To Reason or Not to Reason: Is Autobiographical Reasoning Always Beneficial?

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Abstract

Autobiographical reasoning has been found to be a critical process in identity development; however, the authors suggest that existing research shows that such reasoning may not always be critical to another important outcome: well-being. The authors describe characteristics of people such as personality and age, contexts such as conversations, and experiences such as transgressions, which may hinder adaptive reasoning. They also propose alternatives to autobiographical reasoning for managing challenging events and constructing the life story, which include different kinds of meaning-making than those primarily focused on in the current literature. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Autobiographical reasoning is actively reflecting on one’s personal past to make explicit connections between that past and oneself (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). We argue that although autobiographical reasoning is a critical process for identity development related to maturity and well-being (e.g., King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; McAdams et al., 2004; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pals, 2006a), there are certain persons for whom, and certain events and contexts in which, reasoning about the past and the self is detrimental to well-being. Although we agree with the authors in this volume and others that reasoning is a critically important narrative process, we suggest that the demands put on us by our audiences, our internal resources, our experiences, and our culture can facilitate as well as limit the benefits of autobiographical reasoning.

Autobiographical reasoning is a critical part of the process of forming a life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), such that to selectively appropriate events into one’s life story one must reason about them to integrate them into that larger story (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). We define autobiographical reasoning as explicit reasoning that serves to connect events to the self to create a story of personal continuity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Pasupathi et al., 2007)—that is, reasoning is evident in narratives that include self-event connections (Pasupathi et al., 2007), lessons and insights (e.g., McLean & Thorne, 2003), patterns of complexity and growth (Pals, 2006b), and the redemption of past negative events (McAdams, 2006). Of course, these types of reasoning can result in different outcomes. For example, reasoning about stability of the self is less complicated than reasoning about personal change (e.g., McLean, 2008a; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Reasoning about nuances of a past event (e.g., complexity) is different than redeeming it, and these two processes have different implications for well-being (e.g., King et al., 2000).

Research has clearly shown the importance of autobiographical reasoning in relation to well-being (e.g., King et al., 2000; Lilgendahl & McAdams, in press; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, in press; Pals, 2006a), identity status development (McLean & Pratt, 2006), explaining oneself to close others (McLean & Pasupathi, in press), and understanding negative life events (Pals, 2006a). However, we argue that the events one is reasoning about, the context of reasoning, and personal characteristics matter for the degree to which reasoning predicts well-being, which we define broadly in discussing relevant studies (but see Pals 2006a; King et al., 2000).

Events: What Should We (Not) Reason About

Past research has clearly shown that all events are not created equal when it comes to autobiographical reasoning. For example, negative, disruptive, and challenging events appear to require more reasoning than do expected
and/or positive events (e.g., Bruner, 1990; McLean & Thorne, 2003; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). Indeed, parents begin to scaffold rudimentary forms of autobiographical reasoning at a young age by providing more explanation of negative than positive events (e.g., Bird & Reese, 2006). Thus, reasoning about a brush with cancer may bring some peace, but reasoning about one's wedding day may not. In fact, trying to explain positive events may undermine well-being (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006), perhaps because a wedding day is part of the canonical life story (e.g., Habermas, 2007) and thus does not need to be explained (Bruner, 1990).

Nevertheless, even within traumatic events there are limits to the efficacy of reasoning. Baumeister, Stilwell, and Wotman (1990) have argued that we distance ourselves from events in which we harm others to maintain positive self-perceptions (see also Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, in press). When harm is directed at the self there are also limits to the efficacy of autobiographical reasoning. Consider a study by Fivush and Sales (2006), in which they examined how mother–child dyads discussed acute (visiting the emergency room for an asthma attack) and chronic (the ongoing conflict of controlling the child's asthma) stressors. Somewhat surprisingly, children of mothers who helped them develop especially detailed narratives of the acute stressor were not likely to cope more effectively than children whose mothers scaffolded a less detailed narrative. In contrast, for narratives of chronic stressors, children whose mothers provided an emotional and explanatory framework for understanding the stressor had the highest well-being. Thus, the event being reasoned about (harming others or the acute versus chronic nature of a difficult experience) and the context of that reasoning, having a good scaffold in this case, are as important to well-being as how one reasons about the event. We note that although detailed scaffolding is not autobiographical reasoning on the child's part, it has been suggested that this kind of scaffolding sets the stage to develop reasoning processes in adolescence and adulthood (e.g., McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

**Contexts: When Should We (Not) Reason**

Less work has been done on the contexts that facilitate autobiographical reasoning, but it appears that conversational contexts, in particular, demand different kinds of reasoning. McLean and Pasupathi (in press) found that between newly dating romantic partners reasoning that centers on self-stability is more common and adaptive than reasoning focused on self-change, perhaps by diminishing uncertainty about who we are with close others (e.g., De La Ronde, & Swann, 1998). Similarly, there is also a risk in sharing vulnerable stories, to which some audiences are uncomfortable responding (Thorne & McLean, 2003), as well as risks to elaborative narration that come with distracted listeners (Pasupathi & Hoyt,
These studies suggest that certain kinds of reasoning may be limited by contexts and listeners; hence, studies comparing across contexts and listeners are needed.

Studies that focus on the implications of reasoning in solitude versus reasoning with others are also needed. For example, research has shown that writing about past traumatic events in ways that lead to cognitive understanding and less negative emotion improves health over time (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Further, writing or talking to oneself about past negative events seems to be more advantageous than just thinking about such events (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). Though these studies have not defined these linguistic markers as autobiographical reasoning, they do suggest that the ability to form a coherent account of the past, perhaps by engaging in autobiographical reasoning, may be a part of the process that leads to well-being. Writing and talking aloud to oneself may facilitate the process of finding coherence; however, talking to real audiences may not. That is, once the talking turns social, the choice of audience may matter for how well one is able to create a coherent story (e.g., Thorne & McLean, 2003). It is clear that some people need scaffolding to make a coherent story; nevertheless, it may also be that once one has some reasoning tools (by adolescence or adulthood), the time and lack of judgment afforded by solitary reasoning is important for creating the kind of story that is associated with good health.

Finally, different cultures vary in views of what constitutes the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and cultures define the content and processes of autobiographical reasoning. For example, Caucasian Americans tend to have more elaborated, self-focused memory narratives than do the Chinese (Wang, 2001), and these are characteristics that are central to the kind of reasoning we are discussing. Wang (2001) suggested that self-focused reasoning reflects the individualism of American culture. It is not that Chinese individuals are not engaging in autobiographical reasoning, but that such reasoning may look different in Chinese culture. Thus, cultural contexts demand different kinds of reasoning, and some may require more or less reasoning of the kind discussed here to achieve well-being.

**Persons: Who Should (Not) Reason**

Pasupathi and Mansour (2006) suggested that the question of whether autobiographical reasoning is adaptive depends on the person. We delineate personal characteristics that may predict unsuccessful reasoning, specifically age and personality.

**Age.** It is now clear that autobiographical reasoning is a developmental accomplishment. Habermas and de Silveira (2008) examined autobiographical reasoning in individuals aged eight, twelve, sixteen, and twenty, with half of the participants receiving training in autobiographical reasoning and half receiving no such training. In predicting autobiographical
reasoning, they examined this training, repeated narration, number of negative life events, frequency of biographical practices, age, and intelligence quotient (IQ); only age consistently predicted higher reasoning. This suggests that developmental achievements may have occurred to make reasoning more likely and that, for young children, reasoning about the past may not be possible or beneficial. Indeed, Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, and Brewin (2007) found that children (aged nine through thirteen) who were instructed to write about emotions and explanations of problems had lower well-being over time compared to those who wrote about problems without instructions to elaborate on emotions and explanations. This is in marked contrast to research with adults that has shown that such writing improves well-being over time (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Further, in early adolescence autobiographical reasoning in written narratives is associated with lower well-being (McLean, Breen, & Fournier, in press). McLean et al. (in press) provide one explanation for these findings by noting that those who spend more time in deliberative reasoning may have experienced more difficult life events, which could be a third variable that predicts lower well-being in early adolescence. However, this is not necessarily the case in studies with adults. Indeed, Fivush et al. (2007) suggested that those at younger ages need the scaffolding that occurs in conversation to facilitate the emotional regulation skills and reframing of past events necessary for successful reasoning (see also Polkinghorne, 2004). Of course, all of these interpretations should be taken with caution, as the results are correlational.

At the other end of the life span, it appears that older adults reason in less complex ways than younger people. For example, older adults are more likely to reason about stable aspects of the self compared to younger adults (McLean, 2008b; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Further, reasoning about stability is associated with higher well-being for older adults, and reasoning about change is associated with higher well-being for younger adults (McLean, unpublished data). Thus, one may be less likely to accommodate change with age as there is already a consistent theme to one’s life that is maintained by reasoning about self-stability (McLean & Fournier, 2008). Another potential explanation for these age differences is socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1991), which suggests that with age, we focus more on emotion and, relative to younger people, older individuals are especially focused on positive affect. Considering temporal scarcity and shortened time horizons for the elderly, their focus on positive affect may be more adaptive than extended autobiographical analysis of the past (cf., Wong & Watt, 1991). Thus, whereas younger children may not be equipped for autobiographical reasoning, older adults may not find it necessary to reason with the same intensity as younger adults (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008).

**Personality.** A variety of studies have examined how personality relates to autobiographical reasoning. McLean and Fournier (2008) coded
the degree to which individuals reported effortfully engaging in autobiographical reasoning. This effort was associated with the trait of conscientiousness and ego development, suggesting that personality characteristics that may facilitate the engagement with autobiographical reasoning. Further, McAdams and colleagues (McAdams et al., 2004) found that narrative complexity is associated with openness to experience. These studies raise the possibility that those with more curiosity about and attention to novelty and variety in life experiences and who are more complex in their thinking have more complex narratives with greater conceptual differentiation and integration, two important parts of autobiographical reasoning.

Yet, just because those who score higher on conscientiousness, openness to experience, and ego development reason about the past more than those who scored lower on these characteristics does not mean that they are happier because of it (see Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; Loevinger, 1976, for correlational findings and theoretical considerations). Indeed, there are cases in which low openness predicts lower reasoning, but not lower well-being. This is perhaps best evidenced in analyses of George W. Bush, who is someone who is at the bottom of the barrel on openness, not an analytical reasoner, but seemingly happy (Rubenzer & Faschingbauer, 2004).

At another level of personality, autobiographical reasoning is associated with how wise one is, particularly when reasoning about especially difficult events, such as transgressions (Bluck & Gluck, 2004; Mansfield et al., 2009). Indeed, choosing the appropriate issues to reason about—those that are most meaningful to the self and that one can do something about—are a reflection of wisdom that is relevant to adaptive reasoning (Kennedy-Arlin, 1990; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990). However, those who are wiser are not necessarily happier, as the deeply analytic characteristic of wisdom may be associated with unease or uncertainty for those who think deeply about the self and the world (e.g., Loevinger, 1976).

Where Does Understanding the Limitations of Autobiographical Reasoning Lead Us?

The cultural press for autobiographical reasoning is implicit (or perhaps explicit) in the nature of much of the research discussed in this volume (including our own), as well as in our society. Constructing a personal life story is a critical part of one's identity in individualistic cultures (e.g., McAdams, 1996; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002), which makes autobiographical reasoning a demand of our culture. That is, we expect people to story themselves (e.g., Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001), to reason in those stories (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), to redeem trauma (McAdams, 2006), and to think of themselves as consistent across time (McLean & Pasupathi, in press). Yet, what of the people without helpful scaffolders, who
are less open to experience or less wise, whose stories are too rife with trauma to redeem—what are these people to do in the face of this cultural press?

**Resilience Not Reasoning.** We want to make a difficult argument, which is that there are some people for whom, and some contexts in which, autobiographical reasoning may be detrimental. We, as optimistic Americans, want to think that the possibility exists for everyone to develop a redemptive and well-reasoned life story, regardless of their experiences and characteristics. Yet something has nagged at us as we look at our data—some people do not seem to be able to reason, or, if they are, it is not associated with higher well-being. For example, we have data from at-risk youth in which there are individuals who have had particularly challenging lives, but have decided to put themselves on a positive path. Yet this change is shown in behavior and positive statements about the current self without linking that self to the past (Breen, 2010). For example, in our dataset one teen answering questions about her childhood showed marked incoherence, which could have been rectified with autobiographical reasoning.

**P:** I had a pretty good childhood; I mean, I’d go and see my dad and then sometimes I’d go and hang out with my mom and I had lots of family so it was a pretty good, like everybody else.

**I:** Okay. Can you think of a specific memory from childhood that comes to mind?

**P:** Mmm, not really. I mean, when I was little I used to travel a lot… and… with my fa… with my uncle because my dad was in jail so we would travel to go see him so… traveling was the only thing I could really remember about being little.

This participant had difficulty reasoning about, and even remembering, her past. Her example of her “good” childhood was seeing her father in jail, a statement that calls out for reasoning. She was able, however, in the course of the interview to talk coherently about her current self and future goals. She discussed her growing maturity, her desire for a family and to be a teacher—all without linking those things to her past. Perhaps to maintain this positive self-perception she cannot reflect on the past because it would be too challenging to her current view. If redemption is important to well-being, then people with terrifically challenging lives seem somewhat doomed unless they come up with a more positive story. Yet if one has few positive experiences to select for inclusion in one’s life story, then the only option might be to develop a narrative that avoids details in favor of broad themes (e.g., I can’t remember visiting my dad in jail, but overall my life was really happy). This might be a good strategy for putting oneself on a path to resilience, in which case it is not the lack
of reasoning that is not optimal, but the experiences themselves which leave the person no “productive” option for a reasoned narrative (Breen, 2010).

The pattern we have just described may not be limited to those with challenging pasts. Indeed, individuals in normative samples protect self-esteem through their subjective appraisals of the self over time (Ross & Wilson, 2002). That is, regardless of how much time has passed since an event, individuals appraise the self that is capable of negative events as temporally distant from their current self and appraise the self capable of positive events as temporally closer. Thus, Ross and Wilson (2003) suggest that people protect themselves by seeming to be “getting better all the time.”

Bonanno and colleagues have examined the management of trauma across varied contexts, such as loss, childhood sexual abuse, and the 9/11 attacks, identifying an individual difference manifested in response to trauma called repressive coping (Bonanno, 2005; Bonanno et al., 2007; Coifman, Bonanno, Ray, & Gross, 2007). Repressive copers report little negative affect when discussing their traumas although they simultaneously show heightened physiological response (Coifman et al., 2007), suggesting a disconnect between physiologic arousal associated with the trauma and their self-reported state. Although we have to interpret the consequences of this apparent disconnect with caution, it may be that genuinely failing to experience strong negative emotion when discussing the trauma may weaken the need to reason about it. Indeed, if these individuals are experiencing negative emotion and not admitting it, that repression of emotion (and the repression of reasoning to explain that emotion) appears to be beneficial. Several studies have shown that repressive copers are less likely to experience depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder, and have less somatic complaints at as far as 18 months post-trauma (Coifman et al., 2007).

Westphal and Bonanno (2007) suggest that resilience in the face of trauma may arise from personal characteristics, such as optimism and hardiness, which preclude the need for posttraumatic growth (see also Pressman & Bonanno, 2007). Though these findings stand in contrast to the notion that posttraumatic growth is related to autobiographical reasoning (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pals & McAdams, 2004), these studies and others (e.g., Ross & Wilson, 2003) suggest that for some individuals it may be most psychologically adaptive to spend less time reasoning about their most troubling past events and relegating them to a past self while hardly moving on.

Alternatives to Autobiographical Reasoning. Once research begins to cohere, as the literature on autobiographical reasoning is doing, it will be useful to step back to see if we are missing other relevant parts of the story. Whereas one part of the story has to do with individual differences, contexts, and experiences that might preclude reasoning, another part of
the story has to do with examining other kinds of reasoning. In focusing on explicit and linguistic modes of reasoning, we may be missing other processes that communicate the thread of one's life story that we as researchers have not examined in depth (see also Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005).

In thinking about characteristics of stories that will delineate explicit autobiographical reasoning, some researchers have discussed small and big stories (e.g., Bamberg, 2004; McLean & Thorne, 2006; Pasupathi, 2006; Thorne, 2004). Big stories are those that are part of the life story—turning points, self-defining memories, and so forth. These big stories are where we look for, and often find, autobiographical reasoning. Small stories are those that are told in conversation, but may not be a part of one's larger life story, and thus may not include extensive reasoning. Yet, these small stories may go far in communicating one's identity (Bamberg, 2004), as reasoning may not only be in the representation of the story, but in the performance of it. If you tell a funny story, it means that you are funny, and you do not need to state explicitly that you are a funny person for the audience.

From another perspective, reasoning may not be necessary because some meanings are culturally understood parts of a life story. This may explain why one does not need to reason about one's wedding day—that is expected to be a wonderful love story. Building on this idea, Fivush (in press) has described narrators being voiced or silenced, and traditionally, silence was viewed as a marker of less power—one does not disclose or detail one's story for fear of misunderstanding or rejection. Recently, however, Fivush (in press) has argued that silence can also signal the acknowledgment of shared understandings that are likely to be culturally dominant (see also Weststrate & McLean, 2010). Thus, reasoning may not be necessary because some stories come with shared meaning that we may be missing in looking for explicitly stated reasoning.

**Conclusion**

We first note that many of the studies we have discussed are correlational in nature and, thus, we do not know if reasoning causes well-being, well-being causes reasoning, if there is a reciprocal relationship between the two, or if there is a third variable causing the association. Thus, we make our statements about the causal role of reasoning for well-being with caution, but we note some of the experimental (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Pennebaker & Seagel, 1999) and theoretical work (e.g., McLean et al., 2007; Pals, 2006a; King, 2001) that points to at least a partial role of reasoning for well-being.

Indeed, the now robust field of autobiographical reasoning has shown us that it is a critical process that enhances and deepens the life stories that our culture values. Yet as we step back from this rich set of studies,
we see that there are caveats that we may want to spend some more time examining and illuminating. Our argument rests on the idea that the degree to which autobiographical reasoning is beneficial to one’s well-being will depend on the interaction between characteristics of the person and the contexts of reasoning. We also note that we have defined benefit in terms of well-being, and though we suggest that reasoning may be detrimental to well-being in some cases, at the same time it may aid other processes of development, such as the development of self-continuity (Pasupathi et al., 2007). These issues surely deserve future theoretical and empirical attention. We humbly close by noting that there is much more literature to connect to in the service of our argument, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. We hope that these ideas serve as stepping stones to enrich the already vibrant conversation about how it is that individuals successfully story the self.

References


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