost loved ones
- P stumbles at beginning of race, pain → P comes back to win the race
- P is stuck in low-level job, miserable → P is promoted, becomes happy
- P is trapped in abusive relationship → after divorce, P feels "free"
- Bully beats P up → bully and P become best friends
- P lives a sinful life → Christian conversion, P feels "saved"

If the coder determines that the scene contains redemptive imagery, the coder assigns a score of +1 to the scene. (Scenes without redemptive imagery

receive a score of 0.) Scenes that show redemptive imagery are then eligible to earn more points, should the redemptive move itself lead to any of the following three results: *enhanced agency* (the redemptive move enhances the protagonist's power or self-efficacy), *enhanced communion* (the redemptive move improves the protagonist's interpersonal relationships), or *ultimate concerns* (the redemptive move enhances the protagonist's religious or spiritual understanding or well-being). Coders are trained to be relatively conservative in assigning these extra points; the passage must offer detailed and explicit textual evidence for enhanced agency, enhanced communion, or ultimate concerns. Therefore, a particular life-narrative scene could conceivably score from 0 (no redemptive imagery) to 4 (redemption imagery + all three extra points). Typically, researchers sum scores across a series of scenes in the interview to arrive at a total redemption sequence score for the participant. In a typical hypothesis-testing study, then, redemption sequence scores become a quantified psychological variable that can be statistically associated with other variables.

Research consistently shows that higher scores on redemption sequences in American adults' life stories are associated with greater generativity and better psychological health (McAdams, 2006; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams et al., 1997; McAdams et al., 2001; Walker & Frimer, 2007). Seeing one's life in redemptive terms may give people the confidence and psychological resources needed to soldier on through the midlife years, working hard to leave a positive legacy for the next generation. Generativity itself is hard work, as any parent or community organizer knows. But if one's internalized and evolving narrative identity affirms the conviction that negative events can be overcome, then one may be better positioned, psychologically speaking, to take on and find success in the challenges of midlife generativity. American society, furthermore, provides adults with many different models for personal redemption, from inspirational stories of the American dream (the redemptive move from rags to riches) to Sunday morning sermons about salvation and atonement (McAdams, 2006). American adults often appropriate these images and plots into their own narrative identities, which can then be coded and analyzed in objective ways by researchers interested in testing psychological hypotheses about how people make narrative sense of their lives.

Using Narratives to Test Extant Theories

Research on the life stories told by highly generative American adults resulted in the discovery of a new psychological idea—the redemptive self—around which theory has been built and hypotheses continue to be tested. In the case

of the redemptive self, then, life-narrative research has proven valuable for both generating and evaluating new ideas in psychological science. Psychology is filled, however, with interesting ideas and provocative theories—generated outside the tradition of life-narrative studies—that await rigorous and systematic scrutiny in the context of justification. Life-narrative approaches can sometimes offer unique and illuminating ways to test extant theories. And the results of those hypothesis-testing efforts can inform further explorations of life stories in the context of discovery. In this chapter's third example, I describe a relatively new line of life-narrative research that tests hypotheses drawn from existing theory in social and political psychology regarding differences between political conservatives and liberals.

Ever since the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), psychological scientists have proposed theories to explain the psychological underpinnings of political ideology. Contemporary formulations tend to suggest that political ideology is a form of motivated social cognition (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Political conservatism and liberalism may stem from differences in the expressions of basic dispositional traits, such as openness to experience and conscientiousness, and psychological needs for security, safety, and cognitive clarity. It has been suggested, for example, that conservatives endorse strict rules and stringent standards of personal and social discipline (Lakoff, 2002) because they fear the chaos that may result from the breakdown of traditional authority and the denigration of sacred order (Haidt, 2007). By contrast, liberals endorse the values of nurturance and self-fulfillment, and they worry more about social inequality and general human suffering than about the security provided by conventional authority. Whereas conservatives fear the chaos that results from a breakdown of authority, liberals may fear the prospects of emptiness and an unfulfilling life. Indirect support for hypotheses of this sort can be found in contrived laboratory studies and questionnaire surveys. But life-narrative studies offer an especially compelling way to test hypotheses like these because they reveal the rich psychological dynamics of individual human lives.

As part of an ongoing research project examining personality, religion, and political values, my students and I examined relations between psychological themes and political ideology in a sample of 128 midlife adults, all of whom were active in Christian congregations, both Protestant and Catholic. Each participant completed a lengthy set of written questionnaires and was then interviewed about his or her life, faith, and political activity. In the first third of the interview, each participant described eight key scenes in his or her life story, following procedures used in previous

life-narrative studies (McAdams, 1993). In the middle third of the interview, each participant responded to a series of questions and prompts about the nature of his or her religious beliefs and practices, prayer, the development of faith, and related issues. In the third part, the participant discussed political attitudes and answered a series of questions about the 2004 U. S. presidential election (Bush vs. Kerry).

We published a series of reports regarding the findings of the investigation (Hanek, Olson, & McAdams, 2011; McAdams & Albaugh, 2008; McAdams et al., 2008). A central idea running through the research, and derived from extant theories of political psychology, was that conservatives and liberals should apprehend the self in very different ways. For conservatives, the self is an object to be disciplined and controlled, for losing control of the self and giving in to base human impulses will invariably lead to chaos. For liberals, the self is an object to be explored and expanded. Liberals find endless fascination in the self and deeply value self-fulfillment. What they fear, by contrast, is emptiness—a hollow, undernourished self (McAdams & Albaugh, 2008). Put differently, it has been hypothesized that conservatives adopt a *prevention focus* perspective on the self—they aim to tamp down the self and prevent danger from occurring. By contrast, liberals adopt a *promotion focus* perspective on the self—they aim to examine and fill up the self, promote the good things that self-exploration may bring (Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008).

We recently conducted a direct test of the prevention versus promotion hypothesis by coding a set of the autobiographical scenes described by each of the 128 participants in the study for the extent to which the narrator described the self as an object to be controlled (prevention focus) or explored (promotion focus) (McAdams et al., under review). Rather than coding for the presence or absence of imagery (as we did in the analysis of redemption sequences), we adopted a 5-point rating scale for each scene, giving scores that ranged from "1" for extreme self-control through "3" for neutral to "5" for extreme self-exploration.

Our coding rules specified that self-control was evident when the protagonist in the scene aimed to regulate, protect, preserve, maintain, monitor, discipline, tame, restrict, restrain, or manage the self. The protagonist works to keep the self under control, in balance, or on an even keel. Self-improvement is seen as developing better abilities or strategies to regulate the self, to refine its capacities, to maintain its strengths and good tendencies, to sublimate its powers into socially appropriate or socially beneficial actions, or to protect it from harming itself. The following passage, taken from a woman's account of a turning-point scene (describing a period in her

marriage when she got pregnant and her husband suffered health setbacks), provides a good example of a strong self-control theme (score = 1):

> When I got pregnant with him, I had been married almost three years then and just living a wild life, partying. My husband and I just had a good time all the time, and we did not think about monetary or financial issues in a broad sense. . . . I stopped doing the wild things I was doing . . . [making the change] helped shape me into the person that I am now, which is more responsible. . . . The time that he [her husband] had asthma, the doctor explained how we needed to make sure we had to live in a dust-free atmosphere, and he could not be around cigarette smoke. At that time I smoked cigarettes, and I stopped that day. I'm not having another cigarette since that day, and it was 23 or 24 years ago. Yes, I stopped the day he was checked [by the doctors]. (McAdams et al., under review)

Self-exploration was evidenced when the protagonist in the scene aimed mainly to develop, grow, expand, question, search, examine, investigate, discover, articulate, elaborate, or fulfill the self. The protagonist is seen as open to new experiences that may stretch the self or enhance self-exploration, self-expansion, or personal growth. The protagonist seeks out new directions or different options, sometimes challenging the self, and moves forward boldly, even heedlessly, to learn more, experience more, or develop new areas or capacities of the self. Self-improvement is motivated by a desire to know, feel, or experience more. The following excerpt from a woman's high-point moment in her life story illustrates a very strong self-exploration theme (score = 5):

> There's that little bit of reflectiveness that you get with an empty nest. I would say it has truly been a highlight to get shaken up. . . . The decision to leave and the excitement of starting something really fresh caused me to have to look at all of the things I valued and really do a lot of personal reflection. . . . I think I really focused back onto what are important things for me. . . . So I really want to experiment with some of the areas I want to grow into and not just do something because I've done it that way before. (McAdams et al., under review)

The results of the coding for self-control versus self-exploration provided strong support for our initial hypothesis: Conservatives described life story scenes laden with themes of self-control; liberals shaded much more strongly in the direction of self-exploration (McAdams et al., under review).

The empirical findings from this investigation and from hypothesis-testing studies conducted on the redemptive self provided inspiration for a psychological biography I recently wrote on former U. S. President George W. Bush

(McAdams, 2011). Titled *George W. Bush and the Redemptive Dream,* this exercise in the context of discovery analyzes the central dispositional traits, psychological motives, and internalized stories of the self (narrative identity) that formed Bush's personality and proposes that each of these features had an impact on his decision as president to launch a military invasion of Iraq in 2003. Guided in part by empirical findings showing that political conservatives tend to see the self as an object to be regulated, I argue that the central feature of this conservative president's narrative identity was *the deliverance from chaos and the restoration of goodness through self-discipline*. Expressed in his narrative understanding of how, as the prodigal son grown up, he ultimately triumphed over alcohol abuse and re-dedicated his life to God, his family, and generative service, George W. Bush's redemptive story for his own life gave him the confidence not only to run for president but to hunt down, as president, the one person who, he believed, was his beloved father's and his country's greatest enemy—Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein. After 9/11, President Bush projected his deep and abiding story of personal redemption onto America and the world. Just as he triumphed over personal chaos through self-discipline and God's help, so too, he believed would America triumph over the chaos and evil of Saddam and ultimately restore freedom, personal control, and the good life to the Iraqis. The particular narrative identity that Bush constructed for his own life provided him with his deepest justification for the war and 100% confidence that there would someday be a happy ending.

Conclusion

In recent years, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the psychological themes that animate life stories. Life-narrative studies have enriched psychological science by providing a treasure trove of material for generating new theories and hypotheses and by offering reliable and valid coding procedures to be used in hypothesis-testing research. In this chapter's three examples, I illustrated the interplay between theory building (the context of discovery) and hypothesis testing (the context of justification) in psychological research on life narratives. My exploratory study of the life stories told by creative academics illustrates the use of life-narrative data to build a provisional theoretical model. In the research program examining the life stories of highly generative American adults, my students and I developed a theoretical model and then derived a series of hypotheses that continue to be tested through objective content analysis of life-narrative protocols. In the research on the life stories of political conservatives and liberals,

life-narrative data are coded to test hypotheses suggested by extant theories, and then the findings of these studies in the context of justification are used to inform a case study of former U. S. President George W. Bush.

For those readers already familiar with narrative studies in psychological science, I hope my highly selective survey offers a useful organizational scheme and catalyst for future studies. For the uninitiated, I hope I have whetted intellectual appetites. Psychologists are just beginning to make significant progress in the empirical study of life narratives. There is still so much to be done—so many new insights to be generated and hypotheses to be tested regarding the psychological meanings of the stories people live by.

Note

1. Jerry Dennett, Laura Rubin, and Sal Manheimer are pseudonyms.

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