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Literary Arts and the Development of the Life Story

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Abstract

Throughout adolescence, children begin to develop their life story: a coherent account of their experiences and selfhood. Although the nature of this development is still being uncovered, one promising direction for research is the examination of factors that could encourage life story development. Here the authors explore the idea that exposure to the literary arts (i.e., poetry and fictional literature) might promote the formation of a coherent autobiographical narrative. Taking a critical look at both theoretical proposals along with the current empirical research, they provide a brief survey of this intriguing hypothesis. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

When we reflect back upon our life, we can interpret our experiences as being organized around an underlying theme, such as “loneliness,” “social injustice,” or “the meaning in the order of the universe,” and this allows us to interpret scattered events as consistent and integrated (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979). This process of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas, Chapter One) allows for emotional personal memories to contribute to overarching frameworks that structure the self, memory, and identity. Forming a life story, these frameworks integrate experience from the past with our effort to understand the present along with goals for the future (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Not surprisingly, our life story has important implications for how we see ourselves and who we see ourselves as (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). It is therefore important to consider how this life story develops.

The central quality of life stories is their coherence, or how tightly the elements of the story can be seen to form a whole (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2006; cf. Nicolopoulou, 2008). Life stories have a narrative structure, separate from other forms of discourse (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007), and interestingly the ability to employ a narrative form appears to develop earlier than expository discourse (Berman & Katzenberger, 2004). There is a clear developmental trajectory from the ages of around four to twelve, with children becoming increasingly more skilled in producing fictional stories that possess a strong narrative structure (Reid, 1999; Ukrainetz et al., 2005). However, it is not until adolescence that children begin to exhibit a capacity for creating their own autobiographical story, integrating several events distant in time into a coherent thematic whole, and this occurs well after the emergence of expository discourse. Throughout adolescence the coherence of these life stories increases, with children increasingly able to produce more integrated representations of their personal history (Habermas & Paha, 2001; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Because the ability to create a coherent narrative for a specific life episode buffers this memory from distortion (Kulkofsky & Kiemfuss, 2008), an interesting possibility arises: The ability to create a coherent life story might result in a more stable self-identity. In light of this possibility, it is important to consider what might promote or foster the development of a coherent life story. According to theorists such as McLean (2008), the life story schema—a rudimentary knowledge framework for how a life progresses—develops from self-reflection, both thinking and talking about one’s past. One interesting possibility is that exposure to the literary arts, such as poetry and fictional literature, might provide a novel context for such thinking, and thus support the development of coherent life stories by helping to organize personal experience (Mackenzie, 1989). In this chapter, we take a critical look at the ideas and evidence behind this possibility.

Fiction and Autobiography: Theoretical Links

There are a number of complex interactions between our personal experience and the experience of reading. The mind's representation of knowledge in literary reading can be seen in terms of dynamic cognitive frameworks, such as the life story, that the reader brings to the text, but these frameworks are in turn also shaped by the reading (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988). Bluck and Habermas (2000) emphasize the importance of an extended lifetime perspective that enables individuals to look back over their lives and conceptualize an enduring value or motivation to explain their life trajectory. However, many adolescents have not reached the point at which they can look back over their lives; reading literature might help to provide this much broader perspective of the life span. It has been noted, for example, that biographies and autobiographies are directed toward readers eleven or twelve years of age at the youngest, approximately the same time that we see other evidence of an emerging life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Children as young as the age of four begin to recognize the structural elements of narratives (Lynch et al., 2008), and as they enter into their early teens they begin to derive multiple levels of meaning from these literary narratives (Genereux & McKeough, 2007). When interpreting the behavior of characters, adolescents also increasingly begin to make attributions for behavior based on enduring personality traits (Genereux & McKeough, 2007), perhaps indicating an increasing awareness of an integrated "whole person" as actor. This developmental trend toward the recognition of personality traits and personal history is also evident in the fictional stories that adolescents create (McKeough & Genereux, 2003). Might exposure to literary narratives increase the likelihood of forming a personal life narrative that integrates personal history to create a similarly holistic representation?

Building on McLean's proposal (2008) regarding the importance of self-reflection for developing coherent life stories, literary narratives do seem to spur autobiographical thinking. In a recent study, adolescents made interpretations of a short story that centered on the death of a young woman's husband. One participant, a high school student, stated, "As much as I feel for her, as the saying goes '___' happens [sic]. Everyone loses people. You have to overcome adversity if you want to succeed. I wanted to be a pilot, but because of some archaic rule, I can't, I deal. I lost my grandmother tragically, but while I do not forget her, I continue my life" (Wells Jopling, 2008, p. 68).

In interpreting this short story, this adolescent is clearly involved in self-reflective autobiographical thinking, integrating her own history and viewing it in light of the themes and events of the story. She seems not only to be rehearsing and developing the integration of aspects of herself, but she is also using it in her textual interpretation, that is,

“integrating the present moment with the life already lived” (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p.141).

A form of literary theory known as *reader response theory* theorizes that “the reader’s existing stock of experience acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed” (Iser, 1994, p. 144). The derivation of meaning while reading involves an interaction between three basic components: (1) the vantage point represented in the text, (2) the reader’s own perspective, and (3) the place where these sets of perspectives converge (Iser, 1994). In this way, the textual interpretation itself becomes a part of the ongoing development of the reader’s self-identity. Another way in which autobiography interacts with the reading of literary fiction is when readers draw on personal life experiences to help create the world presented by the author (Rosenblatt, 1989).

The above examples show how individuals’ life themes can provide an evaluative filter by means of which new information is encoded and made meaningful (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979). In his book on teaching literature in school, Sumara (2002) points out the importance of the remembered experience of the reader. He argues that reading activities, in which students interpret both personal and collective experience, “illuminate the processes by which humans experience a sense of personal identity, and how these experiences are necessarily organized by remembered identifications and relationships” (Sumara, 2002, p. 24).

Reading fiction might allow adolescents to reason about the whole lives of characters, giving them specific insight into an entire lifespan without having to have fully lived most of their own lives. An important aspect of life stories is incorporating personal discontinuities, resolving these seeming inconsistencies, and creating a coherent representation of one’s life. In fiction, characters often evolve and change, yet remain the same person, providing meaningful exemplars for how people can undergo a variety of experiences, act very differently in different situations, grow and change in a number of ways, and yet maintain their individual personhood. Authors also often provide details of a character’s past as a way to explain his or her current personality and future behaviors. Doing so might encourage readers to look back at their own experiences and consider how these fit into their overall life schema.

Fiction and Autobiography: Research Evidence

An important question is whether empirical evidence exists to support the idea that reading literature encourages students to develop, rehearse, or use their life story schema. Despite the intriguing theoretical reasons to believe that this may be the case, this topic has remained largely unexplored. As a result, little research directly examines this question. Consequently, we review what indirect research there exists that relates to this

question, with the caveat that none of these studies provides a direct test of the hypothesis.

In terms of indirect evidence, the findings are not encouraging. One study that approached this topic from quite a unique direction looked at children who either had, or did not have, an imaginary friend (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Children who had an imaginary friend were better at telling fictional stories than those who did not, and these children were also better at narrating past experiences. Importantly, there were no differences in vocabulary or narrative comprehension ability for the two groups, which means that a better ability to narrate one's past was not correlated with better story comprehension. It is important to note that narrative comprehension ability is not the same as exposure to fictional narratives, so the implications of this study for our central hypothesis are not without question.

Other approaches have not yielded any greater support for the idea that reading fiction helps the development of a life story. In a large-scale study by the National Literacy Trust, 8000 students aged five to seventeen years were asked "why they read" (Clark & Foster, 2005). Of the younger, primary students, 39 percent endorsed the statement, "It helps me understand more about myself," but this dropped to 17 percent among the older, secondary students. This decline might seem surprising; however, a similar finding was reported in another large study (van Schooten & de Gloppe, 2003) in which students from the seventh to eleventh grades completed a questionnaire measuring literary response (Miall & Kuiken, 1995). One aspect of this questionnaire measures "insight," characterized by items such as, "When I begin to understand a literary text, it's because I've been able to relate it to my own concerns about life," and "I often see similarities between events in literature and events in my own life." Insight scores were fairly low among this sample, and furthermore, decreased from grades seven to eleven. This apparent trend toward less insight, and less of a tendency to draw relations between the self and the text, runs counter to the theory that reading literary fiction aids the formation of coherent life narrative throughout adolescence. A separate interpretation of this finding, however, is that adolescents increasingly see literature as aesthetic objects, not necessarily tied to their own lives. In which case, life narratives and autobiographies might similarly be treated in an aesthetic manner, as part of a developmental trend, with less of a discouraging implication for the hypothesis in question.

One other way we can examine the possibility that reading fictional literature helps adolescents develop a coherent life narrative is to capitalize upon naturally existing differences in reading habits. Census data from Canada shows that women are more likely to read than men (Statistics Canada, 1998), and this difference emerges at a young age; girls are consistently found to be more interested in voluntary reading than boys (Morrow & Weinstein, 1986). The more important question, from our

perspective, may be whether these gender differences persist when looking at individuals who do not engage in *any* pleasure-reading at all. This does appear to be the case. More boys than girls reported spending no time at all reading for pleasure (Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005), and this appears true across cultures and across generations. A large longitudinal study from Sweden, for example, found that the proportion of non-readers was much higher among boys than girls, regardless of age group (eleven- to twelve-year-olds or fifteen- to sixteen-year-olds), and at every time point tested from 1976 to 2002 (Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson, 2006). Given the fact that boys are more likely to be non-readers than are girls, we would expect there to be parallel gender differences in quality of life narratives if reading aids the development of a coherent life story. In line with this idea, there is some evidence that girls are better at producing fictional stories than boys (McKeough & Genereux, 2003). Does this also translate to the creation of a life narrative?

A survey of the available research does not appear to provide much support for this idea. Awareness of the cultural conventions regarding construction of a biography do not appear to differ between males and females across adolescence (from ages eight through twenty; Habermas, 2007). There are also no gender differences with respect to the quality of narrative structure in life stories across this same time period (Habermas, Ehlert-Lerche, & de Silveira, 2009), or differences for other variables related to content and quality (McAdams et al., 2006). Lastly, there do not appear to be any differences in the capacity for young men and young women to derive meaning from their life stories (e.g., McLean & Breen, 2009). In light of the gender differences observed for reading behavior, this lack of difference for multiple aspects of life narratives is inconsistent with the idea that reading fiction could aid the development of life stories. Again, it is important to stress that this does not constitute a direct test of this possibility.

The available research on whether exposure to literary fiction influences life stories is thus rather discouraging, despite a number of intriguing theoretical reasons to posit such a relation. Admittedly, however, this research is largely indirect and loosely inferential. Perhaps the safest thing to conclude is that a good empirical examination of this hypothesis has yet to be conducted. What indirect work does exist seems consistent, however, with a recent study demonstrating that explicit training fails to produce improvements in the coherence of life stories (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). It is possible that a more interactive approach to improving life stories is necessary. In line with this proposal, responsive listeners provoke more meaning-laden conversations regarding personal experience (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009); an intervention designed along these lines might be promising. We now turn our attention to the theoretical arguments and empirical research regarding the related proposal that reading poetry may help improve the quality of life stories.

Poetry and Autobiography: Theoretical Links

In the interpretation of poetry, individuals often draw on personal experiences. In a recent intervention study involving disguised symbolism (Peskin & Wells-Jopling, 2009), adolescents were presented with poems that could be interpreted either literally or symbolically. For instance, William Carlos Williams' (1998) poem "Poem—As the Cat" could be interpreted literally as a poem about a cat that climbs over the top of the jam cupboard and then "carefully" steps down "into the pit of/the empty/flowerpot." However, many adolescents viewed the cat and empty flowerpot as open-ended symbols, which allowed them to provide their subjective and very personal choice of topic (Gibbs, 1994). For instance, one young girl demonstrated her concern that women need to be wary, "Like the cat in the poem, women are thought to be cautious; however, they may just be stepping into a trap." Others related the poem to their own loneliness, or to how the world obeys its own rules, or to the emptiness of life.

These interpretations can often take the shape of themes. The formation of thematic coherence within life stories "involves individuals' capacity to step back from recalled experiences and extract metaphors, lessons, or messages" (Singer & Bluck, 2001, p. 95), such as "Living is struggling," "People cannot be trusted," "Family is of the utmost importance," or "Overcoming obstacles" (McLean, 2008; Ruth, Birren, & Polkinghorne, 1996). This has obvious import for reading poetry, which often explores similar coherent themes. Reading poetry may help the reader explore themes for his or her own life; these are then used to organize experiences in a coherent way.

The open-ended nature of poetry might encourage the examination, rehearsal, and projection of one's own life story schema during interpretation. Myers (1998) suggests that when poems are carefully selected they have the potential to elicit intense emotional and sensory reactions such that students "may become motivated to seek the written word as a means to explore and understand the complexities of their personal lives" (p. 170). At the first major John Keats research conference, an essay by a high school senior was read to the audience. Written by "Clay," a student who frequently skipped school and drove a truck with a "Born to Party" bumper sticker, it read, "How do I relate to Keats? Hell, I am John Keats. My life struggles are his poetry" (Walton, 1995).

Poetry and Autobiography: Research Evidence

Just as with literary fiction, there has been no direct research on whether the reading of poetry might influence a person's life story despite the compelling theoretical reasons for postulating such a link. Research that informs this question indirectly, however, does exist. One promising piece of indirect evidence can be seen in the distinction between *point-driven reading* in contrast to *story-driven reading* (Beach, 1987). Point-driven

reading is when the reader explores and construes the point or significance of the text, determined largely by their individual experience and personality; story-driven reading, in contrast, is when the reader is primarily interested in the plot (Vipond & Hunt, 1984). Although point-driven reading is the most appropriate approach when it comes to reading almost all literary genres (Miall, 1990), it applies particularly well to the reading of poetry. According to Culler (1976), the poetry reader expects that a poem will express “a significant attitude to some problem concerning man[kind] and/or his relation to the universe” (p. 115). English teachers are also more likely to encourage text reading that is point-driven, and this might explain why Swedish adolescents who received more literary instruction and read more literature were better able to provide symbolic meaning when reading poetry (Svensson, 1987). In this study, students with less reading experience provided more literal and story-driven interpretations. Intriguingly, this finding posits a relation between the reading of literary fiction and the reading of poetry, within the context of uncovering meaning and symbolic importance that could in turn have an impact on one’s life story.

In later adolescence, students begin to develop an appreciation of the aesthetic elements of literary texts that add a layer of meaning, and this growing aesthetic appreciation might inform their own life narratives as well. In a recent think-aloud study of students (fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades) reading texts in the shape of poems, Peskin (2010) found that the twelfth graders but not the younger students appreciated the aesthetic elements of the texts. The fourth and eighth graders merely elaborated on the content. Those in the fourth grade tended to describe their personal experiences or memories in relation to the content: “It reminds me of World War Two because I saw a man walking up the street during World War Two.” The eighth graders related to the content less in terms of their own personal memories than in terms of their own knowledge of the world: “Bad things . . . are going on in the world today . . . kids out on the street and homeless people dying from the coldness outside and . . . there’s nothing you can do about it.” The twelfth graders, on the other hand, talked about the poems as involving multiple meanings and metaphoric content, and as expressing a significant attitude to some issue related to the human condition. These older students paid attention not only to what the poem was saying, but how the author was saying it; how the sounds, the contrasts, and other textual devices amplified the subject matter. The years between the ninth and twelfth grades appear to be a time when literature is increasingly being conceptualized from an aesthetic point of view. This growing aesthetic viewpoint might help to create more meaningful and coherent life narratives. Notably, this finding concerning poetry supports the alternative explanation for why adolescents increasingly report drawing less insight from literary fiction, that is, they are viewing these texts more and more as aesthetic objects.

Conclusions

There are sound theoretical reasons to believe that exposure to the literary arts might promote development of a coherent life story. Both literary fiction and poetry promote autobiographical thinking, as readers draw relations between their own lives and the content of the text, while extracting overarching themes. Literary fiction also provides a unique opportunity for adolescents to adopt a lifespan perspective, examining how the events in a character's life contribute to shape a holistic identity. Research evidence that directly tests this hypothesis has yet to be conducted, however, and the indirect evidence that exists is not encouraging. Although a gender difference exists with regard to leisure reading, no parallel gender difference is present for various aspects of life story development. As well, readers increasingly view literary texts as less relevant to their own lives as they enter adolescence, and report decreasing interest in drawing personal insight from literature. It is possible, however, that this increasing distance reflects a growing tendency to view literary fiction and poetry as aesthetic objects, objects that may promote the identification of personal life themes.

Although the indirect evidence that exists is not particularly promising, the true question of interest has not been tackled empirically. To do so, a preliminary study would have to be done in which reading habits were measured and life stories recorded, with adolescents being the most likely population as this appears to be when life stories emerge (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Coherence and quality of these life stories would be evaluated and quantified, and the correlation between coherence and exposure to poetry and literature assessed. If exposure to the literary arts is correlated with life story coherence and quality, an experimental design would be adopted to determine causality. Specifically, individuals would have to be randomly assigned to read different sorts of texts, with life stories recorded before and after this intervention. If reading literature and poetry does aid the development of better life stories, then we would expect those assigned to read these types of texts to exhibit a greater increase in life story quality compared to those assigned to read other types of texts. Writing literary fiction and writing poetry might also encourage coherence in an adolescent's life narrative and this possibility should be examined as well.

Researching participation in and exposure to the literary arts has already yielded a number of promising insights into human development. Reading is a well-known predictor of early vocabulary acquisition (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), and it appears that exposure to children's storybooks might also influence social development. Parent-child book-reading is correlated with child theory-of-mind abilities (Adrian, Clemente, Villanueva, & Rieffe, 2005), and expertise in choosing children's literature on the part of mothers predicts teacher ratings of child empathy

and socio-emotional development (Aram & Aviram, 2009). Parental ability to recognize the authors and titles of children's storybooks from among a list of foils also predicts better theory-of-mind performance in children, even after controlling for the child's vocabulary, age, gender, and parental income (Mar, Tackett, & Moore, 2010). This growing body of evidence that exposure to the literary arts may influence child development in a domain separate from language acquisition seems very promising. Although there is much that is unknown about the development of life stories, how participation with the literary arts influences life stories seems a fruitful area to direct empirical attention.

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