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## Introduction: Development's Story in Time and Place

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### Abstract

*In this introductory chapter, I place Bertram J. Cohler's (1982) seminal essay Personal Narrative and Life Course in the context of the history of narrative psychology and developmental theory. I describe four theses from Personal Narrative and Life Course, which impacted developmental theory and research: (a) the self is a narrative project, (b) developmental periods have a distinct narrative character, (c) narratives are always told in (personal and historical) time, and (d) persons strive for coherence. I briefly describe the chapters to follow. However, my main goal is to argue for the implications of narrative for developmental science. Following Cohler, I argue that narrative has a central role to play in understanding human lives and can provide substantial benefit to developmental theory and research. A narrative perspective allows for a complex and nuanced description of developmental phenomena that accounts for the subjective and unpredictable nature of human lives. The narrative interpretation of experience is a primary human activity that alters the meaning of experience and potentially sets development on a new course, rendering the prediction of developmental outcomes a difficult venture. The narrative perspective provides detailed insights into how development unfolds, how persons actually interpret and reinterpret life in time and place, and can help psychologists to engage fundamental questions about the meaning of experience. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Rather than viewing personality development either in terms of continuing stability over time or in terms of a number of well-ordered phases or stages, lives seem to be characterized by often abrupt transformations determined both by expected and eruptive life events and by intrinsic, but not necessarily continuous, developmental factors, including biological aging. These events taking place across the life course are later remembered as elements of a narrative which provides a coherent account of this often disjunctive life course. The form of this narrative is based upon a socially shared belief in Western culture that all narratives, including history, literature, and biographies, must have a beginning, a middle, and an end related to each other in a meaningful manner. (Cohler, 1982, pp. 227–228)

This volume is a reflection on life course developmental theory. In particular, the volume argues for the centrality of narrative interpretation for human development. As a point of departure, we begin from Bertram Joseph Cohler's (1938–2012) seminal contribution to our understanding of developmental psychology. During his prolific career, Cohler published over 200 papers and book chapters. But, Cohler's (1982) chapter *Personal Narrative and Life Course* is clearly one of the most influential. The chapter is one of the first published manuscripts in psychology on the process of storytelling for establishing selfhood and identity and one of the first essays on what would later become narrative psychology. In fact, the chapter was published before Theodore Sarbin (1986) coined the term “narrative psychology” or Jerome Bruner (1990) heralded the “narrative turn in psychology.”

Although *Personal Narrative and Life Course* is difficult to locate (PsycInfo doesn't even index the chapter), it has had a substantial impact on how developmental, personality, and clinical psychologists understand identity formation and mental health. But, the chapter can also be viewed as an innovative contribution to developmental theory, an alternative to other perspectives (e.g., biological, cognitive, evolutionary), which argues that development is an interpretative, narrative project.

The formulation, personal narrative and life course, elegantly summarizes three critical developmental processes. First, *personal narrative* captures the fact that persons are engaged in the process of interpretation, often self-interpretation, constantly figuring and refiguring their life and their past into a story of the self through time. Second, *life course* captures the fact that development is not only subjective and individual but also collective and contextual. Persons always find themselves inside a definite horizon of social and cultural conditions, which are historical and changing. Subjective interpretation and contextual forces are essential components for

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This volume is dedicated to Bertram Joseph Cohler, a great friend and inspiration.

understanding development's path. But, finally, *putting together personal narrative and life course* highlights the tension between our place in the world and how we make sense of it.

From the first moments of our lives, and even before birth, persons are engaged in the process of making interpretations about life and their place inside it. We need to quickly gather: Whose voice is that? What sounds should I concentrate on? When does a word end? Who are others? What are people talking about? What kind of world do I live in? What are the dangers? What am I? What is a person? What do persons know, think, and feel? What kind of a person am I? What are the goals of life for a person like me? What is the meaning of life? Such facts about the world that we are thrown into are interpretations that each person must make. They are also interpretations that are vital to our survival and well-being.

Of course, newborns are, biologically and socially, prepared for making such interpretations. And, they are not alone in their endeavors. Babies find themselves in sustained interaction with others who are more knowledgeable about the world and its ways and help them to devise provisional answers to these questions and many others (Bruner, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1988). With the support of others, children also learn the forms that persons in their community use to talk about self and others and to express the quality of their experience, intentions, and emotions (Miller, Chen, & Olivarez, Chapter 2 of this volume; Miller & Fung, 2012; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998).

Cohler's great insight, which he developed in numerous publications during his long career, is that storytelling is our way of wrestling with the dilemmas and disruptions that define human existence. Persons make sense of life—of the life that they have, of the life that is given to them. We need to. The challenges are unrelenting, from birth until death. And, the solutions that we arrive at have consequences for our sense of being whole, vital, and progressing toward worthy goals. We advance, or we don't, on the basis of our capacity to create adaptive narratives that make sense to ourselves and to others.

*Personal Narrative and Life Course* was at the avant-garde of the narrative psychology movement, which gained momentum in the late 1980s and 1990s and continues with considerable energy today (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Thirty years after its publication, there is now a large literature, from early childhood to old age, on the role of narrative in human development. But, in my opinion, the themes that Cohler advanced in *Personal Narrative and Life Course* are still fresh and future oriented, prescient of an innovative, interpretive, developmental psychology.

## The Self Is a Narrative Project

To readers in 2014, the thesis that self is a narrative project is hardly revolutionary. But, in 1982, it was. Cohler's chapter was published shortly

after the 1979 conference *Narrative: The Illusion of Sequence*, organized by W. J. T. Mitchell, and the 1980 publication of a *Critical Inquiry* special issue based upon a selection of conference papers from luminaries such as Hayden White, Roy Schafer, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, and Frank Kermode. The special issue, republished soon after (Mitchell, 1981), is regarded as a turning point—when the conversation on narrative became widespread and interdisciplinary (Bruner, 1991a; Hyvärinen, 2006).

However, even in 2014, the implications of a narrative perspective for developmental psychology are yet to be realized. We remain very far away from a developmental psychology that takes meaning and context seriously. It is my hope that this volume of *NDCAD* will serve as a reference point for psychologists who would like to *re*-think their approach to development through the lens of a narrative perspective that is sensitive to interpretation and context in human lives.

For Cohler, narrative is part of the everyday interpretative orientation that humans take in the world. By emphasizing the role of the interpretive process in what Bruner (1991b) would call “self-making,” Cohler identified and developed the central tenet of a narrative perspective in psychology—narrative is an interpretative, hermeneutic enterprise (Brockmeier, 2013). Persons are meaning makers engaged in the project of understanding life. Narrative is the means for testing out, fixing, and revising interpretations, for bringing together disparate aspects of our experience and for making self and world comprehensible. Over the course of development, we use narrative in various ways, but beginning in adolescence, we begin to tell stories about our lives, which integrate past experiences with the present and projected future in order to describe a “self” or “identity” (Cohler, 1982; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Hatiboğlu, Chapter 3 of this volume; Habermas & Paha, 2001; McAdams, 1996).

The self becomes a story, an interpretation of our place in the world, which is progressively made and remade over developmental and historical time. Certainly, there is a subjective side to human development in which persons take account of their lives and create themselves, shaping the contours of who they were in the past, who they are now in the present, and what is possible for them in the future. One of the more interesting implications of this argument is that the self is nothing more than an interpretative action (Schiff, 2012). The meanings that persons employ are vitally important in shaping their identity and well-being. In a sense, Cohler’s narrative theory radically individualizes the developmental process, making development a personal project that relies heavily on how each person experiences and organizes their past (McAdams, Chapter 5 of this volume).

## **Developmental Periods Have a Distinct Narrative Character**

Cohler argued that life challenges, adversity and discontinuity, are key moments when narrative is required to reinterpret the past in order to

experience a sense of continuity in the face of rupture. Certainly, persons encounter adversity at unique points in their life. Life is full of nonnormative events, which become part of the narrative project and require new interpretations. But, there are also common developmental challenges, both universal and social-cultural, which provide a common narrative character to particular epochs (Hammack & Toolis, Chapter 4 of this volume).

Cohler's work contains a tension between the individualized personal narrative and the normative course of development. Although narrative interpretation provides substantial freedom, understandings are always constrained by biological, cognitive, and social development. Cohler described the transformations in form and content of narratives in three normative developmental transitions (from early childhood to middle childhood, from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, and from adulthood to middle age). Each transformation requires a rebalancing of the person's orientation to the past, present, and future. Cohler (1982) suggested that middle childhood is characterized by turning away from the past, adolescence by "remembering the future" (p. 218), and middle age by a returning concern with the past. Recent work has suggested that early childhood and emerging adulthood are also candidates for life course periods with distinct narrative characters. But, as Lieblich (Chapter 6 of this volume) argues, the character of developmental periods is not uniform or sacrosanct. One of the goals of the chapters collected in this volume is to refine our understanding of narrative across the life course with reference to the emerging scholarly research in this area.

### **Narratives Are Always Told in (Personal and Historical) Time**

Although biological, cognitive, and social forces may initiate transitions, persons always make sense of these challenges in the context of history, culture, and relationships. In order to understand their lives, persons are always inside a definite temporal and cultural horizon. Persons can only tell a "presently understood" version of the self at a specific moment in developmental time. We can understand the past only through the perspective of the present, an act of narrative reflection or hindsight (Freeman, 2010) in which persons read the past backward through the eyes of later experiences and present circumstances (Schiff & Cohler, 2001).

This presently understood account of self intersects with a specific moment in not only personal history but also world history. Cohler preferred the term "life course" over "life cycle" in order to emphasize development's context and the synergy of personal development with historical, sociological, and cultural circumstances. He was inspired not only by Mannheim's (1928/1952) sociology of generations but also by the innovative work of life course sociologists, such as Neugarten and Elder, who connected historical and social circumstances with subjective experience. Neugarten (1996), Cohler's mentor at The University of Chicago's Committee on Human

Development, argued that persons understand their own development in relationship to socially constructed, but normatively shared, expectations and time tables. For Cohler, Elder's (1974/1999) *Children of the Great Depression* provided solid evidence for Mannheim's thesis that generational cohorts, being similarly "located" in developmental and historical time, share substantial aspects of their mentality while those from previous or later generations experience self and the world differently.

Cohler's conception of personal narrative and life course should also be understood in light of other anti-Piagetian theories of its day in their common effort to move beyond individualistic models of human development, which separate the unfolding of individual development from the social world. Riegel's (1976) notion of dialectics and dialogue in human development and Sameroff and Chandler's (1975) transactional model argue for a dynamic conception of the relationship between persons and the social world, through which, in their exchange, person and world are transformed. Gergen's (1977) aleatoric model argued for the nonuniversal, idiosyncratic, progression of lives over time.

In 1982, Cohler emphasized aspects of historical time in the process of self-interpretation, but it is a short move from history to culture (Cohler, 1992; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). Of course, developmental psychology has progressed in the past 30 years. Vygotsky-inspired (Cole, 1996; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Rogoff, 2003) and other cultural conscious theories (LeVine & New, 2008; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990) have significantly revised our conception of the universality of human development. There is also a revival of nonlinear theories, including dynamic systems theory, and the continuing influence of transactional models (Sameroff, 2009; van Geert, 2011).

Nevertheless, the notions of personal narrative and life course are still insightful and fresh. Development is never out of context but always inside it. This realization has never been fully appreciated in developmental psychology, which continues to look at itself, deceptively, as generating laws that are true about all humans in all times and all places. Cohler didn't only discuss context but the way that persons make sense of their lives in context. In such a way, he aligned the interpretative capacities of persons with life course theory. Persons are constantly making sense of themselves and the world, in the midst of a changing personal situation and a changing world.

## **Persons Strive for Coherence**

Although interpretations are forever limited by the present moment, these self-constructions strive for intelligibility on the personal, social, and cultural levels. Narratives should make sense to the teller, capturing the necessary facts about their past. But, stories must also present a followable story to listeners, fulfilling the immediate social and larger cultural

expectations of storytelling. Cohler (1982) called this the dual interpretative task, whereby “the account . . . must be an accurate reflection of the subjectively experienced personal narrative” and it “must do so in a manner which is followable or which makes sense to others” (p. 208). In other words, the personal narrative needs to render the past in a way that is subjectively accurate and makes sense to others to whom we address our stories. We need to answer both the demands of our experience and the demands of the social world to tell our experience cogently.

Finally, Cohler argued that the sense of being coherent through time, narrating a story that successfully brings together past, present, and future, is connected to psychological well-being. In response to ruptures and discontinuities, brought on by a variety of life events, including physical and psychological growth, the personal narrative represents the attempt to maintain a sense of self as continuous, whole, and vital through time. As Cohler (1982) wrote, “transformations are characteristically dramatic and require considerable self-interpretative activity in order to preserve a sense of continuity in the personal narrative which fosters cohesiveness or congruence” (p. 215). The ability to author and reauthor a coherent personal narrative is a characteristic of adaptability—of personal resilience (Cohler, 1987). This is a point that has inspired considerable research in developmental psychology; it also has strong connections with psychoanalytic theorizing, particularly in Self Psychology. As Cohler (1982, 1987) recognized, the sense of coherence communicated in narrative nicely coalesces with Kohut's (1977) contention that the coherence and wholeness of the self are necessary for psychological health, productivity, and vitality. And, “the failure to maintain a coherent life history is characteristic of psychopathology of the self” (Cohler, 1987, p. 400).

## Plan of the Work and Chapter Summary

This volume is authored by Cohler's students, friends, and colleagues. Each in our own way, we were touched by Cohler's scholarship and life. Authors were selected to represent major developmental epochs in narrating the self: childhood (Peggy J. Miller, Eva Chian-Hui Chen, & Megan Olivarez, Chapter 2), adolescence (Tilmann Habermas & Neşe Hatiboglu, Chapter 3), emerging adulthood (Phillip L. Hammack & Erin Toolis, Chapter 4), middle age (Dan P. McAdams, Chapter 5), and old age (Amia Lieblich, Chapter 6). Authors were also asked to address one or more of the central theses that Cohler argued in his 1982 chapter and outlined above: (a) *the self is a narrative project*, (b) *developmental periods have a distinct narrative character*, (c) *narratives are always told in (personal and historical) time*, and (d) *persons strive for coherence*. Mark Freeman was asked to write an epilogue and comment on the chapters.

Read together, the chapters form a larger description of narrative's origins in conversation and the various uses that narrative is put to over

developmental time. Miller, Chen, and Olivarez (Chapter 2) argue that the personal narrative has its beginnings in early childhood's stories of personal experience, in which specific episodes of recent experience are jointly told and scaffold children's emerging understanding of what it means to be a self over time and within a particular cultural world. Habermas and Hatiboğlu (Chapter 3) argue that adolescents begin to draw in larger segments of time and sweeping themes about the self, provocatively suggesting that contextual coherence, seeing the place of the self in history and culture, is a feature of adolescent narratives. Hammack and Toolis (Chapter 4) argue that the functions and themes of narrating in adulthood display a greater openness than adolescence; through the activity of narrative engagement, persons negotiate an individual conception of adulthood that responds to socially and culturally imagined master narratives of adulthood. In middle adulthood, McAdams (Chapter 5) argues that narratives respond to the developmental challenge to view life as purposeful and the projects of adulthood as having a larger meaning. Although the notion of purpose in life could be variously conceived in different cultural settings, in American history, folklore and media, the redemptive narrative is especially well articulated and conceived for sustaining generative projects. In old age, Amia Lieblich (Chapter 6) questions the ubiquity of reviewing the past for the construction of a coherent personal narrative as a requisite for positive aging. Lieblich argues that social and cultural contexts need to be considered as motivating forces for engagement with the past or other strategies for managing identity in old age. Finally, Mark Freeman (Chapter 7) provides critical insights into the nature of narrative over the life course and the legacy of Cohler's work.

### **Development's Story in Context**

Although celebrating Cohler's scholarship and the research that it inspired is a worthy goal, this volume is essentially concerned with the future direction of developmental psychology. What is the legacy of these ideas for a more complex, and more realistic, understanding of developmental process? Or, why should developmental psychology take narrative seriously?

Following Cohler, I believe that narrative has a central role to play in understanding human lives and can provide substantial benefit to developmental theory and research. Human development is not only about objective circumstances that can be reliably measured and quantified in variables but it is equally about how persons interpret themselves and the world around them. Variable-centered research is important and complementary, but it conceals central aspects of human development. A narrative perspective can contribute to the project of developmental psychology by revealing the interpretative processes in which persons make connections between actions, experiences, and emotions. Narrative provides the tools to understand how people make sense of life, self, and world, and the consequences of meaning making.



This descriptive research activity of apprehending, in a more grounded and realistic light, what happens during development is a critical contribution in and of itself. Indeed, one way of viewing the significance of narrative for developmental psychology is fulfilling the goal of describing, and understanding, the phenomenon of development itself. The longstanding orientation toward understanding, *verstehen*, found in the writings of Max Weber, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Cohler's mentor, Gordon Allport, argues that the aim of the human sciences is to make intelligible, and knowable, the subjective bases of lived experience and the meaning of experience. Following in this tradition, narrative aspires to the epistemological goal of understanding, in contrast to the goal of prediction that underlies the vast majority of research in psychology and the social sciences.

Narrative offers developmental psychologists a window into the complexity of human lives, to comprehend the way that persons grow into meanings, how subjective construals of self and the world emerge over time, in conversation with significant others and under the sway of historical and cultural currents. By paying close attention to how persons interpret themselves, others, and the world, a narrative perspective allows for a nuanced description of developmental phenomena that accounts for the subjective experience of what life is like and what it means to me. But, this is just the beginning of the story. Narrative's insight into subjectivity helps us to understand several persistent lacunae in developmental knowledge.

First, narrative interpretation inserts a wild card in human development. Persons are actors in the creation of their own development, active in making interpretations, and then altering and revising the meaning of experience. This interpretative activity always has the potential to *re-set* development on a new course, rendering the orderly prediction of developmental outcomes a difficult, if not impossible, venture. Psychology continues to be plagued with questions about the predictive power of our analyses in which large portions of the data are left unaccounted for by our statistical models. What doesn't fit into our predictive equations, we label error variance. But, of course, error suggests that our models need to be rethought, and I believe expanded to incorporate the complex and particular manner by which persons "make life" and "make self." The solution is not better statistical models but complementary approaches that can account for human interpretation, which, in my estimation, is one of the major reasons why human lives are so uncertain but also so fascinating.

I am not suggesting that statistical models are not useful or worthy of our time and energy, but rather they can't account for all developmental phenomena. The interpretative, day in and day out recasting of experience, capitalizes on the possible and virtually ensures the unpredictability of outcomes. The narrative perspective is sensitive to these interpretative twists and turns, providing detailed insights into how development unfolds and how experiences are constantly reworked in order to arrive at outcomes that are unforeseeable. As Cohler (1982) argued, "the interpretative or narrative

approach is based on an assumption that lives change over time in ways not necessarily predictable" (p. 210). Once again, following Gergen's (1977) "aleatoric" model, Cohler (1982) wrote that "the course of life may be better understood as a series of . . . marked discontinuities in development, rather than as transformations in which later phases appear to emerge from earlier ones" (p. 214). Michael Lewis (1997), summarizing his views on short-term and long-term longitudinal research, has argued that "the best that can be said is that there sometimes is very limited support for the belief that earlier events are connected to later ones" (p. 52). The nonlinearity of human lives is due not only to chance events but also to the influence of interpretative activity, which has the ability to reimagine the past and present and set the future on a new path. Only by looking closely at how persons interpret their lives over time can we arrive at a more complete account of the capriciousness so characteristic of human lives.

Second, narrative is able to "personalize" developmental knowledge. As a part of psychological science, developmental psychology strives to account for generalizations beyond the persons being studied. But, we mistake "knowledge of the average" for "knowledge of the general" (Bakan, 1966; Lamiell, 2003). We aggregate information across a wide number of cases and analyze the means from these data, which we assume describe something real, in general, about individual trajectories. In a chapter aptly titled *Missing Persons*, Elliot Mishler (1996) argues that aggregation conceals the fact that advances and setbacks to developmental ends are part and parcel of any developmental process, including basic ones like cognitive, emotional, or identity development. We take the means from aggregated data and mistake the aggregates for individual developmental markers. The result is that development looks much more orderly, steplike, and linear than it actually is. Indeed, as we all know from our life experience, there are a great number of pathways to reach any developmental goal. And, when we start to investigate how persons interpret themselves and their past, we understand that advances, setbacks, lapses, and gaps are all a part of the developmental process. Life is much more messy and persons much more inconsistent than aggregated data allow us to imagine.

Although research remains on the level of the group average, there is no clear formula for applying knowledge derived from statistical aggregates to individual persons. Our aggregated data and statistical analyses translate badly back to persons. Sometimes the data do seem to help us understand the person sitting in front of us at the dinner table, the client in our clinical practice, or the person on the street. But, just as often, what the data mean for *this* person is limited and opaque. How does one translate averages back to a person?

When the numbers can't account for diversity in developmental trajectories, we are often left with the well-worn saw, "everyone is different." Although this is undoubtedly true, a narrative perspective can help us to move beyond an empty account of difference through the systematic

description of *how* and *why* differences are realized. Building theories from detailed observations of how persons interpret self and world, narrative perspectives document the variety of lifeways through development and provide insight into how interpretative strategies of reflecting on experience (Freeman, 2006) and positioning the self in conversation (Bamberg, 2004) shape the course of development.

Finally, narrative deserves a special place in developmental psychology because narrative interpretation is key to understanding basic problems in human development about how persons grow into meaning in order to *make life* and *make self*. As Cohler argued, we need to put this interpretative capacity in its correct context. Interpretation is personal but it is also temporal and social; development's story is always situated, interpretation is fused with the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of a particular time and place, at a definite stage in development and life experience, which is likewise situated in a conversational setting and in a cultural and historical horizon of meaning. In narrative, we come to understand persons, as who they are, as individuals with a particular life experience, making interpretations, imagining, and inhabiting notions about self and life. Such a thick picture of development is critical for advancing the project of understanding human beings and how our interpretative capacity works to cobble together a version of self, life, and world.

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