

Building a Useful Personality Psychology

Suzanne C. Ouellette

*Department of Psychology
Graduate School and University Center
City University of New York*

In keeping with McAdams's emphasis on context and his call to personality psychologists to take into account the "sociohistorical setting within which the person's life makes sense," I begin this commentary with a description of the situation I was in as I read his important new contribution to personality psychology. Very close by my "commentator me" was my "professor me." At hand—in terms of deadlines and the materials spread across my desk—were the attributes, tasks and goals, and identity (yes, all of McAdams's levels!) of the teacher preparing a syllabus for 1st-year graduate students in Social/Personality Psychology, a new required core course.

Ours is an academic setting in which the slash between social and personality is taken seriously. It stands for the *and* between the subdisciplines and recently led to the decision to replace with a single integrated social and personality course what, since the founding of the program, had been two separate core courses. Along with the challenge of providing students with a view of both the interface and the distinctiveness of the two enterprises, Michelle Fine, my collaborator in this new academic endeavor, and I faced the task of making the course meaningful to graduate students with action-oriented research agenda. Ours is a very diverse set of students committed to bringing social science theory and method out into the world. And the parts of the world they seek to explore are complex and understudied. Current student projects include studies of adolescents who are struggling to maintain what they call squats on abandoned sites in Manhattan's Lower East Side; gay men, lesbian women, and bisexuals seeking to express both their religious identities and their sexual orientations in a new kind of religious institution; and young people raised in Puerto Rican families on the mainland who return to Puerto Rico only to find themselves labeled *Nuyoricans* and possibly more marginalized there than they were in New York City.

What do I have to teach these students about personality psychology that will enhance the theoretical and methodological promise of a combined personality and social psychology and simultaneously support their particular research interests? This is the pressing question that accompanied my reading of the McAdams article. Its pedagogical challenge was made even more urgent by the postmodern shadow that now looms over

most academic settings. It is often difficult, in that shadow, to remain focused on any sort of empirical work and research that makes the individual person its primary object of study that is easily thrown up for grabs by the deconstructionist discourse.

In my sociohistorical setting as teacher, I found myself thanking Professor McAdams for easing the burden. His attempt to pull the complex subdiscipline of personality psychology together using his three-levels notion as well as his very friendly pass through a broadly defined personality research enterprise was and will continue to be very helpful. His integration of past and current personality work provides students with something to say in response to the question: "What is personality psychology?" Perhaps his article does not provide the full response, but it gives students who seek to work with social psychologists and other behavioral and social scientists some words to begin the dialogue. Heretofore, they have expressed feeling stymied by such a question. Maddi (1980) and others concerned with preserving the distinctiveness between various approaches to personality may accuse McAdams of naivete, indiscriminateness, or what Maddi criticized as "benevolent eclecticism". Nonetheless, McAdams's inviting researchers of all stripes to the personality table and seating of Big Five proponents right next to those who collect elaborate and idiographic life stories is a refreshing gesture in a field that has too often been mired in debates about who has the definitive approach to personality. Confronting a literature filled with conflicts that are not convincingly resolved, students like those in our program are tempted to turn away from the challenge of incorporating a personality question into an investigation of complex social behavior. McAdams's openness to a variety of personality approaches, coupled with his emphasis on context, engages these students in new ways of thinking about research.

To further McAdams's vision for a personality psychology that is in keeping with its times, there are several concerns that could usefully be pursued. What follows is a sketch of five kinds of questions to McAdams: his notion of levels—what exactly are these and how are they related to each other?; the struggling self—is this indeed so modern a notion?; the developmental setting for the self—can this be better elabo-

rated?; the I—where is it?; and the teller of the story—what roles do others, including the researcher, play in the self's construction of its story?

What Are These Three Levels?

The primary tool that McAdams uses to construct his framework for an integration of personality psychology is that of levels. Given its importance, it is troubling that the text does not contain a clear specification of what McAdams means when he says "level." At points in the manuscript, McAdams seems to be saying that a level is no more than a way of approaching the phenomena of personality psychology; at other times, he seems to mean more than that. In these latter cases, a level emerges as a representation of some reality inherent to the person. If McAdams intends his levels to be more than heuristic devices, he needs to elaborate his suggestion that levels are somehow constitutive of the individual.

Also, in introducing the levels, McAdams makes the claim that they are "relatively independent, nonoverlapping." But are they really? Again, one finds some ambiguity in the text. At times, McAdams seems to be saying that there are simply lots of different ways of thinking about personality, that some investigators use one level and others use another level, and that is all right because there is room for all. At other points, McAdams calls for an integration of levels and not simple coexistence. In those recommendations, one finds an assumption of hierarchy in levels and hears McAdams placing the levels on a scale of values. Given his equation of the movement from traits through tasks to stories with a growth in complexity and meaningfulness, there is no question about what is highest in the hierarchy for him. It is at these points in the text where one sees that what is most interesting is how the levels are not independent and nonoverlapping. One wants McAdams to say more than he does. One would like to hear what he has to say about such things as how certain kinds of traits might facilitate a particular kind of holding of projects or how specific goals in life might support certain kinds of stories and interfere with the telling of others about self.

Is the Self Really So Modern?

Relying a good deal on Baumeister (1986) and Giddens (1991), the sociologist, McAdams strongly associates the struggles after a sense of self or identity with the modern and postmodern periods. In his depiction, before the Industrial Revolution, people did not agonize the way we do now over their individuality or lack of

it. It is certainly in the spirit of Freud, Jung, Murray, Allport, and the other founding figures of personality psychology to give a nod to history and to take advantage of insights from other disciplines. McAdams is also to be commended for just raising the question about whether or not contemporary personality psychology addresses the real problems of the world. One worries, however, about the narrowness of both his historical sweep and use of other disciplines.

Some very convincing work has been done by classicists, medieval scholars, and historians to support a much earlier emergence of the individual. Morris (1972/1987), for example, documented the preoccupation with notions such as self-discovery and self-expression as the most important cultural development of the period from 1050 to 1200. He found the roots for this phenomenon within the earlier classical period. Others have written poignantly about anxiety and the search for self in the early Christian and Hellenistic periods (Dodds, 1965; Jonas, 1958). Yet another scholar, Weintraub (1978), a cultural historian, aptly demonstrated the value of asking about where individuality emerges and where and why it does not across a wide sweep of history. I am not requiring of McAdams or any of my students that they master all of this scholarly material; I'm only asking that they take care not too quickly to simplify our human past and thereby miss the opportunity provided by documents produced before what we know as the modern period to learn something important about personality in society.

Just as one would encourage students and others to take more care about when one starts to look for the self than McAdams does here, one would urge caution about where one looks for self. McAdams suggests that there may be class differences with regard to the struggle after the self. I think his assumption that those of higher socioeconomic status would be, when compared with those receiving lower scores on these demographic indicators, more likely to be preoccupied with constructing an explicit and integrated story about self is an assumption sorely in need of empirical test. It may very well be that categories such as class, educational level, race, ethnicity, and gender have important implications for the language that one uses to express concerns about self and even for some fundamental processes of self-understanding. But I find it unlikely that these implications will be so simple as to suggest a simple breakdown into those struggling after stories about self and those not struggling according to class.

Reading McAdams leaves one with a clear message about the necessary next research steps. We need to know more than what we now do about how a variety of different kinds of people, for themselves, tell the stories that McAdams finds so definitive of personality.

McAdams has effectively provided us with his own framework for identity stories. Elsewhere (McAdams, 1993), he has told us about the stories of many of his research participants who appear to represent only particular segments of our very diverse society. We need to elaborate these phenomenological methods in socioculturally sensitive ways and bring them to studies with more individuals in many different kinds of groups.

What About the Developmental Setting?

In describing the link between identity stories and personality development, McAdams draws primarily on Erikson. Given the latter's contribution to the study of identity, this is not surprising yet one needs also to recognize the relevance of many other theorists. The current emphasis on the long-neglected (in this country) contributions of Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1929/1973), some very recent work in Developmental Psychology—especially that inspired by Vygotsky and Bakhtin, and other commentaries on identity could usefully enhance McAdams's perspective. For example, McAdams sees little of interest with regard to identity stories in developmental periods before that of midadolescence. Daiute (Daiute & Griffin, 1993), however, who studied very young children in school settings, places the children's own stories at the very center of her investigation. Within their provocative narratives, she discovers not only how knowledge develops in young children, but also keys to understanding their emotional experiences and the critical interplay between their developing personalities and the cultures of which they are part.

One would also like to see a filling out of the developmental aspects of McAdams's identity stories at later parts of the life cycle. He ascribes to young adulthood the "consolidation of an ideological setting" and finds there a "now-taken-for granted landscape of personal belief and value." Although I question many parts of Gergen's (1992) and Lifton's (1994) depictions of the state of the contemporary adult, I am sufficiently provoked by their arguments for the multiplicity and protean dimensions of self to ask whether identity really can be as clear and neat as McAdams seems to suggest it is by the time of young adulthood. There are many things in our popular culture that keep us from such clarity and the identity researcher would want to remain open to hearing the ups and downs of the struggle after clarity that young adulthood stories might contain. Finally, I would want to stretch McAdams's conceptualization of the very last part of the life cycle. He seems

to leave little room for the entry of critically new elements in the identity stories of the elderly; instead, he has them retelling elements of earlier stories. There are too many examples in autobiographies and biographies of major change in identity stories in late life to neglect them in personality research.

Where Is the I?

As McAdams elaborates the now infamous I-Me distinction, it is clear that the I is a major player. Nonetheless, in the target article, the I seems always to be backstage. McAdams's review of each of the levels, and the methods personality psychologists use to collect and analyze data on each of the levels, reveals a great deal about the Me. But when do we get to watch the I in action, and can McAdams not help us to develop more systematic ways of studying the I? For example, as McAdams described the instructional value of stories, he had the instruction making a difference in external aspects or products of the self. Yet is not story telling a very self-reflexive process, and might it not be the case that as one tells a story about self, something changes in the I as well as the Me? It may be useful here to juxtapose McAdams's work with the recent empirical and theoretical efforts of Hermans (1993, 1995) on what he called the dialogical self. In the latter's work, one finds an explicit concern with processes of the self and an approach to James's I and Me.

Who Is Telling the Story?

An important guiding principle for those contemporary psychologists inspired by the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin is that every story one hears, although spoken by a single individual, represents a multitude of voices. As I speak, you hear my grandfather who was a very effective storyteller, my students' questions, the ideas of others that I have just read, and many other contributors. These many voices that we all speak can work in concert; but at some times and places, they can be very much in conflict. McAdams does state, at several points in the text, that there are interpersonal, social, cultural, and political constraints placed on the story that any particular person can tell about himself or herself. But I fear that he does not fully appreciate the power of these. The absence of the influence of contextual factors is especially striking as he discusses what makes up a good story.

One very strong case for the point that some individuals' have their stories drastically limited by the setting in which they find themselves—limited to the

extent that one would have to say that their stories are being told for them by others—is made in a new collection of the work of Martin-Baro (1994). Writing from the perspective of a social psychologist working with the poor in El Salvador, Martin-Baro described how the government in El Salvador, in collaboration with our own and often with the help of fundamentalist religious groups, imposed identity stories on the people of that country. These stories included those about the lazy Latin and those about people who suffer hunger and other tragedies in this life but who, if they suffer them silently, will meet their reward in the next life. In Martin-Baro's terms, this is the kind of story that "limits the possibility of developing a personality according to the social and personal options freely exercised by each individual" (p. 132). I am sure that this kind of shaping of stories goes on in parts of our society as well as in El Salvador. The personality psychologist needs to be prepared to hear that kind of influence and to be able to evaluate the extent to which it has influenced the criteria that McAdams associates with a good story, its coherence, credibility, and differentiation.

One also needs to ask about the role of the researcher in the creation and use of another's story. Martin-Baro explicitly defines the researcher's role as that which includes providing research participants with data through which they are helped to develop a more accurate story of who they are in the world. The researcher goes beyond being a mere recorder of the story. This is not so different from a point made many years ago by Sanford, who characterized an interview as action research in which the interviewee, as well as interviewer, are changed by the experience. Reflecting on all of this work, I am compelled to ask McAdams how he understands his role in the generation of the stories he collects and how he thinks about what will happen next for his research participants, once they have told him their stories.

Notes

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Suzanne C. Ouellette, Department of Psychology, Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036-8003.

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The Units We Should Employ

Daniel J. Ozer

*Department of Psychology
University of California, Riverside*

It has been nearly 40 years since Allport (1958) asked "What units shall we employ?" for the description of personality, but he could only express bewilderment over the many possible choices (he listed 10 broad classes of nomothetic units) and proffer general encour-

agement and the specific suggestion that idiographic analyses of personality might prove worthwhile. Allport's question remains a challenge to all who would study personality. Given the absence of disciplinary-wide consensus and the impossibility of simultaneously

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