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This Is Your Life (and How You Tell It)

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For more than a century, researchers have been trying to work out the raw ingredients that account for personality, the sweetness and neuroses that make Anna Anna, the sluggishness and sensitivity that make Andrew Andrew. They have largely ignored the first-person explanation — the life story that people themselves tell about who they are, and why.

Stories are stories, after all. The attractive stranger at the airport bar hears one version, the parole officer another, and the P.T.A. board gets something entirely different. Moreover, the tone, the lessons, even the facts in a life story can all shift in the changing light of a person's mood, its major notes turning minor, its depths appearing shallow.

Yet in the past decade or so a handful of psychologists have argued that the quicksilver elements of personal narrative belong in any three-dimensional picture of personality. And a burst of new findings are now helping them make the case. Generous, civic-minded adults from diverse backgrounds tell life stories with very similar and telling features, studies find; so likewise do people who have overcome mental distress through psychotherapy.

Every American may be working on a screenplay, but we are also continually updating a treatment of our own life — and the way in which we visualize each scene not only shapes how we think about ourselves, but how we behave, new studies find. By better understanding how life stories are built, this work suggests, people may be able to alter their own narrative, in small ways and perhaps large ones.

“When we first started studying life stories, people thought it was just idle curiosity — stories, isn't that cool?” said Dan P. McAdams, a professor of psychology at Northwestern and author of the 2006 book, “The Redemptive Self.” “Well, we find that these narratives guide behavior in every moment, and frame not only how we see the past but how we see ourselves in the future.”

Researchers have found that the human brain has a natural affinity for narrative construction. People tend to remember facts more accurately if they encounter them in a story rather than in a list, studies find; and they rate legal arguments as more convincing when built into narrative tales rather than on legal precedent.

YouTube routines notwithstanding, most people do not begin to see themselves in the midst of a tale with a beginning, middle and eventual end until they are teenagers. “Younger kids see themselves in terms of broad, stable traits: ‘I like baseball but not soccer,’ ” said Kate McLean, a psychologist at the University of Toronto in Mississauga. “This meaning-making capability — to talk about growth, to explain what something says about who I am — develops across adolescence.”

Psychologists know what life stories look like when they are fully hatched, at least for some Americans. Over the

years, Dr. McAdams and others have interviewed hundreds of men and women, most in their 30s and older.

During a standard life-story interview, people describe phases of their lives as if they were outlining chapters, from the sandlot years through adolescence and middle age. They also describe several crucial scenes in detail, including high points (the graduation speech, complete with verbal drum roll); low points (the college nervous breakdown, complete with the list of witnesses); and turning points. The entire two-hour session is recorded and transcribed.

In analyzing the texts, the researchers found strong correlations between the content of people's current lives and the stories they tell. Those with mood problems have many good memories, but these scenes are usually tainted by some dark detail. The pride of college graduation is spoiled when a friend makes a cutting remark. The wedding party was wonderful until the best man collapsed from drink. A note of disappointment seems to close each narrative phrase.

By contrast, so-called generative adults — those who score highly on tests measuring civic-mindedness, and who are likely to be energetic and involved — tend to see many of the events in their life in the reverse order, as linked by themes of redemption. They flunked sixth grade but met a wonderful counselor and made honor roll in seventh. They were laid low by divorce, only to meet a wonderful new partner. Often, too, they say they felt singled out from very early in life — protected, even as others nearby suffered.

In broad outline, the researchers report, such tales express distinctly American cultural narratives, of emancipation or atonement, of Horatio Alger advancement, of epiphany and second chances. Depending on the person, the story itself might be nuanced or simplistic, powerfully dramatic or cloyingly pious. But the point is that the narrative themes are, as much as any other trait, driving factors in people's behavior, the researchers say.

“We find that when it comes to the big choices people make — should I marry this person? should I take this job? should I move across the country? — they draw on these stories implicitly, whether they know they are working from them or not,” Dr. McAdams said.

Any life story is by definition a retrospective reconstruction, at least in part an outgrowth of native temperament. Yet the research so far suggests that people's life stories are neither rigid nor wildly variable, but rather change gradually over time, in close tandem with meaningful life events.

Jonathan Adler, a researcher at Northwestern, has found that people's accounts of their experiences in psychotherapy provide clues about the nature of their recovery. In a recent study presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in January, Mr. Adler reported on 180 adults from the Chicago area who had recently completed a course of talk therapy. They sought treatment for things like depression, anxiety, marital problems and fear of flying, and spent months to years in therapy.

At some level, talk therapy has always been an exercise in replaying and reinterpreting each person's unique life story. Yet Mr. Adler found that in fact those former patients who scored highest on measures of well-being — who had recovered, by standard measures — told very similar tales about their experiences.

They described their problem, whether depression or an [eating disorder](#), as coming on suddenly, as if out of nowhere. They characterized their difficulty as if it were an outside enemy, often giving it a name (the black dog,

the walk of shame). And eventually they conquered it.

“The story is one of victorious battle: ‘I ended therapy because I could overcome this on my own,’ ” Mr. Adler said. Those in the study who scored lower on measures of psychological well-being were more likely to see their moods and behavior problems as a part of their own character, rather than as a villain to be defeated. To them, therapy was part of a continuing adaptation, not a decisive battle.

The findings suggest that psychotherapy, when it is effective, gives people who are feeling helpless a sense of their own power, in effect altering their life story even as they work to disarm their own demons, Mr. Adler said.

Mental resilience relies in part on exactly this kind of autobiographical storytelling, moment to moment, when navigating life’s stings and sorrows. To better understand how stories are built in real time, researchers have recently studied how people recall vivid scenes from recent memory. They find that one important factor is the perspective people take when they revisit the scene — whether in the first person, or in the third person, as if they were watching themselves in a movie.

In a 2005 study reported in the journal *Psychological Science*, researchers at [Columbia University](#) measured how student participants reacted to a bad memory, whether an argument or failed exam, when it was recalled in the third person. They tested levels of conscious and unconscious hostility after the recollections, using both standard questionnaires and students’ essays. The investigators found that the third-person scenes were significantly less upsetting, compared with bad memories recalled in the first person.

“What our experiment showed is that this shift in perspective, having this distance from yourself, allows you to relive the experience and focus on why you’re feeling upset,” instead of being immersed in it, said Ethan Kross, the study’s lead author. The emotional content of the memory is still felt, he said, but its sting is blunted as the brain frames its meaning, as it builds the story.

Taken together, these findings suggest a kind of give and take between life stories and individual memories, between the larger screenplay and the individual scenes. The way people replay and recast memories, day by day, deepens and reshapes their larger life story. And as it evolves, that larger story in turn colors the interpretation of the scenes.

Nic Weststrate, 23, a student living in Toronto, said he was able to reinterpret many of his most painful memories with more compassion after having come out as a gay man. He was very hard on himself, for instance, when at age 20 he misjudged a relationship with a friend who turned out to be straight.

He now sees the end of that relationship as both a painful lesson and part of a larger narrative. “I really had no meaningful story for my life then,” he said, “and I think if I had been open about being gay I might not have put myself in that position, and he probably wouldn’t have either.”

After coming out, he said: “I saw that there were other possibilities. I would be presenting myself openly to a gay audience, and just having a coherent story about who I am made a big difference. It affects how you see the past, but it also really affects your future.”

Psychologists have shown just how interpretations of memories can alter future behavior. In an experiment published in 2005, researchers had college students who described themselves as socially awkward in high

school recall one of their most embarrassing moments. Half of the students reimagined the humiliation in the first person, and the other half pictured it in the third person.

Two clear differences emerged. Those who replayed the scene in the third person rated themselves as having changed significantly since high school — much more so than the first-person group did. The third-person perspective allowed people to reflect on the meaning of their social miscues, the authors suggest, and thus to perceive more psychological growth.

And their behavior changed, too. After completing the psychological questionnaires, each study participant spent time in a waiting room with another student, someone the research subject thought was taking part in the study. In fact the person was working for the research team, and secretly recorded the conversation between the pair, if any. This double agent had no idea which study participants had just relived a high school horror, and which had viewed theirs as a movie scene.

The recordings showed that members of the third-person group were much more sociable than the others. “They were more likely to initiate a conversation, after having perceived themselves as more changed,” said Lisa Libby, the lead author and a psychologist at [Ohio State University](#). She added, “We think that feeling you have changed frees you up to behave as if you have; you think, ‘Wow, I’ve really made some progress’ and it gives you some real momentum.”

Dr. Libby and others have found that projecting future actions in the third person may also affect what people later do, as well. In another study, students who pictured themselves voting for president in the 2004 election, from a third-person perspective, were more likely to actually go to the polls than those imagining themselves casting votes in the first person.

The implications of these results for self-improvement, whether sticking to a [diet](#) or finishing a degree or a novel, are still unknown. Likewise, experts say, it is unclear whether such scene-making is more functional for some people, and some memories, than for others. And no one yet knows how fundamental personality factors, like neuroticism or extraversion, shape the content of life stories or their component scenes.

But the new research is giving narrative psychologists something they did not have before: a coherent story to tell. Seeing oneself as acting in a movie or a play is not merely fantasy or indulgence; it is fundamental to how people work out who it is they are, and may become.

“The idea that whoever appeared onstage would play not me but a character was central to imagining how to make the narrative: I would need to see myself from outside,” the writer Joan Didion has said of “The Year of Magical Thinking,” her autobiographical play about mourning the death of her husband and her daughter. “I would need to locate the dissonance between the person I thought I was and the person other people saw.”

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