Autobiographical Reasoning: Arguing and Narrating from a Biographical Perspective

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Abstract

Autobiographical reasoning is the activity of creating relations between different parts of one’s past, present, and future life and one’s personality and development. It embeds personal memories in a culturally, temporally, causally, and thematically coherent life story. Prototypical autobiographical arguments are presented. Culture and socializing interactions shape the development of autobiographical reasoning especially in late childhood and adolescence. Situated at the intersection of cognitive and narrative development and autobiographical memory, autobiographical reasoning contributes to the development of personality and identity, is instrumental in efforts to cope with life events, and helps to create a shared history. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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Hermann Ebbinghaus lay the foundations for the psychology of memory in 1880 by substituting everyday remembering with an experimental paradigm that focused on the controlled learning of elements with identical value, the correct remembering of which could therefore be counted and related to the passing of time. These elements were to have no links, neither to words nor to things; they were designed to have no prior meaning (Ebbinghaus, 1983). This paradigm defined memory psychology for an entire century, with a few important exceptions such as work by Bartlett (1932). Maybe the most outspoken antipode to Ebbinghaus was his colleague at the University of Berlin, Wilhelm Dilthey (1895), who proclaimed life stories as the model for the Geisteswissenschaften, the humanities, which approach their subject through historical understanding. Life stories center on emergent meaning, not numbers. Linking the events within a life to each other and the individual’s overall development, and embedding this life in a social and historical context, endows the life with meaning. Wilhelm Dilthey was not interested in memory, but in obtaining the most exhaustive information possible about phenomena that need to be understood in the light of their history.

Psychology began to leave Ebbinghaus’s “memorizing trap” (Danziger, 2008) only a century later, moving one step in the direction of Dilthey by developing an interest in everyday remembering instead of memorizing laboratory material (Neisser, 1982). This new object of psychological research was termed autobiographical memory (Rubin, 1986). Psychologists, interested in the representation of temporally structured knowledge, took a further step in the direction of Dilthey’s interest in the life story by introducing narrative as the central form for organizing and communicating events (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981).

Everyday remembering of single events involves varying degrees of linking, contextualizing, and interpreting. One kind of linking consists of creating the temporal, spatial, and social context of the remembered episode. In narratives, this is the purpose of the initial orientation section. Another kind of linking is of a more linear nature and consists of linking actions and events by putting them in a temporal-causal order that makes sense to the rememberer and the listener alike. In narratives, this is the purpose of explanations and narrative clauses, the sequence of which imitates the sequence of events. Except for some involuntary memories (cf. Berntsen, 2009), everyday remembering is an active, reconstructive activity that involves at least some degree of argumentative linking, or narrative reasoning (Rubin & Greenberg, 2003).

In this volume, we take the next step in the direction of Dilthey’s life-historical approach to memory and individuality, by focusing on narratives of memories, not of any everyday events, but on past, present, and future events that are of biographical relevance. Biographical relevance marks aspects of one’s past that have meaning for one’s life, and
therefore would justifiably enter one’s written autobiography. These meaningful events are contextualized by life, linked not only by chronological order, but also by arguments that state thematic or causal-motivational implications, similarities, or consequences. Habermas and Bluck (2000) coined the term autobiographical reasoning for this activity of explicating the biographical relevance of memories. Autobiographical reasoning creates links between remembered events and other distant parts of one’s life and to the self and its development. It refers to the remembering subject’s life as the relevant frame of reference, thereby implying the life story. Autobiographical reasoning requires extra mental effort that goes beyond the effort of mere remembering. We termed this activity as reasoning to underscore three aspects: the constructive and interpretative nature of the activity, the both cognitive and communicative nature of it, and its normative aspect implied by its appeal to reason and logic. The term reasoning also alludes to the cognitive-developmental tradition (Piaget, 1924), which we wed to the narrative tradition. Related constructs are those of the life review (Butler, 1963), identity-related reminiscing (Webster, 1993), and reflecting on life (Pasupathi, Weeks, & Rice, 2006; Staudinger, 2001) because they tend to require reference to the whole life.

Autobiographical reasoning is a late acquisition in socio-cognitive development, as it begins to develop only in preadolescence and continues to mature throughout adolescence. This development draws remembering closer to the self, maximizing identity implications of remembered episodes by linking them to individual development. Only the ability for autobiographical reasoning allows individuals to understand what it means when they are asked for self-defining memories.

This volume demonstrates how a focus on this late maturing competence opens new perspectives in the psychology of adolescence. This introductory chapter contextualizes the main arguments of the following chapters. First, I will outline the conceptual life story framework of which autobiographical reasoning is a part and then present some prototypical arguments used in autobiographical reasoning. Then I will discuss what is known to date about the development of the ability for autobiographical reasoning in adolescence and age differences in its spontaneous use across adulthood. As autobiographical reasoning is conceived as a basically socio-cognitive process, I will then discuss which cultural models influence autobiographical reasoning, and which socializing narrative and discursive practices may shape autobiographical reasoning especially in adolescence. Finally, I will review mostly indirect evidence on how autobiographical reasoning is adaptive in different contexts. This introduction and the following chapters take a strong theoretical stance, mapping new areas for research in adolescence and beyond. The introduction closes with a brief presentation of each chapter.
We conceived of autobiographical reasoning as one of two possible manifestations of the autobiographical life story, the other being entire life narratives. An essential aspect of the life story is its global coherence. Its parts are related to each other and to the whole; events are related to other events and to the development of the individual. We highlighted four kinds of global coherence of special relevance to the life story. First, life stories are constructed following more or less a cultural concept of biography, which we defined as a skeletal structure of temporally ordered biographically salient life events with age norms attached to them (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). This sequence of life events was termed life script by Berntsen and Rubin (2004). It represents a normative cultural life course (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). Other aspects of the cultural concept of biography concern not how life is to be lived, but how life is to be narrated, such as how to begin and end a life narrative (Habermas, Ehlert-Lerche, & de Silveira, 2009). Second, global temporal coherence allows the listener to locate events in the narrator’s life. The most basic temporal order of events in narratives is chronological. Artful narrators may deviate from this pattern, but to maintain global temporal coherence they need to mark deviations from chronological time (Habermas et al., 2009). Third, global causal-motivational coherence provides a sense of direction and purpose to a life. Life narratives vary in the degree to which events are purported to be caused externally or motivated by one’s desires, aims, and values (Schafer, 1983). Causal-motivational coherence bridges change, connecting what had been earlier and what became of it, most notably the narrator’s person and personality. Fourth, global thematic coherence is established by extracting continuities across change. Global coherence is what differentiates the life story from mere lists of unrelated memories from one’s life.

Whereas entire life narratives are usually only produced in research interviews, in everyday life the life story is usually manifested in the more partial form of autobiographical reasoning. We suggested that repeated autobiographical reasoning leads to the construction of a rudimentary knowledge structure in memory that relates to life as a whole, termed life story schema, which in turn is activated and used in autobiographical reasoning. Thus, autobiographical reasoning may involve arguments constructed on the spot, which are then saved as an enduring knowledge structure. It may also use arguments already stored in memory, such as the product of earlier autobiographical reasoning. In the process of autobiographical reasoning, past events may be remembered and are then interpreted by putting them in a biographical context (Bluck & Habermas, 2000). Despite obvious motivational differences, autobiographical reasoning is structurally identical with biographical reasoning about another
individual's life because it takes an external, third-person perspective of a life. This structural homology shows both in studies of the memory of and reasoning about literary representations of life in novels and short stories (Copeland, Radvansky & Goodwin, 2009; Feldman, Bruner, Kalmar, & Renderer, 1993; Genereux & McKeough, 2007; Mar & Oatley, 2008), as well as in clinical practice. Psychoanalysts construct life stories of their patients to identify recurrent themes and conflicts, and to explain these developmentally as responses to specific experiences and to developing motives and conflicts. In principle, this kind of reconstruction is structurally homologous to how patients themselves may narrate and explain their lives (Linde, 1993; Schafer, 1983).

Prototypical Autobiographical Arguments

Autobiographical reasoning often involves some of the following prototypical arguments (Habermas & Paha, 2001; cf. Pasupathi, & Weeks, Chapter Three; Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, Chapter Four, for additional autobiographical arguments). I shall first describe arguments that bridge change, then arguments that establish continuity. They are arguments insofar as they provide reasons for claims or causes for states of affairs.

Biographical Change. The following list of autobiographical arguments ranges from very basic to more complex references to biography. A normative idea of the life course may be invoked by referring to the developmental status of an individual to explain his or her reaction, ability, or sensibility (McCabe, Capron, & Peterson, 1991), such as in “My parents’ divorce didn’t affect me much. I wasn’t really aware of what was happening. I was still too little.” In a more individual vein, specific experiences may be said to have had a formative influence on the individual, for example, by stating the influence of a role model. More individual influences of specific events on the development of personality can be designated as events causing personality change, such as in “After age ten, I became a shy person because the separation of my parents made me distrust others.” An experience may also have a more specific influence in creating a sensibility or motivation to react in a specific way in specific kinds of situations (Feldman et al., 1993). This very typical biographical argument is used to explain strange behaviors by reference to the biographical background of the individual, such as in “When a car suddenly raced towards us, he panicked. He had been run over by a car when he was small.” Events may also be causally related to long-term biographical consequences, such as changes in life circumstances, relationships, or later events. Mackavey, Malley, and Stewart (1991) identified events in the written autobiographies of forty-nine psychologists that were explicitly named as biographically consequential. They most frequently came from early adulthood. A specific linguistic form to point out biographical consequences is a past–present
comparison that states that something is different ever since a specified event happened.

An especially important set of biographical arguments regards change in the individual's knowledge and understanding, evaluations, and intentions. A simple way for an event to change an individual's outlook is to provide new information. An increase in knowledge is often expressed negatively by stating that at a specific point in life one had not yet known something, or by verbs like finding out. Experiences in which an aspect of personality is revealed belong to this category if the assumption is that the aspect has always been there, for instance the metaphor of coming out implies a process of revelation of sexual orientation (cf. Pasupathi & Weeks, Chapter Three). A more active change in outlook is brought about when the individual learns a lesson. An experience is related to a lasting understanding of a mechanism and how to better deal with a specific situation, like when a twelve-year-old boy states, “That's why I told myself, next time I fall in love, school work should not suffer from it.” The individual actively processes an experience, but the inferences drawn remain limited to circumscribed situations. The most profound process of understanding is involved in general insights. The individual generalizes a single experience to a very general rule of how the world works, as in this insight of a fifteen-year-old girl: “I was really emotionally hooked up with him for a long time. Probably that's what always happens when it's the first kiss” (Habermas & Paha, 2001; cf. McLean & Thorne, 2003). These biographical arguments that relate an experience to a change in the subjective outlook usually imply an increase in understanding and insight.

Biographical Continuity. Thematic coherence is most often constructed hierarchically, by creating a higher-level category that integrates more specific categories or instances. By assimilating diverse, temporally distributed local elements of a life to an overarching concept, continuity is created. A major device in autobiographical narratives is exemplification. A general statement covering an extended period, for example, about one's personality, may be substantiated by providing an episode in which this trait is manifested. A formally similar argument is used to explain specific actions by the actor's personality. Whereas exemplifications start from a general, abstract claim that is then exemplified, explanations of actions by personality are adduced within the context of a specific episode—they proceed from the particular (explanandum) to the general (explanans). Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker (2007) pointed to an interesting variation of the argument, namely negating that an action can be explained by a trait, by stating that an action is atypical for the self, thereby safeguarding self-continuity against events that disrupt continuity. Another way to highlight stability is to state that something is still the same today. Finally, parallels may be constructed between a specific episode and other episodes. Thus, narrators frequently state that a given kind of experience happened to them more than once, or that it was a typical experience. In this case, it
is not an abstract trait, but a class of episodes or pattern of experiences that is stable.

**Development of Autobiographical Reasoning**

We have reviewed probable developmental prerequisites of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Briefly stated, autobiographical reasoning joins the categorical concept of person with the temporal structure of event representations (cf. Nelson & Gruendel, 1981), socio-cognitive with narrative development. Older grade school children and preadolescents know how to narrate single episodes (Peterson & McCabe, 1994), and they have developed a complex person concept organized in terms of abstract dispositions that explain more specific habits and attitudes (Selman, 1980). Only during adolescence, however, do they learn to conceive of individuals in biographical terms, contextualizing personality in individual development that bridges personal discontinuities in increasingly sophisticated ways (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Selman, 1980). Therefore, it is only in adolescence that coherent life narratives can be constructed. Wedding the neo-Piagetian cognitive-developmental theory of Case (1985) with narrative developmental theory, Anne McKeough and Genereux (2003) showed a significant increase of interpretative biographical abilities between ages ten and eighteen (cf. McKeough & Malcolm, Chapter Five). In an exploratory (Habermas & Paha, 2001) and two larger studies of entire life narratives—oral narratives spanning ages eight to twenty (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008) and written narratives spanning ages nine to fifteen (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008)—globally coherent life stories were absent in older children and gradually emerged across early and mid-adolescence. The studies used a variety of measures of global coherence, from relative frequencies of autobiographical reasoning and global coherence ratings to codes of the autobiographical well-formedness of beginnings and endings and judgments of the overall narrative structure.

The spontaneous use of autobiographical reasoning appears to increase beyond adolescence. In a life-span study of narratives of wisdom-related events, the spontaneous creation of causal links to other life events increased across adulthood, and drawing a lesson from this experience increased between adolescence and middle adulthood (Bluck & Glück, 2004). Another element of autobiographical reasoning, creating causal links between biographical events and the self and personal development, increased in crisis narratives across adulthood (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). In a study by McLean (2008), however, younger and older adults did not differ in the frequency of self-event connections in narratives of self-defining memories.

Apart from identifying autobiographical reasoning as elements of life narratives, Habermas, Fröhlich, and Diel (2009) devised a separate
semi-structured Autobiographical Reasoning Interview to test for the spontaneous tendency of and the ability to use autobiographical reasoning. The interview elicits a narrative of an important life event, and then asks for specific factual and counterfactual causal-motivational links, as well as for thematic links between the event and other events or the narrator's self. This research team found a dramatic increase in autobiographical links provided between late childhood and mid-adolescence. The increase showed both in spontaneous autobiographical reasoning as well as in the generally higher maximal competence as demonstrated in responses to probing.

**Cultural Models**

Whereas narrative is a universal format to share experiences and event knowledge, the life story may not be universal. The prototypical Western developmental life story is derived from literary autobiographies and dates back only to the eighteenth century to works such as Rousseau’s *Confessions*. In a cross-cultural comparison, some cultures seem to demand more telling of life stories and autobiographical reasoning than others (Tonkin, 1992). Western cultures appear to stress remembering of personal experiences and elaborations of the personal point of view at least for single experiences (e.g., Wang, 2004). Given this historical and cultural variation, it is plausible to assume that what is considered a good life story also varies with culture. In Europe, knowledge about the normative skeletal version of a life in terms of biographically salient life events and their age norms is acquired during early to mid-adolescence, not as a consequence of experiencing these events, but as a unitary concept stretching across life (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008; Habermas, 2007). Knowledge of the life script also correlates with the global coherence of life narratives (cf. Bohn, Chapter Two) and with both causal and thematic autobiographical reasoning (Habermas et al., 2009).

There may be different pathways for acquiring this cultural knowledge and ability. One could be the use of cultural media such as watching talk shows on TV or reading biographies and novels. There are strong arguments that reading fiction helps to develop an understanding of human motives and empathy (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Mar, Peskin, and Fong (Chapter Six) point out that reading about the lives of others may elicit a self-centered reading that draws parallels between protagonists’ lives or narrators’ interpretations and the understanding of one’s own life. Novels may serve especially as a model for constructing an extended life story in its temporal-causal ordering. Mar and colleagues also make a strong point by noting that poetry may foster readers’ ability and propensity to find metaphors, helping to create thematic coherence in a life. This resonates with some of the excerpts of family stories reported by McKeough and Malcolm in Chapter Five in which the older adolescents...
use metaphors to integrate characteristic aspects. In our Autobiographical Reasoning Interview, the central question for thematic links asks for a red thread or overarching theme of one's life, i.e., for metaphors. Accordingly, the frequency of a youth's participation in biographical practices such as writing diaries or letters, or reading biographies correlates with the temporal global coherence and the well-formedness of endings of life narratives (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; Habermas et al., 2009) as well as with temporal autobiographical reasoning (Habermas et al., 2009).

Socializing Narrative Practices

A more direct way to acquire the cultural concept of biography may be by participating in socializing interactions with more cognitively mature and competent members of a culture. Basic narrative ability is acquired in memory talk with adults who help young children structure their memories by heavy scaffolding (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). Although adolescents are much more autonomous than preschool children and do participate in the wider culture on their own, talk about the past is still very much shared with parents and the family. Fivush and colleagues (Chapter Four) show that spontaneous talk about the shared past is quite frequent in families. Reminiscing in families need not involve autobiographical reasoning and will often consist of mere mutual confirmation of a shared past. However, what Fivush and colleagues call intergenerational narratives—parents' narratives about their own lives—often evoke autobiographical reasoning on the part of adolescents who draw parallels between their own and their parent's life, or point to how parents' advice is rooted in their life experience. The kind of naturalistic research on everyday talk presented by Fivush and colleagues is a necessary, but starkly underrepresented approach to psychological phenomena.

Although parent–child dialogues studied in the laboratory cannot provide information about the spontaneous use of autobiographical reasoning, they do tell us something about how parents and adolescents may talk to each other. Pasupathi and Weeks (Chapter Three) provide illuminative excerpts from mother–daughter dialogues in which the mother crafts a continuous personality of the daughter that stretches from the past into the future. They also show how a mother challenges her adolescent daughter's self-understanding, arguing for the stability of her personality, based also on her advantage of knowing the daughter's distant past better than the daughter herself does. Pasupathi and Weeks hypothesize that parents may enable their children to discover continuities, whereas peers as listeners might be better suited to emphasize change and development.

How the stories that are repeatedly told in families, termed family stories, are digested by adolescents according to their cognitive development is demonstrated in the contribution by Anne McKeough and Jennifer
Malcolm (Chapter Five). With a clinical interview following up on the re-narration of a family story, the authors show how older children stick to a literal interpretation of the story, whereas preadolescents draw a moral from the story, and mid-adolescents excerpt some overarching insight that applies not only to the adolescent, but to lives in general. Thus as adolescents mature cognitively, they increasingly interpret biographical stories they hear from their parents and integrate them into their view of their own (and their parents’) lives by means of the developing ability for autobiographical reasoning. McKeough and Malcolm show how general cognitive abilities are applied to fictional narratives and, more specifically, to family narratives pertaining to their own lives. They thus succeed in relating general social-cognitive development to narrative development and autobiographical reasoning.

Although longitudinal studies of the effects of shared parental autobiographical reasoning on adolescents’ ability for autobiographical reasoning are lacking, there is at least some evidence that mothers adapt to the growth of the child’s and adolescent’s ability for autobiographical reasoning by supporting abilities that their child is only about to learn. Preadolescents first learn to temporally structure a life story with the help of the life script, and only later learn to construct causal-motivational and thematic coherence in life narratives by relating life events to each other and the self (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Accordingly, in an exploratory study of life stories co-narrated by sixteen mothers and their children, in late childhood and preadolescence mothers supported temporal autobiographical reasoning, whereas in early and mid-adolescence they supported causal-motivational reasoning that focused on personality and its development (Habermas, Negele, & Brenneisen-Mayer, in press).

**Functions and Adaptivity of Autobiographical Reasoning**

The ability to create coherence and continuity in one’s life story is normatively expected from adult members of Western cultures and contributes to a mature and healthy psycho-social identity (Erikson, 1968). This seems to suggest that autobiographical reasoning is beneficial by helping to integrate diverse aspects of one’s past and personality into a coherent and continuous self. Fivush, Bohanek, and Zaman (Chapter Four) provide evidence that adolescents whose mothers are involved in co-narrating distant memories with them have less psychological symptoms. Pennebaker and colleagues found that repeatedly writing about a traumatic event with increasing causal connections and words indicating insight is related to better physical health (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997; cf. Frattaroli, 2006). In a study more directly related to the life story, a composite measure of narrative coherence for significant life memories correlated with measures of well-being (Baerger & McAdams, 1999). One of the four
criteria of coherence had been whether the event was explicitly related to other parts of the narrator’s life. In a four-year longitudinal study, an increase in emotional health correlated with causal reasoning in narratives of personality change at the end of these four years (Lodi-Smith et al., 2009).

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) also seems to suggest that autobiographical reasoning reflects psychological health. It is a semi-structured biographical interview that measures attachment security as communicative coherence in the sense that abstract claims and concrete examples for one’s past relationships are adequately and convincingly expressed. Although the AAI aims at eliciting autobiographical reasoning, it is not the frequency of autobiographical reasoning but its quality that is relevant for the categorization of attachment security. Accordingly, in a reanalysis of AAI transcripts of twenty-seven young women (cf. Gloger-Tippelt, Gomille, König, & Vetter, 2002), we found no differences between securely and insecurely attached women in terms of relative frequencies of the use of autobiographical arguments and exemplifications (Höpfner, 2007). Similarly, life narratives of clinically depressed in-patients did not contain less autobiographical arguments than those of matched controls (Habermas, Ott, Schubert, Schneider, & Pate, 2008). Some authors even argue that, at least with regard to traumatic experiences, it is detrimental to psychological health to integrate these experiences into one’s life story (Berntsen & Rubin, 2007). McLean and Mansfield (Chapter Seven) review evidence from their own and others’ research that the adaptivity of autobiographical reasoning may vary with context, content, and age. A promising suggestion of theirs is that one precondition for autobiographical reasoning to be helpful is that one is sufficiently mature enough to adequately reason autobiographically and not just to ruminate about past events.

From a clinical perspective, detrimental effects could be expected from too intellectual uses of autobiographical reasoning that only serve to suppress emotions. In addition, repetitive ruminating about the same negative aspects of the past is a symptom of depression. Treynor, Gonzalez, and Nolen-Hoeksema (2003) found that brooding over negative consequences of depression predicted an increase in depression, whereas reflecting upon possible reasons for one’s depression predicted a decrease. Other aspects of autobiographical reasoning which may impact how beneficial it is are whether it is used for solving a specific problem or not (see McLean and Mansfield, Chapter Seven) and whether it is used in solitary thinking or in communication with others.

In a way, autobiographical reasoning may be beneficial to the degree that it is normative. I do not intend this to mean that the life story needs to follow conventional conceptions, although in a Danish sample a conventional life correlated negatively with depressiveness, but not so in a U.S. sample (Rubin, Berntsen, & Hutson, 2009) nor in a German sample...
(Habermas, Negele, Arslan, & Tavenaux, 2008). Rather, autobiographical reasoning might be beneficial if it fulfills a criterion that transcends the formal definition adopted here, that is, if it follows communicative norms to adhere to common sense so that listeners may find it plausible and reasonable.

The concept of autobiographical reasoning is intended to bridge the radical gap between Ebbinghaus and Dilthey. Our conception of memory starts with everyday remembering that is both linguistic and meaningful, embedded in dialogue and relationships, and influenced by wishes and their biographical roots. We thus suggest to keep our theoretical conception of memory as complex as necessary to do justice to the phenomena of interest. Methodologically, case studies that allow apprehending the complexities of specific contexts and individual lives are a rich and necessary part of psychological research (e.g., Larsen & Hansen, 2005). Memory is narrative if it is successful. However, and this is what we retain from the Ebbinghaus tradition, we have an interest in empirically based generalizations of psychological insight, which requires systematic empirical comparison. For these purposes, it is important that the concept of autobiographical reasoning allows some degree of quantification.

Overview of the Volume

This volume has been composed to offer an overview of relevant developmental research on autobiographical reasoning to date and to integrate contributions from memory, cognitive developmental, narrative, discourse, identity, literary, and coping perspectives, and to present conceptual advances. In the course of this volume, the perspective on autobiographical reasoning gradually expands, starting with a focus on the individual, opening up to interactions and the family, to the wider culture via literature, and ending with a shift of focus on the consequences of autobiographical reasoning.

In Chapter Two, Annette Bohn argues for the central role of the cultural life script in creating coherence in life stories. Global coherence of written life narratives correlates with the acquisition of the life script. The latter, however, does not correlate with coherence in single-event narratives, underlining the difference between stories and life stories. Bohn exemplifies the interplay between the personal and the prescriptive cultural form by contrasting the presumed life narrative of a nine-year-old boy with his life narrative three years later, which corresponds much better to what we expect a life story to read like.

In Chapter Three, Monisha Pasupathi and Trisha Weeks define the core of autobiographical reasoning as the act of establishing links between events in time and the self-concept. They present a system of this kind of autobiographical argument that they term self-event relations. These can be identified in narratives of single autobiographical memories. The authors
argue that these arguments serve the identity function of establishing personal continuity across change. Building on Pasupathi’s earlier work on listener effects on autobiographical memory and expanding Fivush’s work on mother–child memory talk in preschool children to adolescence, the authors then develop ideas on how socializing interactions might support adolescents’ emerging ability for autobiographical reasoning. Excerpts from mother–daughter discussions of the adolescent’s personal development illustrate these ideas.

In Chapter Four, Robyn Fivush, Jennifer Bohanek, and Widaad Zaman focus on how narrating in families supports adolescents developing life story and self-concept, and how it supports their well-being. Exceptionally daring for psychologists, they analyze naturally occurring dinner table conversations in families with adolescents. Only this kind of data can show how relevant narratives are in real life. Indeed, narratives make up not the majority of ongoing family talk, but a substantial part of it. Most interestingly, intergenerational stories about the parents’ lives prior to their children’s recollection were surprisingly frequent. Interviewed individually about intergenerational narratives, adolescents were easily able to provide such stories from both their parents’ lives and, by way of autobiographical reasoning, to intertwine them with their own life story. In addition, interesting gender differences emerged.

In Chapter Five, Anne McKeough and Jennifer Malcolm present their work on how social-cognitive development (in terms of Case’s neo-Piagetian theory) is applied to the understanding of and drawing inferences from fictional stories across adolescence, thereby bridging cognitive and narrative development. They then go on to show that parallel to general cognitive development and to the development of understanding fictional stories, adolescents develop an understanding of family stories that are told repeatedly by parents. In re-narrations of these stories and subsequent clinical interviews, adolescents show a progressing ability for autobiographical reasoning by interpreting the stories and excerpting a moral from them also with the use of metaphor. The authors bridge both general cognitive development and narrative understanding, as well as the understanding of fictional and real-life stories.

In Chapter Six, Raymond Mar, Joan Peskin, and Katrina Fong write about a much-neglected topic in psychology, the meaning and possible effects of fictional literature on the minds and lives of adolescents. They eloquently argue for the role that reading fiction has in developing an understanding of how lives are constructed, of how motivation and personality develop biographically, and of how individuals may remain the same despite change. Second, they also provide strong arguments for why reading poetry may enhance adolescents’ abilities to extract themes from a life and to create thematic coherence using metaphor. Despite the lack of direct evidence, the authors succeed in constructing indirect evidence from this much under-researched field of psychology that can actually be
read as a call for future studies that directly test the possible influence of reading literature.

In Chapter Seven, Kate McLean and Cade Mansfield move from the different manifestations and the development of autobiographical reasoning to the possible effects of autobiographical reasoning. I believe that it is not only a dearly held conviction of psychoanalysts, but also a fundamental belief of many educated people, which is deeply rooted in European and American intellectual and cultural tradition, that trying to understand yourself and your life is both morally required and good for yourself and others. McLean and Mansfield partially undermine this assumption by discussing evidence that at least limits its validity. They argue that in some circumstances, in some social contexts, and at specific ages, autobiographical reasoning might be detrimental rather than beneficial to the individual. The authors show that once the core concept and the main developmental line of autobiographical reasoning have been established, studying multiple uses in different contexts will be the next step to take.

References


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