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Narrative and the Social Construction of Adulthood

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Abstract

This chapter develops three points of elaboration and theoretical expansion upon Cohler's (1982) treatise on personal narrative and life course. First, we highlight Cohler's emphasis on an interpretive, idiographic approach to the study of lives and reveal the radicalism of this approach, particularly in its ability to interrogate the lived experience of social categorization. Second, we link Cohler's position directly to cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and consider the link between inner and social speech through the idea of narrative engagement. Finally, following Cohler's life course perspective on human development, we suggest that adulthood is best conceived as a cultural discourse to which individuals orient their personal narratives through a dynamic process of narrative engagement rather than a clearly demarcated life stage. Emerging adulthood is linked to cultural and economic processes of globalization in the 21st century and challenges static notions of social roles traditionally associated with compulsory heterosexuality (e.g., marriage and parenthood). Narrative processes in emerging adulthood occur through both situated storytelling and the formation of a life story that provides coherence and social meaning, both of which have key implications for social stasis and change. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

... There are no events or facts regarding lives which are independent of interpretations which are made of them—just as, in studying history more generally, concern is with the adequacy of the narrative or interpretation, rather than with the actuality of the events.

Cohler (1982, p. 228)

Martin Duberman, the scholar and pioneer of early gay and lesbian studies, was born in 1930 and experienced early adulthood in the 1950s and early 1960s—a time in which the gay and lesbian civil rights movement was emerging but before the Stonewall riots that brought national visibility (Duberman, 1993). He experienced adulthood and developed an understanding of his sexual identity at a time in which homosexuality remained a diagnosable mental illness. Describing his early adulthood, Duberman (1991) said, “We accepted as given that we as homosexuals could never reach ‘full adult maturity’ . . . : marrying, settling down, having a family” (p. 344). Like many gay men of his generation, Duberman struggled in early adulthood to construct a personal narrative consistent with dominant cultural expectations for the life course.

Today’s young adults with same-sex desire, in contrast to those of Duberman’s generation, inhabit a world of increasing rights and recognition (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). The dominant cultural narrative of an acceptable adult life in many nations has expanded to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals. While LGBTs continue to experience discrimination and harassment in many nations, in the United States and elsewhere a master narrative of sickness and deviance has given way to the idea of sexual and gender identity diversity as “normative” facts of social and cultural life (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Hammack, Mayers, & Windell, 2013). A heterosexual union is no longer considered inevitable, and the intrinsic link between adulthood and heterosexuality has eroded to accommodate sexual and gender identity diversity in the 21st century. With this cultural shift, the process of human development through engagement with master narratives of social categories suggests new possibilities for self-understanding in adulthood (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Cohler’s (1982) idea of human development as a process of *interpretive activity*, always situated in a particular time and place, is illustrated.

In this chapter, we revisit Cohler’s (1982) theoretical treatise on personal narrative and life course, with a focus on its implications for the social construction of adulthood in the 21st century. We develop three points of elaboration and expansion. First, we highlight the radicalism in Cohler’s (1982) commitment to a person-centered approach to the study of lives that, with its idiographic foundation (Allport, 1937), challenges the essentialism inherent in much research in personality and social psychology, particularly with regard to social categories (Gjerde, 2004; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Second, we expand upon Cohler's (1982) idea of human development as a process of reconstructive activity conducted through personal narrative. We link Cohler's (1982) approach, originally anchored in psychoanalytic theory, to Vygotsky's (1978) cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). We suggest that a key addition to Cohler's (1982) theoretical approach requires the examination of the link between what Vygotsky (1978) calls *social speech* and *inner speech* and what we call *master narratives* and *personal narratives* (see also Hammack, 2008, 2011a, 2011b). The result is a process of *narrative engagement* (Hammack & Cohler, 2009), rather than *personal narrative construction*, which better describes the dynamic, dialogic process through which reconstructive, interpretive activity occurs.

Finally, we highlight Cohler's (1982) *life course* or *sociogenic* perspective on human development (see also Dannefer, 1984; Elder, 1998) suggesting that adulthood represents a cultural discourse always associated with historical time and place (see also Schiff, Chapter 1 of this volume). We suggest that the contemporary discourse on adulthood in the 21st century in much of the world is linked to the larger social and economic context of late capitalism and globalization (e.g., Arnett, 2002) and that the meaning of adulthood has shifted considerably since the writing of Cohler's (1982) essay. The emergence of a newly demarcated period in the life course, *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000, 2004), reveals the social construction of adulthood. We posit that narrative processes in emerging adulthood are key to the social construction of memory and identity, with implications for both individual development and social stasis and change.

Narrative as Interpretive Activity

The sense of stability and consistency which is experienced over time results primarily from continuing reconstructive activity leading to the maintenance of a particular personal narrative of the life course, rather than a consequence of constancy of development. (Cohler, 1982, p. 205)

In our theoretical expansion of Cohler's (1982) concept of personal narrative, we first highlight the radical potential of his original theory for the study of lives. We then link his perspective to the CHAT approach to human development. This expansion is consistent with Cohler's later work in which he sought to link personal narratives of gay identity to social practice (e.g., Cohler, 2007; Cohler & Hammack, 2006).

First, Cohler's (1982) call for an interpretive approach to the study of lives presents a radical challenge to psychological and developmental science, both at the time of his writing and today (McAdams, Chapter 5 of this volume; Schiff, Chapter 1 of this volume). In contrast to perspectives on human development which emphasized normative sequences of "ages and stages" (e.g., Piaget, 1933/1954), Cohler (1982) redefined human

development as a process of personal narrative construction across the life course. Individuals make meaning of life events, including events linked to biological maturation and social processes, by constructing a coherent story with an intelligible timeline (i.e., a beginning, middle, and end; see Habermas & Hatiboğlu, Chapter 3 of this volume; McAdams, Chapter 5 of this volume) and content linked to “socially shared definitions” (p. 205). “The personal narrative which is recounted at any point in the course of life represents the most internally consistent interpretation of presently understood past, experienced present, and anticipated future at that time” (p. 207).

According to Cohler (1982), the study of personal narrative development across the life course represents a more appropriate approach to the study of lives since it more closely interrogates lived experience in contrast to positivist approaches to the study of personality: “This interpretive approach to the study of the person parallels the approach actually used by persons in the successive interpretations or reconstructions of their own history as a personal narrative across the course of life” (p. 229). The conception of human development as a process of narrative meaning making reveals the dynamic, unpredictable nature of development and challenges the idea of normativity itself (see also McAdams, Chapter 5 of this volume; Schiff, Chapter 1 of this volume), as well as framing development in terms of narrative practices (Miller, Chen, & Olivarez, Chapter 2 of this volume) rather than particular “outcomes.” This approach thus reverses the relationship between scientific discourse and lived experience, with the former derived from the latter.

The liberatory effect of this move, and of a more interpretive approach to the study of lives in general, is significant. Rather than social categories and their associated normative expectations reifying experience (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), lived experience itself informs our understanding of both social categories and developmental processes more broadly. This interpretive approach reverses the historic hegemony associated with an ontogenetic approach to human development (Dannefer, 1984), in which lived experience is discarded and a disembodied subject is placed within established aggregate frameworks (e.g., traits; see Mishler, 1996). Particularly for individuals inhabiting social categories of historic subordination or exclusion (e.g., racial and sexual minorities, women), this reversal of scientific analysis from “top-down” to “bottom-up” is significant because scientists no longer collude in the reification of social categories but rather are able to critically interrogate social categorization itself as a process of power and control (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Cohler’s (1982) interpretive stance toward human development also provides a link to contemporaneous moves in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies that emphasized meaning and context in human action (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987; Ricoeur, 1984). Thus, Cohler’s (1982) approach sought to link the study of lives more directly to fields of knowledge production

concerned less with prediction and control than with human understanding (see Bruner, 1990).

Our second point of elaboration and theoretical expansion centers on Cohler's (1982) notion of the personal narrative not as a "product" of human development but rather as a process of ongoing "reconstructive activity" (p. 205). This view of narrative reveals an alignment between Cohler and theorists in the CHAT tradition such as Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Vygotsky (1978) challenged the dominant view in developmental science of sequential stages, instead positing that development proceeds through mediated social practice—activity that occurs in a particular cultural environment and relies upon the material world of the developing person (e.g., cultural tools, including language). Vygotsky's (1934/1962) view on language as itself a form of social practice has a direct link to Cohler's (1982) narrative theory, as Vygotsky argues that *internalization of speech* represents psychological activity that guides development. According to Vygotsky, we develop *inner speech* through this process, and this inner speech can be conceptualized as a process of personal narrative construction, since that speech often assumes a narrative form.

Cohler (1982) importantly notes that personal narratives are formed in relation to "socially shared definitions," a claim that calls attention to another aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) CHAT that emphasizes the idea of *social speech*. Vygotsky and other theorists associated with CHAT (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981) highlight the way in which language is always tied to the ideological positions of a particular verbal community. In Bakhtin's (1981) words, "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (p. 294). Similar to Foucault's (1980) views on discourse and power, CHAT theorists view language as inherently politicized, always possessing implications for an existing configuration of power in society. The process of *appropriation* (Bakhtin, 1981) or *internalization* (Vygotsky, 1978) is thus not simply personal but rather fundamentally political in its link to power relations.

To provide a concrete example, Hammack (2011a) has illustrated how the personal narratives of Israelis and Palestinians appropriate elements of master narratives of identity that reproduce the stalemate of conflict between them. Jewish Israeli youth construct personal narratives that assume a redemptive form (McAdams & Bowman, 2001) and thematic content associated with historic persecution and victimization, contemporary existential insecurity, exceptionalism, and delegitimization of Palestinians (Hammack, 2011a). Palestinian youth construct personal narratives that assume a contaminated (McAdams & Bowman, 2001) or tragic form and thematic content associated with collective loss and land dispossession, contemporary existential insecurity, resistance, and delegitimization of Zionism (Hammack, 2011a). The voices of young Palestinians and Israelis are "populated," to use Bakhtin's (1981) term, with the intentions of others.

Personal narrative as human activity is hence best understood as a social process of dynamic engagement with existing tools, gestures, and symbolic forms such as language, all of which are tied to ideological positions and bring implications not just for individual development but also for history and politics.

Linking Cohler's (1982) narrative theory to CHAT allows us to theorize a process of *narrative engagement* (Hammack, 2011b; Hammack & Cohler, 2009) in which narrative is conceptualized not as a product of human development but as a form of situated activity in line with Cohler's (1982) original proposition. The idea of narrative engagement highlights the ongoing negotiation between social speech and inner speech that may be accessible but highly variable at different moments in a person's life, depending upon social, historical, and biological events that may not, as Cohler (1982) argues, assume a predictable pattern. The point is to interrogate this process as it occurs and to derive insights into human development that recognize the significance of context and meaning, rather than to derive a set of lawful regularities associated with the decontextualized aims of a positivist, rather than interpretive, human science (Hammack, 2011b; see also Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987).

In Cohler's (2007) later work examining the personal narratives of distinct generation cohorts of gay men, he adopts this theoretical view of personal narratives as linked to social practice and to master narratives of gay identity circulating at the time of development. For example, gay men like Duberman, born in the 1930s, constructed personal narratives in early adulthood characterized by the internalization of stigma, whereas gay men born in the 1940s and 1950s engaged with a narrative of gay liberation and new forms of social practice that resulted in distinct processes of personal narrative development (Cohler, 2007; Hammack & Cohler, 2011). These narratives have implications for history and politics, as new generations of LGBTs engage with discourses that challenge existing sexual and gender identity categories (e.g., Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009). An important expansion of Cohler's (1982) original theory, then, centers on the significance of master narratives in the interpretive activity of personal narrative development.

We have identified two points of theoretical expansion of Cohler's (1982) original position on personal narratives. First, we suggested that the emphasis on interrogation of lived experience has the potential to reverse the relationship between positivist developmental science and the meaning-making process of human lives. Rather than reifying social categories and human traits by imposing the lens of these concepts on lives in progress, Cohler's (1982) interpretive approach suggests that we derive our understanding of categories of human understanding from the active process of personal narration. Second, we suggested that Cohler's (1982) interpretive approach relies upon a view of development through mediated activity, chiefly engagement with the discourse and language existing in a

particular verbal community at a particular historical moment. As individuals appropriate or repudiate existing forms of discourse through their ongoing reconstructive activity, they participate in a larger process of social reproduction or change, always with implications for an existing configuration of power in society. This idea represents a strong subtext within Cohler's (1982) original essay, which focuses decidedly more on the person than on society, but an explicit link to social theory that emphasizes language, discourse, and power enhances the theoretical vision and speaks to his later work on gay identity (e.g., Cohler, 2007).

Adulthood in Social and Historical Time

Assumption of adult roles provides the possibility for further elaboration of the personal narrative, as transformed through the resolution of the identity crisis of adolescence. The elements of this narrative are tested, in particular, by the assumption of parenthood. (Cohler, 1982, p. 221)

A narrative approach to the study of lives suggests not only that individual lives are based upon ongoing interpretive activity, but also that the human life course is itself a matter of collective interpretive activity. Hence, the very ideas of *childhood*, *adolescence*, or *adulthood* represent discourses of human interpretation. The meaning of these moments in the life span is socially situated and varies across time and place (e.g., Aries, 1960/1962; Elder, 1974; Erikson, 1950; Kett, 1977; Lieblich, Chapter 6 of this volume; Neugarten, 1996). Our third point of elaboration centers on Cohler's (1982) commitment to a *life course* perspective on human development which views lives as intimately linked to cultural, historic, and economic contexts (e.g., Elder, 1974; see Schiff, Chapter 1 of this volume). We suggest that adulthood itself ought, through this theoretical lens, to be conceived not as an inevitable moment of biological maturation but rather as a social and cultural discourse to which individuals orient their personal narratives.

Strongly influenced by Elder (1974) and Neugarten (1979), Cohler (1982) situates his theory in the *life course*, rather than traditional *life span*, perspective in developmental science (see Elder, 1998). The life span paradigm traditionally associated with developmental psychology takes an *ontogenetic* perspective emphasizing individual processes with only a superficial account of context (Dannefer, 1984). A *sociogenic* perspective accords more weight to context and to the self-society link (Dannefer, 1984). Cohler's (1982) life course approach is consistent with a sociogenic perspective that recognizes adulthood not as a biological phenomenon of aging but as a form of human social organization intended to provide both intelligibility for individual lives and a mechanism for social reproduction. Hence,

Cohler's (1982) account places matters of history and historical timing at the center.

The life course is therefore a matter of ongoing interpretation, as the social and economic needs of societies shift with human invention and cultural practices (e.g., Dannefer, 2003). With the rise of industrialism came a longer period of delay for entry into the workforce, a subsequent longer period of schooling, and the establishment of the concept of *adolescence* as its own distinct life stage marking the transition between childhood and adulthood (Kett, 1977). The meaning of adulthood has also shifted radically with social and economic change, with the nature of late capitalism characterized by an even longer period of delay for entry into certain forms of labor involved in an information-based economy (Arnett, 2000; Shanahan, 2000). These social and economic shifts have resulted in another new stage of the life course dubbed *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2011). Emerging adulthood represents a period in which many in postindustrial societies extend their education and delay milestones that previously occurred at younger ages, such as marriage and parenthood. Rather than identity being "resolved" or "achieved" at the end of adolescence (Cohler, 1982; Erikson, 1950), it remains an ongoing project, assuming significance in emerging adulthood as matters of love, work, and social position assume prominence (Arnett, 2004).

Our point here is that adulthood, like all periods of the human life course, represents a cultural discourse that impinges upon the individual's ongoing process of reconstructive activity in the personal narrative. Here, we expand upon Cohler's (1982) discussion of adulthood, which has relatively little to say about the personal narrative in adulthood beyond the significance of parenthood, to suggest that the very idea of adulthood and adult status in a society is associated with normative roles and expectations that command particular forms of generativity—namely contributions to a capitalist economy and, to a somewhat lessening extent in some cultural contexts, compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction. In other words, the master narrative of adulthood with which many in the postindustrial world engage is one that encourages practices associated with reproduction of a social and economic status quo, with little attention to issues of inequality.

The proliferation of this hegemonic master narrative of adulthood is probably most visible when examining its moments of challenge. Examples include social movements such as the "Occupy" movement that involved many emerging adults challenging the economic status quo (Gitlin, 2012) and the LGBT movement's push for marriage, which alters the link among traditional adult roles, institutions, and heterosexuality. Although hegemonic discourses on the nature and meaning of adulthood continue to exist, these examples of protest reveal the way in which master narratives are in constant states of tension and renegotiation, as individuals do not blindly internalize them but rather *engage* with them (Cohler & Hammack, 2007).

In many ways, Cohler's (1982) views on narrative in adulthood are the least radical in his original essay, for they present a view of adulthood that is anchored in compulsory heterosexuality (a view from which he would later depart; e.g., Cohler, 2006) and traditional roles. The liberatory potential of Cohler's (1982) original ideas, though, can be realized in the recognition that adulthood itself represents not a moment of inevitable social and biological processes but rather a cultural discourse in relation to which lives are interpreted and positioned. The empirical concern then becomes an interrogation of how individuals negotiate master narratives as they construct coherent and purposive personal narratives.

Narrative and Identity in Emerging Adulthood

...What young adults set out to do in the way of identity construction is... elicited by and subject to the responses and interests of their social worlds. (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 666)

The main psychosocial task of emerging adulthood is to author a narrative identity. (McAdams & Olson, 2010, p. 534)

If adulthood represents a discourse in relation to which lives are positioned, what narrative processes are particularly relevant to emerging adulthood? Emerging adulthood represents a time in which individuals in many nations negotiate not only the meaning of their identities in relation to their personal past and present, but also make meaning of the very idea of adulthood by reproducing or challenging existing cultural scripts inherited from past generations. In other words, narrative processes in emerging adulthood represent a critical turning point for both the individual and society, as the person situates himself or herself as a cultural participant with implications for either the reproduction or repudiation of a status quo. The ongoing reconstructive activity of narrative in emerging adulthood thus involves two critical functions: (a) the coconstruction of identity and memory through situated storytelling and (b) the individual construction of a life story that provides a sense of personal and social meaning in relation to society.

As a time defined by transition, emerging adulthood is marked by disruptive and self-defining experiences and the formation of new intimate relationships (Pasupathi, 2001). Sharing situated stories is a way for emerging adults to dialogically coconstruct the meaning of these experiences and develop or maintain their identities (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). A well-established line of research in this area has revealed the important role of social and cultural context, goals, and listeners in storytelling (e.g., McLean & Pasupathi, 2011; see Thorne & Nam, 2009). These studies suggest that listeners help to impart meaning to stories, influence how

elaborately they are told, and how well they are remembered (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). Emerging adults most commonly report telling stories to peers (as opposed to parents, as in early adolescence; McLean, 2005) for self-related functions (as opposed to older adults, who more often tell stories for social functions; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). This research reveals narrative as situated activity either implicitly or explicitly linked to the notion of development as a process of ongoing social practice (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, narrative represents the tool through which the past is socially constructed (Pasupathi, 2001). Although research conducted in this approach highlights the active, dialogic process of personal narrative associated with Cohler's (1982) original views, it departs from his vision in a key way: The methodological emphasis on narrative as disembodied speech effectively erases the person as an active, agentic subject. Narrative data in these studies are aggregated across persons, and a positivist, rather than interpretive, approach to data analysis is employed. This aggregated, nomothetic approach to data analysis neglects personal meaning and lived experience—central aspects of Cohler's (1982) theoretical position.

A second function of narrative in emerging adulthood is to provide an interpretive anchor for an individual's navigation of the social world, which occurs through the construction of a life story (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Research consistent with Cohler's (1982) interpretive approach reveals the way in which individuals engage with multiple discourses as they construct coherent personal narratives. Schachter's (2004) research with Jewish Israeli Orthodox emerging adults interrogates the way in which individuals reconcile multiple and conflicting discourses of religion and sexuality. Gregg's (2007) work with young Moroccans illustrates the way in which they engage with conflicting discourses of tradition and modernity in the larger cultural context of economic underdevelopment as they narrate their life stories. Schiff's (2002) research with Arab emerging adults in Jerusalem illustrates the significance of social relationships in "identity talk," revealing the dialogic nature of personal narrative construction. Hammack and colleagues' (2009) work on sexual identity among U.S. emerging adults reveals the way in which they engage with competing narratives of the meaning of same-sex attraction as they construct life stories. These empirical examples illustrate how an interpretive, idiographic approach to narrative identity can reveal the ways in which emerging adults across cultural contexts engage in processes of social stasis and change as they reconcile conflicting discourses about religion, sexuality, nationality, and other social categories. They illustrate the way in which narrative processes in emerging adulthood have potential impact on historical and political processes. Research in this area that takes an interpretive focus adheres to Cohler's (1982) approach to the study of lives but expands his approach to take cultural variability into greater account.

Conclusion

The guiding premise of social constructionism is that all aspects of material and psychological reality are the products of human invention (e.g., Gergen, 1999). The world is not merely “given” but rather “made” through ongoing human activity. Social constructionists place particular emphasis on the way in which language and language practices make and remake the social world, constructing forms of human intelligibility and establishing a particular social order (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Cohler’s (1982) pathbreaking essay on personal narrative and life course can be interpreted as a treatise on the social construction of human development, and it provides a blueprint to study the dynamic link between self and society. In this chapter, we have highlighted three points of elaboration and theoretical expansion, and we have suggested that narrative processes in emerging adulthood assume a role in social stasis and change. Through the lens of social constructionism, adulthood is not simply a stage of human development. Rather, it represents a cultural and historical discourse toward which individuals orient their personal narratives through the ongoing interpretive activity of narrative engagement (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Adulthood represents a form of social speech which individuals navigate as they undergo biological maturation and social experience, always contingent on a particular time and place. In this view, human development does not “unfold” in a particular predictable pattern but rather represents a dynamic process in which persons and contexts are dynamically coconstituted through the practices of language, including narrative engagement and personal narrative construction.

Cohler’s (1982) essay was part of a revolution in psychology and developmental science that challenged the positivist, ontogenetic epistemology of the field. His theoretical stance on personal narrative and life course suggests that the study of adult development place central weight on the social context and historical timing of lives (see also Habermas & Hatiboğlu, Chapter 3 of this volume). Thus, social history and generation cohort likely assume significant roles in individual interpretive processes. We have expanded upon Cohler’s (1982) theory to suggest that adulthood represents a master narrative against which individuals discursively position their own personal narratives in the ongoing reconstructive activity of narrative engagement. In other words, the expectations and possibilities of an adult life, whether in terms of relational or occupational possibilities, are tied to social, cultural, and economic conditions of a particular time and place. The narrative study of adult lives benefits from this social constructionist lens on adult development, providing insights not only into individual lives but also larger social processes of stasis and change.

Research that embraces the radical implications of Cohler’s (1982) theory has gradually emerged, even if often not recognizing his contribution. To some extent, however, such work has been limited because of the

continued hegemony of positivist approaches in psychological and developmental science that privilege quantification, aggregation, prediction, and control. Cohler's (1982) concern to interrogate the active process of meaning making and lived experience positions him within the move toward interpretive social science (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987) and toward an approach to human development sensitive to history, politics, and culture. His pioneering essay warrants its place in the canon of narrative theory and humanistic approaches to social science research.

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