



the Co-authored Self

FAMILY STORIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Kate C. McLean

OXFORD

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CONTENTS

1. Building the Narrative Ecology 1

SECTION 1 SETTING THE STAGE

2. Developmental Considerations 11

3. Theoretical Approaches to Identity Development and the Power of Narrative 19

SECTION 2 MASTER NARRATIVES AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES: THE STORIES OUR FAMILIES TELL ABOUT US

4. Two Storied Paths to Identity Integration 41

5. Resisting Stories 62

SECTION 3 BROADENING THE NARRATIVE ECOLOGY: ANOTHER STORY, AN OTHER'S STORY

6. Parents are People: Parents' Identities 83

7. Parents' Stories: Children's Identities 101

SECTION 4 BROADER CONTEXTS OF STORYTELLING: GENDER AND PEERS

8. The Gendered Socialization of Narrative and Identity 119

9. Peers and Family Stories 130

SECTION 5 CONCLUSION

10. The End of the Story, for Now 143

Acknowledgments 147

Appendix: Methodological Issues 151

References 155

About the Author 171

Index 173

The Co-authored Self

Building the Narrative Ecology

This book began in 1999 when I came to UC Santa Cruz to interview for the graduate program. I arrived at Avril Thorne's lab with butterflies in my stomach, dressed in my most dignified outfit, prepared to be serious and professional, sober, and smart. Gravitas is what I was going for. After the pleasantries of greeting each other were dispensed with, and we had seated ourselves across the table from each other—time to get down to business—Avril leaned back in her chair, put her hands behind her head, and said, "So. Did your parents ever smoke pot?"

To make a short story short: I decided to become a Banana Slug.

Avril's question wasn't totally out of left field. She was thinking about how parents tell stories of personal transgressions to their children, a question that led to our first collaboration together (culminating in the chapter, "When Stories go to Pot," Thorne, McLean, & Dasbach, 2004). It was in Avril's lab where I was first introduced to the field of narrative psychology, where I began to learn about the importance of stories in the landscape of individual lives. It was in her lab where I learned that stories *could* be studied, that stories *should* be studied, that stories, just like brainwaves or blood pressure, are data. I learned that:

The world we actually inhabit is made up of stories, images, collective beliefs, all the immaterial appurtenances we call ideology and culture, the pictures we wander in and out of all the time (Solnit, 2013, p. 61).

I learned that stories are like the molecules of air we breathe; their presence infuses our daily lives.

Imagine a day in the life. You wake up and turn on NPR. Steve Inskeep tells you a story about two grade school kids, an Israeli and a Palestinian, bonding over their mutual love of soccer during the World Cup. Or perhaps you are lucky enough to wake up to StoryCorps; an octogenarian couple is recounting how they fell in love at a school dance seven decades ago. You grab the paper from the porch, and on the front page you find a story about a local salmon fisherman who is taking over his father's seafood business. Later, at the office, you chat with a

coworker, who is in the midst of planning her wedding. When she asks what your wedding was like, you tell her the story. After work you pick up your daughter and ask her to tell you something that happened at school that day. She was teased about her new glasses, she says, which reminds you of the time you were teased for showing up to your second-grade class picture in a ratty old sweatshirt (you forgot it was picture day). When you get home your husband regales you with the heroic tale of how he stormed into his boss's office and demanded a raise.

You get the point; we inhabit a world of stories. We wander in and out of them all the time. Yet we do not wander aimlessly. We do not hang on to every story that chances across the eye or the ear, or recall *all* of the events of our lives. We grab on to certain stories, those that speak to us in some way, that are salient, and that help us make sense of what is often a chaotic world. Of course, we don't just *hear* stories; we *make* stories. It's a reflexive habit: with our uniquely human meaning-making abilities we create stories out of raw experience, the raw data that the world and our senses provide us (Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; McAdams, 1988; 1993; Sarbin, 1986; Taylor, 1989).

Just as stories help us understand the *outer* world, they also bring meaning and sense to an *inner* world. We use stories to make sense of our selves. It is with and through stories that we develop an understanding of our selves through time—an identity—and this is the focus of my research. My approach to investigating this question is based on four basic assertions:

- identity development is a crucial psychosocial task;
- identity is constructed, it does not simply arise;
- identity is constructed through narrative;
- and most importantly, for the purposes of this book, identity is not constructed alone.

The Importance of Identity

At first glance, identity can seem like an abstract construct, perhaps even a first-world concern. What does your identity matter if you have no water to drink, no food to eat? To some, identity can seem secondary, even immaterial, to what people actually do in the world, how they act. It is an intellectual concern, an academic concern. But of course, so much of human action—what people actually do in the world—arises from the need to stake out and to sustain an identity. This need, like hunger and thirst, is part of our survival instinct and thus a powerful compeller of human behavior.

One of the original stimuli for the construction of a theory of identity development was Erik Erikson's (1950; 1968) work with veterans, individuals who were

likely suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) before a diagnosis was in existence. Erikson pinpointed their suffering as stemming from a broken self—he argued that the problems he was seeing with the veterans were problems of identity. He saw people who were in a state of bewilderment and loss: is the same person who is here now, the same person who has killed others? He saw people who had no understanding of their own actions—people who didn't know who they were, people who didn't have a sense of themselves through time. Those who cannot see themselves through time—who have no connection between the past and the present—cannot see themselves in the future, a disconnect so severe that it is associated with suicidal ideation (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003). Problems of identity can be seen in alcoholics (Dunlop & Tracey, 2013), violent youth offenders (Wainryb, Komolova, & Florsheim, 2010), and those who are depressed or afflicted with other mental illnesses (Singer & Kasmark, 2015; see also Cohler, 1987). Although these are all individual afflictions, they also cause great harm beyond the individual—to the families and friends of the afflicted, and to the society at large. In fact, many of the conflicts in the world, from simple road rage to outright war, can be seen as stemming from fractured identities (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Hammack, 2011; see also Heyes, 2012). Indeed, the roots of these most grave conflicts derive not only from battles over resources or religious doctrines, but also from identities that are strongly staked on shaky ground. Such identities can drive aggressive attempts to enforce coherence that spawns religious zealotry, excessive national pride, and territorial battles, whether that territory is the Middle East or East LA. Identity is not merely an abstract construct; it is a matter of consequence.

Identity is a Construction

Identity is not something we inherit. We inherit the color of our eyes and the color of our skin, aspects of self that can become central pieces of our identities, but we must still make sense of those parts. The subjective process of sense-making is how we come to understand who we are (Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1993). We focus on some parts of ourselves, to the neglect of others, just as we attend to some stories we wander into and ignore others (McAdams, 2001). The idea that identity is constructed—that the self is, to some degree, fictitious—can be a threatening idea. If we construct the self, it seems possible that we might change that construction on a whim, making the self seem fleeting, unmoored, susceptible to the persuasions of others. However, it turns out that we do not seem to change on a whim; people tend to feel that they know who they are and that they are relatively the same person across time and context (Locke, 1996, James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Schechtman, 2005). And if not, then they have some explanation for their deviations (e.g., Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). Knowing

who we are gives us a sense of predictability—we know what we will do because we know what we have done. We know what we have done and what we will do, therefore, we know who we are. It is an incredible strength of the human mind to be able to construct identities, to create a sense of stability in an uncertain world, and to bring our selves into existence through acts of reflection and imagination.

Identity is Constructed Through Narrative

Storytelling is one of the most ubiquitous activities in which people engage (Eisenberg, 1985; Fiese, Sameroff, Grotevant, Wamboldt, Dickestein, & Fravel, 1999; Heath, 1983; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Miller, Mintz, Hoogstra, Fung, & Potts, 1992; Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, & Mintz, 1990a; Miller & Sperry, 1988; Pasupathi, 2001; Sperry & Sperry, 1996). The stories we tell ourselves and others hold powerful weight in developing and sustaining social ties, in persuading the self and others to action, and in constructing the selves that make up a community. When we are able to weave together seemingly disparate past events into a story about where we have been, where we are, and where we are going, we create a sense of continuity through time—the same person who was then, is now, will be. We can give meaning to the self and understand our purpose by creating a Story out of stories (e.g., McAdams, 1993; 2001). Storytelling is a tool, a tool with which we build certainty to survive in a world that is protean, unpredictable (McAdams, 1996). With stories we create identities, create coherence, and we maintain order in the universe.

Identity is Not Constructed Alone

Despite the importance of relationships in constructing identity, the study of identity development has traditionally been relatively devoid of social context (see Thorne, 2004). In terms of narrative identity, in particular, the focus of empirical inquiry has been on how individuals reconstruct their own personal past experiences (e.g., Blagov & Singer, 2004; McLean & Thorne, 2003; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006a; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Even when the phenomenon of inquiry is how others help us to understand the past (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000), the focus is still on how others help us to understand our own past, the personal past. These personal stories are thought to make up the fabric of identity. Yet identity is not exclusively an intrapsychic process. Almost any theorist of identity embraces, or at least admits to the validity of, the idea that we define ourselves in relation to others (e.g., Bos, 1962; Bowlby, 1967/1982). However, it is not just

that we define ourselves in relation to others; others define us too. We are not simply autonomous agents who pick and choose the stories we select into ourselves, constructing an identity only to meet our own needs. We are also subject to the stories of others. To the stories others tell about us. To the stories others tell about themselves. Even, in some cases, strange as it may sound, to the stories others *don't* tell. An identity is not the work of a sole-author, but a collaboration: the co-authored self.

Introducing the Narrative Ecology

The universe is made up of stories, not of atoms (Rukeyser, 1968).

The metaphors of Solnit's world of stories and Rukeyser's universe of stories point simply to the inherency of stories, that stories are part of the natural world, the natural order of things. Just as the natural world of geography and climate shapes us, stories shape us. Developmental psychologists have added to these metaphors about the natural world with the metaphor of ecologies (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1988). Bronfenbrenner has persuasively argued that the study of any one person's development cannot only focus on that person; the examination must focus also on what *surrounds* that person. Andrea Breen and I see an individual being shaped by an ecology of stories, as developing within a *narrative ecology of self* (Breen, McLean, Cairney, & McAdams, 2015; McLean & Breen, 2014). In the simplest terms, the narrative ecology comprises the stories that are available to a person as he or she develops, the stories that form each person's particular narrative landscape.

At the most central level of the narrative ecology are the individuals' personal stories (see Figure 1.1): their self-defining memories, their low points, high points, and turning point memories, among others.

It is not hard to argue that *our own stories*, the stories that tell of the things *we have personally done*, the things that happened *to us*, are of great importance. But those stories are not the whole story. The narrative ecology features not only the stories of one's own personal experiences, but also includes the stories of one's friends, romantic partners, and teachers; stories that persist in the culture at large; and the stories that are the focus of this book—family stories. Family stories can be about the individual—that is, stories your family tells about *you* (Remember when 6-year-old Katie insisted on wearing high heels to go camping?). But they can also include the stories family members tell about *themselves*—the story of a mother's first marriage, or perhaps a father's first time smoking pot.

Let me bring this model to life with a case example. Consider the President of the United States, Barack Obama. In his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father* (Obama, 1995), he details many vivid personal memories, stories that he tries to

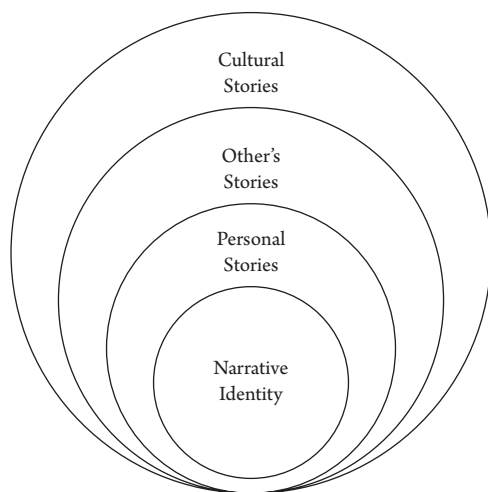


Figure 1.1 The Narrative Ecology of Self.

make sense of as he works toward a coherent understanding of himself as a man of mixed ethnic heritage in America. He recalls nights spent reading poetry and drinking whiskey with Frank, a friend of his grandfather's, one of the few Black men that he encountered in his youth. He recalls his friend, Ray, mocking his choice of books—the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*—telling him “I don’t need no books to tell me how to be black” (Obama, 1995, p. 87). He recalls his grandfather telling him that the reason his grandmother was so bothered by an encounter with a panhandler was not because he had asked her for money, but because the panhandler was Black.

These personal stories are central to Obama’s understanding of himself as a Black man—they make up a good deal of his own narrative identity, of his story. But these stories, as intensely as they reveal the struggle to define his ethnic identity, are not enough. The stories from his own personal past are not enough to construct a coherent identity. Obama has to reach into other levels of the ecology to understand himself, to *other’s* stories, particularly to the stories of his father. Yet even beyond his father’s story, his narrative ecology also includes the story of his maternal grandfather fighting in Patton’s army, a story that inspires him to serve his country. It includes the story of his maternal grandmother, working her way up the economic ladder with little education, a story that shaped his view on what is possible in America and the importance of gender equality. It includes the stories of some of his mother’s wilder exploits, stories that may have given him a sense of freedom as he discovered himself (or perhaps, in opposition, made him seek greater discipline). It even includes the stories of his wife, Michelle, and her experience of being raised in a Black family in Chicago, quite distinct from his experience of a multiracial upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia. Her stories helped him to see

how he wanted to raise his own daughters, and helped him to see another side of being Black in America. These are the stories that go beyond himself, but that eventually come into himself, the stories that infuse his own identity.

The narrative ecology also includes stories from the culture at large, such as well-known fairy tales (*Little Red Riding Hood*), religious stories (*Cain and Abel*), and stories from history (the assassination of President Kennedy). Obama wrote about the life and death of Martin Luther King Jr., a cultural story that made its way into his ecology even though he was only 7 years old when King was assassinated. Interestingly, he recalls hearing his pastor's personal story of the death of King, which takes the cultural story down to the level of an *other's* personal story, showing the permeability between levels of the ecology—these stories are not segregated by levels, they slide between them with some degree of fluidity. Of course, Obama's personal story is one that has become a part of the narrative ecology of the little boys and girls growing up right now—it has become a cultural story toward which some will gravitate for personal understanding.

The Present Volume: The Co-authored Self

I view the family as primary in the layers beyond the self because the family provides the most active initial role in developing the narrative ecology. Indeed, Obama's book about his own identity focuses not on his pastor's stories, not on the story of Martin Luther King Jr., but on his own family stories. It is within the family and through these stories that the self takes on its earliest and, in many cases, its most lasting form. These stories, particularly those that are the most frequently told, can lead to some conclusions about selves that are assigned within families. These "small" stories can accumulate, leading to this larger Story of self. Part of our story is where we come from, what our group is, what our place in that group is. Family stories are special in the narrative ecology. They provide us with our first identities. Whether we adopt, appropriate, or resist them—we use family stories above all others to create and understand ourselves.

While family stories are important at all stages of development, they hold a special place during the time in which individuals are initially, and most intensely, focused on identity development—adolescence and emerging adulthood. This is the time when the question of identity is first made salient and can first be adequately tackled with the newfound cognitive and social-emotional resources that develop across adolescence and into emerging adulthood. It is in this developmental stage that I situate my examination of identity development in the context of family stories.

This book follows an empirical chain of studies that, taken together, comprise my thesis that the self is a co-authored work. I explore the stories that families tell together, the stories that adolescents and emerging adults tell about their families, and the personal stories that parents do—and do not—tell their children.

Setting the Stage

I begin this volume by setting the theoretical stage for my arguments. In Chapter Two, I detail the developments that occur during adolescence and emerging adulthood relevant to identity, such as neural and pubertal development, relations with parents, and shifts in the complexity of thinking. In Chapter Three, I address the theoretical roots of my research on identity and narrative within a developmental, social, and cultural framework.

The Stories Families Tell

I began this venture by examining the role of family stories in adolescent and emerging adult identity development by listening to the stories that families tell together. To further understand how individuals appropriate or resist these shared stories I next asked emerging adults to recall their family stories alone, and to tell me what those stories meant to them. Those studies are at the heart of Chapters Four and Five, in which I examine how adolescents and emerging adults negotiate with the stories their families tell about them.

Parents' Personal Stories

Building on the idea that parents' personal stories are some of the stories to which adolescents are exposed in the narrative ecology, I next asked parents about their own personal stories that they do or do not tell their children. That led me to return to emerging adults to ask what they recalled about their parents' stories. Those studies provide the data on which Chapters Six and Seven are based, where I examine the role of parents' stories in the narrative ecology, both for the parents themselves as well as for their children.

Broader Contexts of Identity Development

The final section focuses on two other aspects of the storytelling context that are critical to a discussion of identity: gender (Chapter Eight) and peers (Chapter Nine).

Across these sections my intention is to describe and explain the powerful role that family stories play in identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood. This book is the work of several years of listening to family stories, reading, re-reading, and absorbing them, a process that has resulted in the conclusion that we are not simply self-made individuals, composed only of our own stories. For better or worse, the story of the self is a co-authored tale.

SECTION 1

SETTING THE STAGE