Getting a Life Takes Time and an Open Mind: Remembering to Question Assumptions and Embrace Variations as We Continue to Develop Life Story Theory

Commentary on Habermas and Reese

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In their broad and informative piece, Habermas and Reese [this issue] provide a taxonomy of useful terms for life story theory, comprehensively review the literature on the development of life story coherence in late childhood and adolescence, and discuss interesting and theory-expanding findings regarding the functional role of the life story for well-being as well as the influential role of culture in shaping the life story. As a close reader of and contributor to the literature on narrative identity and life story and someone who has been greatly influenced by Habermas and Bluck [2000], a seminal article and precursor to the current one, I read this piece with great interest and found it very stimulating. Indeed, my comment that follows is a sort of imagined conversation with the authors, as I had several points during my reading where I had questions, sought clarifications, or wanted to add a counterpoint or additional point of view. In the end, my take-home message revolves around the idea that, even as we move toward clarifying and advancing life story theory, we must remember to question our basic assumptions and keep an open mind about the vast variability, individuality, and complexity that may be contained in the life stories of human beings when we consider different ages, cultures, circumstances, and the content of lived experiences.

Keeping an Open Mind about the Effectiveness of Different Types of Autobiographical Reasoning

One of the most influential contributions of Habermas and Bluck [2000] was the concept of autobiographical reasoning, which gave the life story field a much needed process concept – the idea that constructing a coherent life story involves forming meaningful connections between past events and other events and past events and the self. One of the pleasures of reading Habermas and Reese’s current piece is that we can fully appreciate how far the field has come with research inspired by the concept of autobiographical reasoning. In table 2, the authors have laid out a number of different types of autobiographical arguments, which are the products of autobiographical reasoning that become the glue of coherent life narratives as they develop in later adolescence. I appreciate the articulation of these different types of arguments and the description in the text of how they relate to similar constructs in the published literature, including meaning-making [McLean & Thorne, 2003] and self-event connections [Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007]. Indeed, many different types of arguments can be made, including stability and change arguments, positive and negative arguments, and, as articulated in table 2, objective and subjective arguments. I was intrigued, however, by the claim put forward by the authors that some autobiographical arguments may be more effective in integrating an event into the life story than others. This is an interesting empirical question and one that I would expect to not have one invariant answer but rather to vary by developmental stage, culture, gender, etc. as well as by how “effectiveness” is actually defined and operationalized. Indeed, I am wondering whether it is necessary to attempt to impose a hierarchy of effectiveness on different kinds of autobiographical arguments if the answer could be quite fluid.

This point became more vivid in reading the section on culture and autobiographical reasoning. In this section, the authors report on their very interesting findings showing that Chinese and Māori adolescents in New Zealand exhibit less autobiographical reasoning in the form of developmental consequentiality (viewing past events as resulting in personality change) but not less local thematic coherence in turning point narratives than adolescents of European heritage. In explaining these differences, the authors state, “For our Māori adolescents, their local narrative coherence ... can rely on other forms of meaning making – through elaboration of the emotions involved or through a change in their understanding of others or the world – than the explicit focus on self required for the most complex autobiographical arguments in table 2.” While I can appreciate the cultural difference being described, why are autobiographical arguments that focus on personality change in the self considered to be necessarily more complex than those that focus on others or the world? If they are new insights or perspectives that emerge from making sense of personal experiences, one could argue that in some cases they could be more rather than less complex than statements about one’s own personality. Indeed, research shows that, in adults, integrative growth memories (i.e., conceptual insights about self, others or the world) are positively associated with ego development, a measure of developmental maturity that captures complexity of perspective [Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005].

Further, it was quite surprising to me that Erana’s turning point narrative was offered as an example of greater thematic coherence than developmental consequen-

tiality. Indeed, the last several sentences of her narrative describe how she changed as a result of racial bullying, that she became more determined and changed how she saw the world. From my perspective, this seems like a rather vivid and elaborated example of effortful autobiographical reasoning producing a personal growth story in which positive changes develop in both self and understanding of the world (i.e., strong evidence for developmental consequentiality). Thus, I caution the authors against (a) promoting an overly narrow understanding of what developmental consequentiality could look like in narratives, and (b) assuming prematurely that one form of autobiographical reasoning is necessarily the most sophisticated, complex, or effective. As noted above, what is the most sophisticated, complex, or effective may depend on culture or even the type of event being narrated. Here, I would argue that it seems quite effective for an experience of racial bullying to change a person's perspective on the world rather than on the self. While narrative researchers have long argued that what is most important in a narrative is the subjective meaning of an event as opposed to its objective content, more recent perspectives are now suggesting that event content and identity process may intersect in important and dynamic ways within the life story [McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; McLean, Syed, Yoder, & Greenhoot, 2014; Syed & Azmitia, 2010].

Keeping an Open Mind about Variations in How a Coherent Life Story Develops over Time

The authors make a very strong case regarding the lower bound of life story narration, summarizing convincing evidence that prior to age 10, children are not able to narrate themselves in terms of a developing self within a broad temporal context. Indicators of these capacities show a normative pattern of increase during adolescence, as cognitive and social development advance and identity development becomes central. At the same time, it is important to not equate what is normative and age-related with what is necessary or healthy for narrative identity. While basic narrative capacities certainly increase in a clear normative fashion, there may also be pronounced individual differences that are not necessarily problematic. This seems especially important to consider with respect to Habermas and Reese's discussion of beginnings and endings as markers of life story coherence. Adolescents do increasingly begin with birth and end in the present, so temporal linearity is a normative pattern, but is it necessary for a coherent life story? Could not someone begin with a central event in adolescence, then go back in time to describe how childhood relates, and then jump ahead? Or could not someone decide to tell her story in term of chapters that are not organized temporally but topically? While I do not know of any data to this effect, it does seem possible that the assumption that a temporally linear story is necessarily a better or more coherent story could be the product, at least in part, of a Western, individualistic perspective.

In making their case for the more coherent temporal perspective that emerges in later adolescence, Habermas and Reese highlight changes to Anna's narrative from age 8 to 16. They state of her story at 16, "The events she narrates have an obvious biographical salience. She no longer narrates accidents or other very mundane events like going to buy a fish but only events which mark transitions or will prove consequential for later developments." Clearly, Anna has learned to tell a coherent story

about her life and her development as she sees it. However, I again want to caution us from formulating too narrow a perspective on what events may have contained biographical salience. Indeed, a seemingly mundane event like going to buy a fish could have special meaning later in life when Anna becomes a parent and remembers activities she used to do with her dad as a child. Such an example reminds us of an essential truth of life story theory, that the life story is not an objective life history but rather a subjective construction that involves not only interpreting the meaning of events but also selectively choosing (however unconsciously) what events are given autobiographical significance [McAdams, 2001]. Indeed, this selection process may not always be temporally linear; our subjective perspective may change as we move through life, as we acquire new experiences and roles, and these new parts of ourselves may bring previously forgotten memories to the fore or stimulate new ways of understanding them in our stories. In this sense, we are not simply adding more information to increasingly crystallized stories as we age, but rather we are reconfiguring who we are from the vast wealth of autobiographical material we are always carrying with us. In other words, the life story is not like one path being laid down in stone. Rather, as argued eloquently by McAdams [2001]: “People carry with them and bring into conversation a wide range of self-stories, and these stories are nested in larger and overlapping stories, creating ultimately a kind of anthology of the self” (p. 117). Although increasing stability is likely and temporal linearity is common, this anthology allows for many possible reconfigurations to emerge over time.

Keeping an Open Mind about Developmental and Cultural Variations in the Function of Meaning-Making about Difficult Events

A major focus of my own work over the past 15 years has been on the connection between narrative identity processes, particularly in the context of difficult events, and optimal outcomes (well-being, maturity) in middle-aged adults [Lilgendahl, Helson, & John, 2013; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006]. In a nutshell, this work has shown that growth-oriented meaning-making in response to difficult events is a healthy pattern of narrative identity construction in adulthood, relating to increasing ego development, greater happiness, and possibly even better physical health. Importantly, however, Habermas and Reese point out two critical caveats to this general principle which have served to open my mind to new ways of thinking about the functions of meaning-making about negative events.

First, Habermas and Reese highlight a seeming paradox in the adult research that while growth from difficult events may be a unique predictor of well-being, research has also shown that viewing negative or traumatic events as central to one’s identity is harmful for well-being [Berntsen & Rubin, 2006]. This is interesting because I certainly have worked from the assumption that attributing a significant amount of growth to a negative event would mean that the event is central in that person’s identity. For example, in my work on adults’ life stories [Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011], greater well-being was associated with differentiated processing of negative events, which was defined as attaching a greater variety of specific growth-related themes to negative events across the narration of the life story. The same pattern was not found for positive events. Thus, the pattern of incorporating multiple negative events into one’s story and acknowledging their importance for self-growth was uniquely benefi-

cial. Perhaps in these adults with higher well-being, negative events may be “central” to identity in the sense that they are essential components of one’s story of self-growth, but they are not central in the sense that they do not feel as though their identities are being dominated by those negative events. Thus, in adulthood, there may be an important balancing act between acknowledging difficult events and infusing them with positive meaning and also managing their significance so that they do not “take over” identity in unwanted or harmful ways. Thus, by attempting to resolve this paradox, I have come to think in new and improved ways about the role of negative events in adults’ life stories.

Second, it appears to be the case that this narrative balancing act takes a while to develop. Habermas and Reese importantly note that several different studies have now shown that, in early adolescence, meaning-making in turning point narratives relates to well-being negatively rather than positively. This is a fascinating and important discovery, and the explanations offered by the authors make good sense. Specifically, a “turning point” for an early adolescent is often something negative (and perhaps especially threatening to a young, vulnerable self, as shown in the heartbreaking example of Tony) that he or she is not yet capable of processing in a healthy or growth-oriented way. Rather, “meaning-making” at that point in development, when depression increases and self-esteem decreases, is more likely to be fueled by rumination than mature autobiographical reasoning. I wholeheartedly agree and would just add another perspective to this issue, and that is that the basic capacity to engage in healthy meaning-making may first develop in the context of more unambiguously positive events. As I have argued elsewhere [Lilgendahl, 2014], in adolescence and emerging adulthood, autobiographical reasoning about positive events may provide the necessary foundation for narrative identity – e.g., scoring the winning goal in the soccer game leads to more self-confidence, making new friends at summer camp opens eyes to different cultural backgrounds, etc. These safer forms of autobiographical reasoning may bolster and build up the developing self so that there is a positive anchor from which more negative events may be contemplated and narrated in a growth-oriented way. In early adolescence, attempts at meaning-making, if they only take place in the context of more negative events, may be putting the cart before the developmental horse; a positive self may need to first be well-established during adolescence in order for difficulties and challenges to be integrated effectively into identity via autobiographical reasoning.

To conclude, I want to applaud Habermas and Reese for being the first to examine systematically cross-cultural differences in indicators of life story coherence during adolescence. Despite important differences that they note among their groups, they also note how similar the groups were, particularly in terms of developmental consequentiality being associated with well-being in later adolescence. While this may indeed be a human universal in contemporary society, as Habermas and Reese suggest, it is important to remember that all the adolescents involved in their study are living in the same predominantly individualistic cultural setting. It will also be important to collect data in different countries and perhaps even in different languages. Finally, it is important to note that a critical part of identity development for some adolescents may be engaging in autobiographical reasoning about experiences directly pertaining to their cultural, racial, or ethnic identity and the status of the group to which they belong. For minority and disadvantaged groups, meaning-making in the context of difficult experiences (e.g., experiences of prejudice, immigration

stories, bicultural identity conflicts, etc.) may be a very important part of the broader process of narrative identity development that have implications for positive emotional adjustment. For example, in my own work with Veronica Benet-Martinez [Lilgendahl & Benet-Martinez, 2015], we have found that positive meaning-making in bicultural memory narratives predicts bicultural identity integration (harmonious and blended bicultural identity) regardless of the valence of the past event. Such findings suggest that, although developmental consequentiality may generally enhance well-being, the specific content domains that play the most important roles in this connection will vary depending on the circumstances and lived experiences of each individual. In sum, we must continue to keep an open mind about the many varieties of human experience as we work to develop ever more sophisticated and comprehensive theories about the life story and its role in identity.

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