

Life Story Model Approach to Understanding Personality

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McAdams's life story model of identity is a narrative approach to understanding personality which draws on the psychoanalytic writings of Eric Erikson and the *personology* theory of Henry A. Murray. Other influences include Jerome Bruner and Theodore R. Sarbin who introduced and popularized the term narrative psychology. McAdams, a professor from Northwestern University, believed understanding human behavior should be grounded in the knowledge that people make sense of their lives by constructing and internalizing stories. According to this model, individuals begin to organize their lives in terms of self-stories in late adolescence and young adulthood. People reconstruct their past and anticipate their future in terms of internalized and evolving life stories. McAdams's research showed that examining how people arrange and integrate the plot points of their lives was the key to understanding how they construct their identities.

McAdams traced the development of three distinct layers of personality. The first level is characterized by the social actor who expresses emotional and behavioral traits. The next is the motivated agent who pursues goals and values. The third is the autobiographical author who constructs a personal story for life. McAdams's three level model show how psychologists learn to know a person in a scientific way:

Level 1 (general traits) how shy, outgoing, intelligent, or warm someone is.

Level 2 (goals and values) an individual's endeavors, strivings, strategies of defense and coping at specific times, and places during life.

Level 3 (storied identity) detailed descriptions of an individual's personality by integrating data from content analysis of personal stories, interviews and questionnaires.

After collecting and examining life stories of thousands of people, McAdams and researchers learned that individuals' stories usually have overarching themes running through them. In McAdam's approach, life narratives are examined and evaluated by the presence and extent to which they contain various structural and thematic components:

- *Temporal coherence*: Is the narration of a story in a clear, chronological way?
- *Causal coherence*: Does the teller draw cause-and-effect relationships between events in the narrative and how it affects the narrator's sense of self and well-being?
- *Thematic coherence*: Does the narrator reflect on his/her story, to reveal themes, and overarching trends, to create a purposeful life?

For example, McAdams and Logan (2006) described an exploratory study of the life stories told by 15 university professors who have made significant scholarly contributions to their respective disciplines. Researchers asked each professor to describe the overall trajectory of his or her scholarly life. Then the professors were asked to focus on particular scenes that stand out in the story: an opening scene

(describing how interest in the area of scholarship may have originated), a professional high point, a low point, a turning point, and future point. The researchers found that a recurring theme was that most professors recalled that it was a question that was to guide their creative work for the rest of their lives. A technology professor recalled in the sixth grade in science class he became obsessed with how to build a perfect robot? A renowned history professor recalled his passion to become a scholar was fueled by the question, “how can you explain the Vietnam war? “

Similarly, students of psychology might ask, “What questions do I have that might be answered by a study of psychology? Or more importantly, what is the life story I hope to live as a psychologist?”

The person defines him/herself by constructing an autobiographical story of the self. The story provides the person with a sense of unity and purpose in life.

. McAdams’s storied approach has become influential in research into the self and identity and significantly raised the power of storytelling as both a research method and treatment. That we are the only “storytelling” animal that can consciously arrange the plot points of our lives into a narrative and deliberately shape who we are— is a fundamental part of being human.

Further Reading

Manczak, E., Zapata-Gietl, C., & McAdams, D. P. (2014). Regulatory focus in the life story: Prevention and promotion as expressed in three layers of personality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, 169-181.

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- McAdams, D. P. (1996). Personality, modernity, and the storied self: A contemporary framework for studying persons. *Psychological Inquiry*, 7, 295-321.
- McAdams, D. P., & Logan, R. L. (2006). Creative work, love, and the dialectic in selected life stories of academics. In D. P. McAdams, R. Josselson, & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Identity and story: Creating self in narrative* (pp. 89–108). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.