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This chapter applies the concept of narrative identity to college student development. The authors describe a narrative interview method that can be used to promote the development of a purposeful life story in the college years.

How Shall I Live? Constructing a Life Story in the College Years

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American educators and the lay public have long considered the college years to be a time when young people struggle to find out who they are and how they will lead lives that matter. In a lecture he regularly gave to Harvard College students in the 1890s, William James posed the question: “What Makes a Life Significant?” After considering different options, James argued that human *ideals* confer deep meaning and significance on a life, and college should be designed to promote the exploration of ideals: “Education, enlarging as it does our horizon and perspective, is a means of multiplying our ideals, of bringing new ones into view” (Schwehn & Bass, 2006, p. 25). The great psychoanalytic theorist Erik Erikson (1950) developed the same theme in asserting that the search for *identity* constitutes the major psychosocial challenge for adolescents and young adults. As Erikson saw it, identity encompasses, among other things, the religious, political, and ethical beliefs and values that a person ultimately embraces (ideals) and the occupational or productive roles that a person will pursue as he or she moves into adulthood (work). The college years are prime time, Erikson believed, for exploring different options with regard to ideals and work and eventually committing to particular ideological positions and work roles that promise to provide a life with some degree of significance, meaning, and purpose.

At coffee shops and campus events, in residence halls, at the gym, over the Internet, and almost everywhere else, college students share their thoughts and feelings about their ideals, their work, and their identities with

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each other and with parents, counselors, student affairs professionals, and anybody else they feel they can trust. For many young people, college may be the ideal forum for “self talk,” for exploring the self and learning about others through conversation. A wide range of theories and research findings in psychology suggest that conversations about personal experiences contribute greatly to the formation of identity in adolescence and young adulthood (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

In this chapter, we describe a set of ideas and tools for promoting identity explorations that capitalize on the tendency of young people to talk, sometimes incessantly, about themselves. The key concept is *narrative identity*, which may be defined as a person’s internalized and evolving story of the self (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The tools to be proposed derive from interview-based research into narrative identity, and much of this research has been conducted with midlife adults (McAdams, 2013). We believe that our research approach may be repurposed as a model for identity development exercises in college to be used by educators, counselors, and other college professionals who work directly with students. We believe our approach holds promise for its ability to provide students with a framework for organizing their conversations about themselves in ways that facilitate the development of the animating ideals and purpose-giving roles that lie at the heart of identity.

Narrative Identity: The Construction of a Life Story

Erikson (1950) believed that identity functions to provide a person’s life with a deep sense of temporal continuity. When individuals have formulated a coherent identity, they not only know who they are but they also understand how they came to be and where their lives may be headed in the future. Identity works to integrate the reconstructed past and imagined future into a psychosocial pattern that makes sense to the self and to the people and the institutions who bear witness to the self’s development. Over the past 20 years, a growing number of researchers in personality, developmental, cognitive, and cultural psychology have argued that identity manages to affirm temporal continuity through a person’s construction of a life story. As people make sense of their lives through narrative, they come to articulate an understanding of how their past relates to the present and the imagined future; they develop a story about how they came to be the person they are becoming (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1985). Narrative identity is that story—an evolving and internalized narrative of the self that begins to take form in adolescence.

Although researchers examine narrative identity in many different ways, a standard research approach for delineating the content and the structure of a person’s life story is to engage the research participant in a structured Life Story Interview (McAdams, 1985, 2013). As outlined in Table 2.1, the interviewer asks a series of questions designed to uncover

Table 2.1. Outline of a Standard Life Story Interview

Life Chapters	Think of your life as if it were a book—a novel with chapters. What would the chapters be? Divide your life story into its main chapters, and for each chapter provide a title and brief plot summary. Explain what marks the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next.
Key Scenes	Focus on a few specific moments or episodes that stand out as being especially memorable or important in your life story. For each scene, describe in detail what happened, who was there, what you were thinking and feeling in the scene, and what significance you believe the scene has in the context of your entire life story. Why do you think you chose this scene? What might the scene say about who you were or are?
High Point	
Low Point	
Turning Point	
Positive Childhood Scene	
Negative Childhood Scene	
Vivid Adolescent Scene	
Vivid Adult Scene	
One Other Important Scene	
Life Challenge	Identify the most important challenge, struggle, or conflict you have faced in your life. Describe what the challenge is, how it came to be, and how you have tried to address it or cope with it.
Future Script	What does the next chapter of your life story look like? Describe where you think your life is headed in the future. What are your main goals for the future? How do you plan to achieve those goals?
Ideological Setting	Consider here your most important beliefs and values about life and the world. First, describe any religious and/or ethical values and beliefs that you consider to be important for your life. How did you develop those values and beliefs? Next, consider beliefs and values that apply to politics and/or social relationships. Describe those values and beliefs and how you came to hold them. Finally, what do you consider to be the most important value in life? Why?
Religious	
Political	
Most Important Value	
Life Theme	Thinking back over what you have said in this interview, do you see a theme or motif that runs through the story of your life? What might it be?

Note: Variations on this general interview format have been developed for many different kinds of studies, each tailored to the aims of the study. For more information on different versions and formats of the life story interview go to <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/>.

key scenes, characters, trends, and themes in the person’s life story. Typically, the narrator begins by dividing his or her life into “chapters” and providing a brief plot summary for each. Next, the interviewer asks the narrator to focus on a few key events that stand out as especially memorable or important in the life story. These typically include a life-story “high point” (the greatest or happiest moment in the story), “low point” (the worst or unhappiest moment in the story), “turning point” (a moment of significant change or transition in the story), and a series of other scenes that are

notable for their emotional/psychological quality or timing in the life course. For each scene, narrators describe what happened in the moment, what they were thinking and feeling, how the scene was ultimately resolved, and what they see as a central lesson or insight about the self that might be derived from the scene.

Narrative identity is nearly as much about the imagined future as it is about the reconstructed past. Therefore, the interviewer next asks the narrator to imagine what is in store for the future and to describe what the next chapter in the life story might be, along with dreams, plans, goals, and fears regarding the future. The narrator then elaborates upon the fundamental beliefs, values, and attitudes that situate the story within an ideological setting (McAdams, 1985). These include beliefs and values that typically speak to religious, ethical, and political–social issues. Finally, the narrator is asked to reflect upon the narrative as a whole and identify a central theme or motif that seems to run through the story.

In considering how research on narrative identity might be repurposed as an intervention to be used by college professionals, we follow the lead of Schwehn and Bass (2006) who delineate three different “vocabularies” that “people use today in their efforts to think and talk about the kind of life that they most admire and would therefore most like to lead” (p. 40). These are the vocabularies of *authenticity*, *virtue*, and *vocation*. Our experience with life stories suggests that each of the three vocabularies regularly finds its way into the narrative identities that American adults construct to make sense of their lives. Each provides a language for describing a worthy life—a life of significance and deep meaning.

Authenticity: Finding My Real Story. To be authentic is to present and express the self *as it really is*. People feel authentic when they sense that they are cutting through the pretenses of everyday social conventions and expressing something “true” and “real.” They know who they are, and they express themselves accordingly, even when such expressions defy societal norms and expectations. Going back at least as far as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1841/1993) *Self-Reliance*, Americans have tended to value the authenticity of the individual over and against what are sometimes seen as artificial, and even oppressive, strictures of the group (McAdams, 2013; Taylor, 1991). Be true to yourself, we are told. Don’t follow the crowd.

Research participants in studies of narrative identity tend to construe the Life Story Interview as an opportunity to tell their own unique story. Simply going through the interview process, then, can itself constitute an exercise in personal authenticity. As the participants see it, the interviewer wants to know what *really* happened in their own lives and what they—the participants—*truly* believe the meaning of the events to be. Accordingly, research participants often use a language of authenticity in describing chapters, scenes, and future prospects in their lives. They will say that a particular decision they made “shows who I truly am” or “illustrates something that has always been true for me.” They will talk about how they pursued a

particular goal or relationship because “I really wanted that” or because it summoned forth deeply felt emotions of joy, excitement, love, or wonder—feeling states that they associate with authentic experience.

In that many college students struggle to determine who they really are and what they truly want to do with their lives, the Life Story Interview can serve to promote self-exploration by encouraging students to engage explicitly in the discourse of personal authenticity. The interview format works in a nonthreatening way. Rather than putting the student on the spot by posing threatening questions about the future, the interview focuses a great deal of attention on the past, gently urging the student to explore what past experiences might indicate about the particular kind of person they have become and are becoming. Because the interview implicitly places a premium on personal authenticity, it can provide practice opportunities for thinking and talking about the self in an authentic manner.

Many psychologists argue that people feel authentic when they are engaged in behavior that they enjoy for the sake of the activity itself, rather than as a means to external ends such as social prestige, acceptance, or money (Deci & Ryan, 1991). These kinds of activities are driven by intrinsic motivation—internal needs to feel autonomous, competent, or close to other people. Studies have shown that college students who provide life narrative accounts featuring high levels of intrinsic motivation tend to enjoy concurrently higher levels of happiness and psychological well-being and show increases in well-being and happiness over time (McAdams, 2013). It would appear to follow that college students who take advantage of the Life Story Interview to explore their most authentic sources of meaning and pleasure might ultimately benefit the most from such an exercise.

Virtue: Living a Good Life. In individualistic Western societies, living an authentic life is often seen as something good in itself. But even in those cultural contexts that encourage people most strongly to be themselves and to do what they truly want to do, there is nonetheless recognition that people live in social groups and must adjust their behavior accordingly. Going back to Aristotle’s (trans. 2004) *The Nicomachean Ethics*, the language of virtue identifies particular character traits that are deemed to be qualities of a good life because, for the most part, they enable people to live together well in groups. Indeed, Aristotle argued that citizens are happiest when they express virtues such as generosity, temperance, and friendship. The world’s great religious traditions all enumerate characteristic virtues for good living. While each tradition identifies its own unique candidates, there is considerable overlap for such virtues as honesty, fairness, love, self-control, humility, gratitude, and many others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Virtues are surely a subset of what William James referred to more generally as the “ideals” that come to be cultivated and explored during the college years (Schwehn & Bass, 2006).

The socialization of virtue begins in early childhood. In all human societies, parents aim to instill virtues for good living, hoping that their children

will get along well with others and attain some measure of social acceptance and status in life. The language of virtue may assume new urgency in the college years, however, as students come to question, or at least reexamine, the lessons of virtue they learned when they were younger. Erikson (1950) argued that the development of identity in late adolescence and young adulthood usually involves attaining some distance from the values, virtues, and ideologies that a young person learned growing up—beliefs about living a good life that have been reinforced by parents, churches, schools, and other socializing influences. Research shows that those college students who reexamine seriously the value systems that they internalized in earlier years tend to show higher levels of moral development and a more mature understanding of religious, political, and social issues, compared to their counterparts who fail to question (McAdams, 1985, 2013).

The Life Story Interview explicitly asks research participants to describe the fundamental beliefs and values that they hold in the realms of ethics, religion, and politics and to describe how those beliefs and values have changed over time. Because identity development in adolescence and young adulthood centrally concerns ideals and ideology, questions like these are arguably more relevant to the lives of many college students than they are to the midlife adults who typically participate in life-narrative research. Educators, counselors, and other college professionals, therefore, may find that the idea of constructing a story for one's life leads naturally to the consideration of what it means to live a life of virtue. The connection is perhaps easier to make at colleges and universities that are rooted in a religious tradition (Schwehn & Bass, 2006). However, secular institutions in the United States typically also ascribe to a set of values regarding how to live in a democratic society, implicitly urging students to embrace such virtues as honest inquiry, egalitarianism, social justice, tolerance, respect for diversity, and the like. Indeed, a tradition of explicating secular virtues in American society may be traced back to writings of Benjamin Franklin in the 18th century, if not further (McAdams, 2013). Many students want to know how to live a good life. The concept of narrative identity is broad enough to encompass this question. The Interview can, therefore, be a useful tool for the exploration and explication of human virtue.

Vocation: Making a Difference. The concept of vocation finds its historical roots in the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther's belief that all Christian men and women are "called" by God to service (Weber, 1904/1976). Luther and other Protestant theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries held that good works on earth were signs of a person's unique standing with God. As Luther saw it, any kind of regular and legitimate work—from manual labor to parenting to active involvement in the community—might qualify for the status of vocation, as long as the Christian did the work out of love for God and in service of humankind. In each person's own small way, therefore, he or she could make a positive difference in the world, while glorifying God in the process. In the 19th and 20th

centuries, the concept of vocation evolved to encompass the more secular idea that each person may have unique talents and skills that can be used for the good of others, and it loosened its connection to religion.

On college campuses today, the language of vocation provides a strong alternative to the general sentiment that higher education should prepare young men and women to go out into the world to make money. Vocation is not necessarily antithetical to careerism and personal ambition, but it can soften and inform these motivations by adding the critical component of service. Many students find appealing the idea that the work they may do in life, whether in a volunteer capacity or for pay, may itself contribute to the betterment of others, even in small ways. The language of vocation is especially salient in such fields as teaching, medicine, and social work, but it can also inform how young people think about careers in business, engineering, law, and other areas. In recent years, colleges and universities have developed a range of programs to stimulate and support students' longing for vocation, from centers for civic engagement to leadership development programs. For example, Washington University in St. Louis sponsors leadership retreats wherein undergraduates explore how to position themselves in life so as to contribute, as leaders, to a more just, caring, and thriving world. In small groups, students draw up and discuss life maps, which diagram important areas of commitment and interest in their lives and project possible life trajectories through which personal vocation might be realized (Washington University, 2014).

Narrative identity encompasses a person's reconstruction of the past and imagined vision for the future. As people anticipate life chapters to come, they often incorporate into their story a *generativity script* (McAdams, 1985)—that is, a planned or imagined scenario whereby they hope to leave a positive legacy of the self for future generations. In the face of mortality, the generativity script sends this message: *Even though I will die, I have the opportunity to leave something positive behind. In the end, my life will have mattered. I will have made a difference.* Research suggests that life stories incorporating strong generativity scripts often adopt the language of vocation, sometimes going so far as to suggest that the protagonist of the story has been “chosen”—by God, by circumstances, by luck, by genes—to make a positive contribution to the world. Moreover, the most generative midlife adults in American society often tell stories about their lives that underscore the power of human *redemption* (McAdams, 2013). The protagonist often encounters setbacks and suffers many defeats, but negative events often give way to positive outcomes and meanings, as the suffering is repeatedly redeemed. In illustrating how the protagonist repeatedly overcomes adversity, these kinds of stories affirm the hope that hard work and suffering today will pay dividends in the future.

The Life Story Interview explicitly asks research participants to articulate a vision for the future and to explain how that future scenario may be linked to the past. As such, the interview offers an opportunity to think

systematically about how one might find a vocation in life, drawing upon the rich storehouse of one's past experience to enable the protagonist to make a positive difference in the future. Although they face imposing stresses and potential obstacles to growth, college students have an opportunity to imagine a generative future that could be inspired by a vocation in life. Ideally, a student's story should reinforce who he or she truly is (authenticity) and how the student can live a good life (virtue). But it may also sustain hope of making a positive difference in the world (vocation), as the student embarks upon the journey of adulthood.

Conclusion

Many college students may find it useful to consider, in an explicit manner, the story of life that they are beginning to formulate as young adults who are about to enter the adult world of work, love, and commitment. Structured life storytelling and reflection, as developed in research on narrative identity and illustrated in the Life Story Interview, may raise new questions and open new ways of talking about ideals, work roles, and identity. Life storytelling may help students figure out what their real story is, how they may live a good life, and what they may need to do in the future in order to leave a positive mark in the world. By tapping into students' inchoate yearnings for authenticity, virtue, and vocation, life storytelling can complement other important experiences in school, both in the classroom and outside of it, in promoting and enhancing the search for identity in the college years.

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