The Objectivity of Persons and Their Lives: A Noble Dream for Personality Psychology?

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What are the required ingredients of a contemporary framework for personality psychology? McAdams offers us the triad of personality traits, personal concerns, and personal life stories as basic means of scientifically knowing persons and their lives.

These comments highlight two additional and necessary components of a framework for modern personality psychology, which are not incompatible with McAdams's broadly sketched formulation but appear to be neglected, at least in this presentation of it. Specifically, the close analysis of personal life stories, a major achievement of McAdams's research program, must be supplemented by attention to community-generated life stories about an individual as well as objectivity-aspiring life history analyses.

I. Community-Generated Life Stories

Preliminary estimates point to about 3,000 to 6,000 acquaintances for an average person's lifelong social network, a range that applies to inhabitants of rural Mediterranean villages (Boissevain, 1974), to a well-known social scientist at a major technological university (Pool & Kochen, 1978), and to residents of Orange County, California (Freeman & Thompson, 1989). Adding a stipulation of some minimal degree of interconnectedness—that is, the extent to which individuals who know the person also know each other—would notably reduce this estimated size of the typical modern person's social network. Postindustrial urban individuals live within their own relatively small, potentially specifiable, idiographic communities (Craik, 1985; Emler, 1990). Of course, through the aid of advanced communication and transportation, their network members may be more geographically dispersed than those of Mediterranean villagers (Benedikt, 1992; Webber, 1963).

Thus, despite the many distinctive features of modern life that McAdams incisively addresses in terms of their implications for subjective selfhood, present-day persons continue to reside within relatively small, idiographic "villages," however spatially scattered and thinly interconnected some of them might be. Between McAdams's rather unknowing strangers on the one hand, and the self's intimate experience of inner concerns and personal stories on the other, falls the individual's own lifelong array of knowing community members—relatives, lovers, friends, fellow students, co-workers, group members, neighbors, local shopkeepers, and so forth.

These community members know other persons not only via personality traits, but primarily in terms of their life deeds and declarations. Indeed, personality traits can be viewed as simply one form of summary statement by observers concerning long-term and even lifelong trends in a person's specific acts and expressions (Buss & Craik, 1983). Furthermore, persons are known in their community in part through their recounting of one or, typically, several editions of their personal life stories (Gergen, 1994).

A community-oriented approach to personality and the study of lives recognizes the public standing of persons and the requirement that a full-fledged framework for personality psychology treat persons as community members as well as self-reflexive agents of integrated action (Craik, 1993a). This approach attempts to balance Stagner's (1937) treatment of the individual within society against the predominant emphasis throughout personality psychology's history that has favored Allport's (1937) restricted focus on the individual transcendent (Craik, 1993b).

Whose life story is it, anyway? We emerge as infants into our own preexisting community of storytellers. For example, conversations around collections of family photographs offer one occasion for parents to convey to their children stories of their offsprings' early years (Middleton & Edwards, 1990). Thus, our community's versions of our life narrative have commenced long before we begin to develop our own personal life stories.

In Jean Anouilh's (1967/1936) play, *Traveller Without Luggage,* a World War I soldier seemingly suffering from amnesia is taken from his hospital to the estate of his probable family. He learns from household members that he was cruel to animals, had cheated on an examination, had crippled his boyhood friend by pushing him down a flight of stairs, had bilked an old family friend out of funds, had had an affair with his sister-in-law while his older brother was off to the war, and was not on speaking terms with his mother when he himself left for the warfront. Alarmed and repelled, the hero

exclaims: "for a man without a memory, an entire past is too heavy to take onto one's back at one go" (p. 159). Anouilh's other, equally central message is that, amnesia or not, the soldier's past had continued to exist socially in stories about his life provided by various family members and servants, who will now expect him to accept or accommodate them into his own.

Beyond childhood, then, community witnesses to an individual's life continue to generate and share alternative or corrective narratives of it concurrently with the person's own life stories. Through both benign and poisonous forms of gossip, chat, and other informal modes of communication, accounts of a person's expressions and deeds circulate through shared social networks and contribute to the individual's reputation or collective representation in the community (Bailey, 1971; Bergmann, 1993; Bromley, 1993; Craik, 1990).

Even when a person's own life storytelling comes to an end, community-generated life stories may well continue, in the form of eulogies, family recollections, reminiscences among acquaintances, biographies, and so forth. Indeed, along with those causal effects of a person's actions that may persist beyond death, community-generated life stories represent a major facet of the enduring personality of an individual. As Mowrer and Kluckhohn (1944) noted:

> That there is a genuine distinction between an individual as "an integrate in action" and his "reputation" is indicated perhaps most decisively by the fact that when an individual dies, "personality" in the first sense comes to an end, but in the second sense it may continue or even grow for centuries. (p. 77)

The dynamics of commemoration, gossip, scandal, and reputation management have played no small role in the development of biography as well as autobiography (Hamilton, 1992; Holmes, 1993; Spacks, 1985; Whitfield, 1978).

Thus, in attending to the person as both community member and self-reflexive agent of integrated action, we identify two complementary modes of life stories: the community-generated life story and the personal life story. The relations between them warrant systematic examination. For example, how would a stratified sample of members of a given individual's idiographic social network generate life narratives of a common acquaintance, guided by McAdams's (1993) life story interview procedure? What areas of overlap, temporal fragmentation, degree of consensus, and points of convergence and divergence would be found in comparing community-generated life narratives of a given person with each other and with that individual's own personal life story?

II. Objectivity-Aspiring Individual Life-History Analyses

Runyan (1982) clearly distinguished between the study of life stories recounted by the persons themselves and the quite different analysis of "the life history as a subject matter, namely, the sequence of events and experiences in a life from birth until death" (p. 6). Kaplan (1991) stressed the many difficulties in ascertaining whether or how causal linkages in the life history of the person also play a role in the generation of specific life stories and his skepticism that somehow the person can reveal the causal determinants of life history via the life story.

Presumably, individual life history analysis aspires to be historical. To treat a person's life as history entails more than producing a narrative account of it. In recent decades, the narrative has been recognized as an important but severely problematic instrument of historical scholarship (Mink, 1978). Moreover, specific narrative products of historical inquiry must be distinguished sharply from its distinctive scholarly processes. Even Hayden White, a leading analyst of the narrative mode of historiographic representation (Kransteiner, 1993; White, 1992), recently emphasized this much wider combination of historical research activities, cognitive tools, and modes of discourse that generates historical knowledge.

Historical knowledge, according to Pompa (1990), constitutes a consensually received but evolving system of beliefs about the past, open to continuing scrutiny and shared by mutually critical scholars alert to the risk of bias. This collective process is sensitive to the selective survival of records and evidence and is marked by a commitment to chronological and causal accounts, to textual skepticism, and to the use of distinctive modes of analyzing evidence, such as attention to corroboration, sourcing, and context (Lowenthal, 1985; Novick, 1988; Wineburg, 1991). Within this distinctive communal process of inquiry, not in its specific narrative products, resides the aspiration to historical objectivity that, according to Novick (1988), continues to be the "noble dream" of most practicing historians.

How can these aspirations, processes, and standards be applied to the analysis of individual life histories? Without doubt, Murray (1938) set a daunting agenda by identifying the life history of the individual as "the long unit" (p. 39) of psychology. The enterprise requires a community of scholars sustaining a shared inquiry into specific individual lives. Unfortunately, popular biography has long been a highly individualized craft; biographers tend to move from one subject to another; and the huge research files gathered by the new guild of investigative biographers, although impressive, may

not be open and accessible to other scholars (Kelley, 1986; Weinstein, 1992). However, academic biographers within such fields as history, literature, and political science do tend to generate Pomparian processes of historical inquiry directed to individual lives. The recent advent of journals such as *Biography, Journal of Narrative and Life History,* and *Narrative Study of Lives* has broadened the institutional infrastructure and range of participants for these activities, drawing in part on the archives of thick-descriptive longitudinal research programs (Hulbert & Schuster, 1993). Indicators of this historical process of inquiry include the close focus on delimited questions concerning an individual life (Elms, 1994), critical debate concerning key events or interpretations in a life (e.g., George & George, 1981–1982; Weinstein, Anderson, & Link, 1978–1979), and efforts to delineate criteria for systematically gauging progress in our understanding of individual life histories (Runyan, 1988).

If individual life history analysis is a form of history, then what is the status of personal life stories? Lowenthal (1996) has drawn an instructive contrast between history and heritage. In his formulation, the purpose of heritage is the construction of a past that advances the ideals of group allegiance and pride in an imagined past, whereas history is dedicated to ideals of truth and impartiality. Heritage embellishes on the good and valued aspects of the group's past. Heritage tends to be exclusive and geared to the current social uses of a constructed past for strengthening group identity and enhancing group morale, whereas history, in the Pomparian view, seeks an open and testable truth concerning the past. Consequently, heritage tolerates anachronisms and readily invents, upgrades, forgets, and excludes accounts of events. The preferred medium of heritage is vivid depiction, whereas that of history is consensually established evidence.

This is not the place for a full examination of the "heritage" characteristics of personal life stories. However, McAdams (1993) delineated the functions of personal life stories in promoting an individual's identity and sustaining self-esteem, whereas Greenwald (1980) depicted a highly selective, ego-supportive process in the construction of the personal past. Thus, grounds can be established to support the analogy that individual life history analyses are to history as personal life stories are to heritage.

III. The Objectivity of Persons and Their Lives

Although persons and their lives constitute ontologically subjective entities of social reality, they can be described through judgments that are epistemically either subjective or objective (Searle, 1995). The contrast between epistemic subjectivity and objectivity is a matter of degree, depending on the independence of judgments from anybody's attitudes, feelings, or point of view. In this sense, community-generated life stories about a person can be viewed as relatively less objective than individual life history analyses concerning the same person. At a minimum, community members, in their life stories about a person, do not aspire to objectivity in the same fashion as life history analysts do. Indeed, the former may intend to achieve bolstering or defaming effects on the person's reputation (Argyle, 1984; Buss & Dedden, 1990; Carter-Ruch & Walker, 1985; Goode, 1978).

Nevertheless, McAdams's attention to the credibility of personal life stories offers one opening for incorporating both community-generated life stories and individual life history analyses within his framework for personality psychology. That is, the need for such outside criteria can be seen in his acknowledgment that "the good, mature, and adaptive life story cannot be based on gross distortions of fact" and "should be accountable to the facts that can be known or found out."

McAdams's further requirement that the study of persons and their lives be grounded in their sociohistorical setting offers a second opening for accommodating objectivity-aspiring life history analyses within his proposed framework for our field. His formulation aims at "understanding individual persons as they exist in history and in culture." To do so will entail not only situating persons objectively in history but also analyzing each of their lives objectively as history.

IV. Conclusions

Although clearly not incompatible with McAdams's contemporary framework for personality psychology, community-generated life stories and individual life history analyses do more than merely provide a check on the credibility and context of an individual's personal life story. Beyond that, they offer a strong basis for seeking objectivity for personality psychology and constitute, in their own right, fundamental means of knowing persons and their lives that importantly complement the personality traits, personal concerns, and personal life stories central to McAdams's formulation.

Notes

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College, London, concerning the comparative analysis of accounts of the individual and collective past. My special thanks to him for a preview of his forthcoming *Possessed by the Past.* Thanks also to my Berkeley colleague, Gerald A. Mendelsohn, for alerting me to Anouilh's *Traveler Without Luggage.*

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Bridging Traits, Story, and Self: Prospects and Problems

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In his target article, McAdams brings together three domains in the field of psychology in which challenging developments have been observed over the past decades: trait psychology, narrative psychology, and culture. Trait psychology has been rejuvenated by cross-national and cross-cultural research projects on the "Big Five." The narrative approach has cropped up in a great diversity of psychological subdisciplines, including personality psychology, and is on its way to being accepted as a respected development in academic psychology. The notion of culture has also received enormous interest, particularly in discussions around modernity and postmodernity and their implications for psychology as a science. Scientists in and outside psychology are becoming aware that culture is implicit not only in their personal views, but also in the theories and concepts that form the basis of their professional activities. McAdams's contribution has the merit that it provides an intriguing conceptual framework that aims at integrating a diversity of psychological developments that interact in many ways, but that have never been analyzed on their mutual implications from a metatheoretical point of view.

Centrifugal Versus Centripetal Forces in Psychology

To underscore the relevance and prospect of McAdams's proposal, it may be clarifying to locate his contribution in the context of the history of psychology as a discipline. As Altman (1987) proposed, a distinction can be made between centripetal forces (working toward unity and integration) and centrifugal forces (working toward differentiation and specialization). In every period in the history of psychology, centrifugal and centripetal forces have been present simultaneously. Despite this simultaneity, Altman argued that there are many indications that they are also alternately dominant in successive periods. He distinguished three periods: (a) the pre-1900 period, which was primarily centrifugal; (b) the period from 1900 to 1960, in which centripetal forces were at work; and (c) the period from 1960 to the present, in which centrifugal forces are predominant.

Altman (1987) observed strong centrifugal trends in psychological studies in the pre-1900 period. The main reason was that early scholars of psychology were often to be found in various disciplines, such as philosophy, medicine, biology, or with no discipline at all. In that time there were no psychology departments, and early scholars explored psychological phenomena in an independent and noninstitutional fashion. As a consequence, there was little sense of a defined field of psychology with common values, methods, and approaches.

At the beginning of the second period, a variety of theoretical views manifested themselves as competing paradigms in the field of psychology, such as structuralism, functionalism, instinct theory, gestalt approaches, and behaviorism. Eventually, the behaviorist perspective, in its variants, became most dominant in American psychology. Although there were many differences among these variants, they collectively provided a unifying, centripetal anchor for psychology in