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The stories we tell about ourselves: understanding our personal narratives with psychologist Dan McAdams

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People are natural storytellers. We constantly revise and edit the ways in which we talk about the past and future. It's through storytelling that we make sense of the world, and Dan McAdams, a Northwestern professor that specializes in a concept he calls "narrative identity," is a practitioner in this craft.

According to McAdams, the theory behind narrative identity is that beginning in adolescence, people start to become historians of the self. People begin to see their past as something that they can make meaning out of, and reconstruct it in a way that helps them understand where they may be going in the future. McAdams shares his research's findings with NBN.

How do people develop a narrative identity?

McAdams: Everybody does this a little differently, but the general trend is to create stories that integrate our lives and give us a sense of who we are. Once this project develops, it stays with us pretty much for the rest of life. We remain storytellers of the self. These stories can always be changed, modified. There's nothing fixed about these stories. That said, they often take a decisive form, and people will often make decisions in their lives based on narrative assumptions they have about their own lives.

Knowing that stories can change, how can we shape our stories with more meaning?

McAdams: The whole process of creating a story and editing and revising and so forth, is a social process. It's something that involves our connections to other people. It's not like we go off to a remote spot in the universe and ponder our identities and then come back fully formed. There is some introspection for some people, but a lot of it happens in social relationships – with friends, parents, teachers, and so on – where we try out different

kinds of narrative and create stories. And then we tell them to other people and we get feedback from that.

What impact can the people around us have on our stories?

McAdams: Certain people, I think, are in a very good position to help us with our stories – people that we are close to being the most important. But sometimes those people can be in positions of authority. And so teachers and parents have a big impact with respect to narrative identity. This impact can be positive in the sense that they encourage us in certain directions and we go in that direction. But it can also be negative, as when an authoritative figure presents a certain kind of identity and we try to resist it. We say, 'I don't want to be that way. I'm not going to live a life like my mother. I'm not going to follow this path or that path.' Either way, we have to confront this menu of different narrative options that are presented to us in everyday life. And we pick and choose, appropriate and reconstruct, based on that menu.

What are some small changes we can make about how we think through certain situations?

McAdams: Life stories are psychological resources. We use them to help us make decisions and move forward in life. It's great when those stories affirm positive messages: when they affirm hope for the future, when they tell us that we are good people, when they celebrate our achievements and our triumphs, and when they help us overcome suffering – that's all good. Yet, the story also has to be true to your lived experience. And so, if you're going through really horrible things in your life right now, coming up with some sunny reconstruction of it that exudes a kind of strong optimism will not work immediately. It's not true to who you are. You're fooling yourself in those kinds of situations. And so I tend to be resistant to offering overall recommendations. That said, there is research on what features of life stories are associated with psychological wellbeing.

What does this research say?

McAdams: There's pretty clear research actually, which has four points to make. The first is that life stories that feature protagonists or main characters who feel empowered and agentic tend to be associated with psychological wellbeing. When people feel beaten down, when the main character of the story is passive and has no control, those kinds of stories tend to be associated with negative outcomes. Communion is also good. It means having a story in which the main character is connected richly to many other people and finds meaningful interactions, relationships, love, friendship and so forth. The third one is redemption, which refers to stories in which suffering is

overcome. Stories in which people find positive meanings in negative events. And finally, stories that are more coherent and easier to follow, tend to be associated with psychological wellbeing. So, it's good to tell life stories in which the protagonist is agentic, is engaged in warm close relationships, is resilient and forms a coherent narrative. Still, you can't just make those up. Lived experience needs to resonate with the story.

Could you explain the concept of redemptive stories?

McAdams: In a redemptive story, the main character of the narrative is delivered from their suffering to an enhanced status or state. That comes in many different varieties. For example, somebody might talk about their life in terms of a really terrible love relationship they had that went really bad. And then, they manage to extricate themselves from that relationship and find true love with another person. That's a classic redemption sequence, where the early suffering is undone or redeemed. The other way that redemption stories play out is when the person, in retrospect, interprets the negative event in a positive way. For instance, I can look back at the divorce of my parents and say, 'It was really a bad thing. It meant that I never had a father. I felt ashamed because the parents of other kids weren't divorced,' you know? So it's not like it was great. It was bad. But looking back on it, the narrator might say, 'Maybe I'd rather they never got divorced, but nonetheless, I find some benefit in that. It made me grow up fast, and it gave me a certain perspective on relationships.' So that's the kind of interpretation that occurs after the event. Now the flip side of a redemptive story would be a contamination story.

What is a contamination story?

McAdams: These are somewhat rare, but nonetheless not rare enough. And most of us could come up with a few of these in our lives where you have a really wonderful scene in life, and then it goes rather dramatically and suddenly bad. It can be psychologically debilitating if you have a lot of contamination stories, because there is a sort of fatalism that goes with them. For instance, research suggests that that's a strong predictor of depression, neuroticism and high anxiety.

Is there any advice you would give, specifically to young people, regarding how we can shape our stories?

McAdams: People in their teens and early twenties – or even in their early thirties – are really young, which means that there's a lot of storytelling to do. One of the satisfying and hopeful features of the idea of narrative identity is that it's not a psychological quality that gets fixed early. Unlike your traits and even your values, life stories are more fluid and malleable. And so, we get lots of opportunities in life to change them. That's

good news when you're young and when things seem really difficult. One of the great things about being young is you've got a lot of time to work on a life story. There are a lot of different experiences and people that will have an impact. And so one shouldn't get too discouraged if, at any given point in time, it doesn't seem to be going well.

How can storytelling bring people together?

McAdams: Stories are always about time. How we make sense of time, how we stay the same over time, how we change. That's really what stories are fundamentally about: human intention organized in time. And that's a basic feature of human nature. Human beings, all over the world, know that they are moving forward in time. They're trying to make sense of what they want over time and how their lives are going to unfold. So, stories, or the way that we do that, are a human universal. And even though every culture has its own unique narrative and cultural customs for storytelling, the idea that life is like a story can be found across the globe.

It's important to remember, especially when we're feeling lost or confused, that we can reshape our stories. There will always be different settings and characters to discover, as well as lessons to be learned. Although we can't control everything that happens to us, we can control the stories that we tell about ourselves.

Editor's Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Thumbnail courtesy of the School of Education and Social Policy.