Identity and Lifetime Narrative Development in Adolescents

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Introduction

The life journey of humans might be described as a process of self-discovery. This begins at an early age, with one’s recognition of self. Infants reach this point when they realize the reflection in the mirror is, in fact, *them*. In one study, psychologists videotaped themselves interacting with a toddler. At some point, they surreptitiously marked the child’s face with a smudge. Directly thereafter, they showed the child the video: those who tried to remove the smudge from their own faces had reached this recognition of self; those who did not, had not.

As toddlers progress into childhood, studies show that the style and depth of their autobiographical memories reflect that of their maternal caregiver (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). The more elaborate and frequent the reminiscence, the deeper the development of autobiographical memory. Toddlers and young children also develop theory of mind (Wellman et al., 2008). In other words, they grow a sense of empathy, that they are one individual of many, each with a unique perspective of the world. Children are able to recognize that others who were present for the same event as they, may have seen that event in an entirely different way. This has direct implications for the development of a broader sense of self, identity, and a lifetime narrative.

Still, even into middle childhood, individuals can recall only episodic memories (Habermas & Paha, 2001). Although they may very well be acute in recalling individual stories or events—even on par with adults by the age of 9 or 11—the true sense of a lifetime narrative with causal coherence does not truly emerge until adolescence (Habermas & Paha, 2001). That is to say, not until
adolescence does an individual begin to get a sense of 'I am this way because of this,' or, 'To better understand this story, let me put it in the greater context of my life.'

Qualitative research studies

As is the case with general cognitive studies of adolescents, there is a real need for deeper research on this age range with respect to lifetime narrative development (Singer, 2004). Some psychologists even argue that there has been too much deference given to the earliest years of life and their effects on who we become as adults, when adolescence is truly such a formative time. While this may be true, especially insofar as current research indicates adolescence as the years of identity formation, it is also undeniable that experiences from childhood through adolescence matter crucially to who that young person will be come. While the brain has the quality of plasticity through the entire lifespan, what happens in childhood and adolescence is certainly gravely important to cognitive growth.

Some studies have been done, though, to break the tip of the iceberg in understanding how narrative development occurs in adolescence. The results of those studies consistently show that the cohesive lifetime narrative emerges during adolescence—but more on that later. First, a bit about the various researchers’ methodology.

Various methodologies include interviewing late-adolescents in their transition from high school to college (Thorne, 2000), to constructing and coding surveys that include open-ended questions and glean subtleties from early theory of mind to later self-defining memory narratives (McLean, 2005), and interviewing
12, 15, and 18 year-olds to elicit their 7 most important life memories and check for levels of life-story cohesion (Habermas & Paha, 2001). These researchers self-acknowledge that, for reasons explained before, their methodologies tend toward the informal and general. As scientific understanding of these phenomena become clearer, so will the experiments and studies drill down with narrower focus.

Another great limitation of the current research is that its subjects tend significantly to be white, middle-class, and situated in western culture (United States, Canada, Germany). In several cases, the researchers also highlight this limitation. Autobiographical memory itself depends so greatly on the dialogic style of the maternal caregiver in early childhood, and the domain of personal-narrative building through adolescence is well within the realm of cognitive development affected by a myriad of complex factors, very much including SES, race, and culture. Therefore, as noted in some of the literature, it is critical to expand subjects of study to include a greater diversity with respect to these. Other limitations in current research include a lack of longitudinal studies, possible gender biases, how much one is willing to openly share, and the fact that they are all retroactive—that is, their participants are recalling past events, rather than being observed forming them. The memory can be a tricky entity.

What these initial, relatively superficial studies indicate, however, are some common trends that at the very least call for further research. The hypothesis that narrative and self-development marry into a highly significant bond during adolescence seems highly plausible.
Meaning making

At the core, what happens to adolescents is that through storytelling, they piece together the story of who they are. This is a meaning-making process that they’ll likely carry with them through the rest of their lives. In part, this emergence takes place during adolescence because they are ready for it—physiologically, psychologically, socially, and linguistically. Having been prepared by their parents during childhood, adolescents take ownership of their own stories, at which point they naturally piece them together to form a concept of self, and even extend that to aptly forecast their own futures (Singer, 2004). Adolescents shift their social attention from parents to peers, who serve as the primary audience for their personal stories. As McLean (2005) notes, “The life story begins to emerge in adolescence because of the onset of formal operations, physiological maturity, and often the demands for establishing oneself in the world through work, school, and family, demands that tend to allow for or even require meaning making.”

At a time in their lives when identity is paramount (and often sees a high turnover rate), adolescents forge the identities through the stories that they tell (Thorne, 2000). Not surprisingly, the stories they choose to tell are often changing as well. A collection of stories produces a theme, or themes, by which the teller would like to be identified. Again here, as in so much that we see in the cognitive development domain, young people are forging the workings of their brains, as they “practice” to become adults.

If collections of stories comprise a life story, it may be somewhat surprising to learn that the stories people choose are often about atypical, emotionally
disruptive events (Thorne, 2000). These atypical events, while not necessarily the norm for the person experiencing them, do however turn out to be the defining moments of one’s life. In this way, people share great triumphs (“I ended my abusive relationship;” “I experienced the death of someone close to me;”), transformations (“I went to India and will never see the world in the same way;”), or turning points (“I got married;” “I had a child;” “I graduated;” “I relocated;” “I got a job;”) to help create the narrative of their own respective life stories and paint a picture of what made them who they are today. The ability to create this causal coherence of a life story is what sets adolescence apart from younger life stages with respect to autobiographical memory. Furthermore, there are two specific kinds of meaning in late adolescents’ self-defining meaning narratives: lesson learning—a specific event that could direct future behavior in similar situations (“I should not talk back to my mother;”)—and gaining insight—gleaning meaning from an event that applies to greater areas of life than a specific behavior (“I realized that I was an independent person.”) (McLean, 2005). This ability to self-reflect blazes the trail to one’s self-discovery.

It may also be surprising that, by and large, personal memories cluster in adolescence and early adulthood, not pervasively across the life course (Thorne, 2000). That is to say, most people’s—even senior citizens’—“life stories” are comprised of events from ages 10 to 30 (Thorne, 2000). We may attribute this phenomenon to, among other factors, the fact that personal memories for 10 to 30 year-olds concern developmental tasks centered on the formation of identity and intimacy: first-time experiences, first jobs, first loves, and so forth. Emotional
experiences generally stabilize later in life. So if one often picks atypical, emotionally disturbing stories, they are likely to have occurred between the ages of 10 and 30.

The crux of life story narrative development lies in the social component—being able to \textit{share} stories about one’s life. Situated stories that are told get remembered (McLean et al., 2007). When one has an experience, he/she either creates a memory of it because it is significant in some way, or he/she does not because it is insignificant. The memory sticks, however, generally only if he/she \textit{shares} it in some form. This is the final piece in the puzzle of identity development. Thorne (2000) notes the importance of proximal development—teachable moments in which some kind of learning takes place through social activity—with respect to the personality: “When the social transactions involve personal memory telling, what develops is a joint product of personal, interpersonal, and cultural values, which jointly contour what is reportable and toward what ends.” As children transition into adolescence, their primary audiences usually shift from parents & relatives to peers (McLean, 2005).

\textbf{Summary}

Adolescence is a critical time for cognitive development as it relates to sense of self. This occurs largely in the form of narrative construction—organizing autobiographical memories into a causally coherent life story. While cognitive research with respect to adolescents is generally limited, including in the case of lifetime narrative development, current studies indicate a definite emergence of identity based on sharing connected life memories during this time. Further
research should be done in this domain, including a wider diversity of race, culture, and SES, in order to better support adolescents in identity formation.

**Relatedness to my Stanford-LDT Master’s Project**

This research holds great implications with respect to the Master’s Project I’m constructing as a student in Stanford’s Learning, Design & Technology program. The project consists of a web-based learning tool aimed to aid 8-11 year-old pre-adolescents in organizing life memories and relating them to their sense of time. While the age of this target user comes just before the life stage that is the focus of this paper, the tool clearly primes a soon-to-be adolescent to form a causally cohesive life narrative.

Before the child reaches age 8, his/her parents may have ownership of the tool, in documenting memories of their child. When the child reaches an age (~8 years) where he/she is capable of abstract thinking and independent documentation of memories, he/she takes ownership of the tool. This begins with episodic memories of personal value to the child. As the collection of stories accumulates, the user simultaneously develops the cognitive ability to recognize causal relationships between the events. The result is a visual support tool to solidify personal identity via themed narrative. The user can choose to share pieces of their life story with family and friends, incorporating the crucial social component in identity formation through storytelling.

To see a demo of a very early prototype of the tool, visit

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFvYrGRC3AQ.
References


