

LIFE STORY MODEL OF IDENTITY

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The goal of personality psychology is to explain why and how individuals differ from each other. Beginning with Freud, a number of grand theories were proposed in an attempt to achieve this goal. However, those theories failed to explain the personality in parsimonious principles. Trait approach to personality, which became the dominant perspective in 1960s and 1970s, claimed that personality can be reduced to a certain number of traits which are stable over time. For several decades this perspective became the dominant view.

However, over time there was a growing dissatisfaction with the dominant trait approach. McAdams, a professor from Northwestern University, argued that we need to have an integrative perspective in understanding personality and, obviously trait approach does not do a good job in this regard. Alternatively, he proposed his *'life story model'* of identity. According to this model, individuals living in modern societies begin to organize their lives in terms of *self stories in late adolescence and young adulthood*. In other words, people reconstruct their past and anticipate their future in terms of internalized and evolving life stories. Thus, identity takes the forms of a story with its *setting, scenes, character, plot and theme*. It does not cover every details of one's life, but it includes significant and prominent scenes of one's life. Therefore, it is very subjective and selective. The meanings and values attributed to those scenes are very much dependent on individual himself and the culture in which he lives.

What makes each individual different from each other is this subjective interpretation of past experiences and their selective integration together with the specific culture individuals live in. Therefore, no two life stories will be equally the same even though they include the same events happening at the same time periods.

What makes each individual similar to each other, i.e. how to explain the commonalities among people, lies in the theme which appears in each story. McAdams says that despite the uniqueness of the individuals' life stories, there are common themes observed in those stories which is influenced largely by the individuals' cultures. He makes a distinction between two types of themes observed in people's life stories:

1. agency vs. communion

Accordingly; individuals coming from collectivist cultures (e.g. China and Japan) tend to evolve their stories around a *communion* theme in which they put more emphasis on conformity to social norms and group work in their life stories. On the other hand, individuals from individualistic cultures (e.g. Europe and North America) are more likely to develop their stories around the theme of *agency* in which they underlines their individual goals and achievements.

2. redemption vs. contamination

Contamination theme appears when a very good or affectively positive life story scene is followed by a very bad, affectively negative outcome. (e.g. I was so happy when I gave birth to my first child, being a mother was the greatest experience that I have ever had. However, I turned into being a widow after losing my husband)

Unlike contamination, redemption theme is observed when a bad, affectively negative life story scene is followed by a very good, affectively positive life story scene

(e.g. I made the biggest mistake of my life by getting married with my ex-husband and leaving the school for that. However, now I am really happy after getting divorced and returning to school back as a mother of two children to be an independent working woman). Overcoming is the central aspect in this theme. McAdams indicates that this is the type of theme that is mostly associated with American culture in which the idea that there is always a chance for eventual redemption, overcoming the difficulties for individuals is emphasized a lot.

In conclusion, the basic premise of McAdams' life story model of identity is that identity itself is a life story which is always evolving. The reason of constructing a life story is to have a *psychosocial unity* and a *purpose* within the modern world. Individuals' life stories not only tell about how they interpret their past experiences, but also they display how they anticipate their future lives.

* McAdams, D. P. (2004). The redemptive self: Narrative identity in America today. In D. R. Beike, J. M. Lampien, and D. A. Behrend (Eds.), *The self and memory* (pp. 95-115). New York: Psychology Press.