Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hidn20

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Available online: 14 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Kate C. McLean & Monisha Pasupathi (2012): Processes of Identity Development: Where I Am and How I Got There, Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research, 12:1, 8-28

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2011.632363

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Processes of Identity Development: Where I Am and How I Got There

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Erikson’s seminal work on identity development focused on the question, Who Am I? Despite theoretical overlap between identity theorists, current research has primarily taken different paths. Those focused on identity statuses have primarily assessed current conceptions of exploration that presumably lead to future commitments. In contrast, narrative identity theorists have primarily focused on reconstructions of past events. Thus, current researchers are not taking advantage of the strengths of these two approaches. This article reviews research and examines ways in which the approaches might be integrated with two claims. The authors propose, first, that narrative is the means by which identity exploration can be carried out, and second, that narrative processing reflects commitments and can promote greater consistency between those commitments and behaviors.

Erikson’s life span theory of psychosocial development places a special emphasis on a primary developmental task of adolescence and young adulthood—that of answering the question, Who Am I? Erikson viewed the transition between childhood and adolescence as one in which adolescents begin to take ownership of their lives by selecting commitments consistent with how they conceptualize their current and past selves (Erikson, 1959; see also Schwartz, 2001). In this article, we delineate two different empirical
routes for answering the question of Who Am I?—one focused on capturing snapshots of presumed developmental processes and one focused on capturing processes—and how these two approaches might be integrated to garner a fuller understanding of identity development.

Erikson (1968) believed that, with advanced cognitive abilities (e.g., formal operations) and a new awareness of one’s environment and relationships, opportunities for shifts in perspectives and beliefs arise, resulting in potential feelings of vulnerability. The alteration or transformation of beliefs and perspectives challenges identity in the philosophical sense since such alterations can mean that the person whose beliefs have changed has become a different person altogether (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003). Erikson (1959) believed that changes in perspective and beliefs coupled with felt vulnerability set the stage for identity exploration:

The period can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual, through free role experimentation, may find a niche in some section of his society. . . . In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child and what he is about to become. (p. 111)

The end point of this adolescent and young adult stage for Erikson (1968) was identity synthesis, in which one establishes coherence between one’s behaviors and one’s commitments. Identity synthesis manifests when behaviors are predictable across contexts and are based on one’s current commitments—or a sense of self-sameness and continuity:

The adolescent process is conclusively complete only when the individual has subordinated his childhood identifications to a new kind of identification. . . . these new identifications. . . . force the young individual into choices and decisions which will, with increasing immediacy, lead to commitments “for life.” (p. 155)

This quotation nicely exemplifies a link between commitments that allow continuity between the past, present, and future, a continuity that was central to Erikson’s reasoning. It also refers explicitly to the idea that the continuity achieved via identity development is a process that unfolds over time. However, empirical work in the area has revolved around two traditions that either focus primarily on snapshots indicating where someone is in that process or that focus primarily on processes relevant to identity construction without the structure that the snapshot approaches can provide. We provide a brief review of the two approaches and some possibilities for integrating these views of identity development.
Marcia (1966) developed an empirical assessment of Erikson’s theory focused on the future or “a sense of knowing where one is going” (Erikson, 1959, p. 118). Marcia conceptualized this process as having two components—exploration and commitment. Exploration is defined as examining different identity alternatives to which one might commit, and commitment is defined as having assumed an identity—including ideologies and roles in different domains. Four statuses can be derived from the combinations of exploration and commitment, with the most advanced being identity achievement—those who have explored their potential ideological options and have subsequently chosen ideologies. Those who have not yet reached commitment and are still exploring are in the moratorium status, whereas those who commit to ideals without a process of exploration are in foreclosure. Finally, those who have neither explored nor committed, and are therefore not engaged in the process of identity formation, are in diffusion.

Although some have viewed Marcia’s statuses as trait-like constructs because there are distinct relationships between statuses and personality profiles (e.g., Côté & Levine, 1988; Meeus, Iedema, Helson, & Vollebergh, 1999; Stephen, Fraser, & Marcia, 1992), he actually intended for them to be viewed as a snapshot of an individual at one moment in time (Marcia, 2001). There has been much empirical and theoretical work addressing the issue of continuity and change in identity statuses to address this issue of whether they are indeed snapshots of developmental processes or indicative of some kind of stability (see Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Meeus, 2011, for reviews and meta-analyses). First, in reviewing existing studies, Meeus (2011) argued that there is a good deal of stability in identity statuses, both in individuals’ status membership over time and in their rank-order stability. However, when changes are found, they generally indicate progression in identity statuses such that individuals are moving toward commitments that have been explored.

More recent derivations of the identity status literature have suggested more nuance to exploration and commitment. For example, Luyckx and colleagues (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx, Goosens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006) have unpacked exploration into “exploration-in-depth” and “exploration-in-breadth.” Exploration in breadth is similar to Marcia’s original conceptualizations, and captures the degree to which individuals evaluate and consider multiple possibilities for potential commitment. Exploration in depth, however, is indicative of continued evaluation of one’s commitments after they have been chosen, and may indicate a maintenance process for one’s commitments. Similarly, Meeus and colleagues (see Meeus, 2011, for a review) conceptualize the continuous nature of identity processes as a dynamic cycle of
commitment, reconsideration, and deeper exploration, the latter of which is also indicative of a maintenance process once commitments have been made.

Although there has clearly been a much work done to unpack the role of exploration and commitment and the different forms they make take (e.g., breadth versus depth), a criticism of status research is that the proximal processes involved in identity development have been neglected (cf., Grotevant, 1987; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Marcia’s original interview assessment did include questions about processes of identity exploration and commitment (e.g., “How did you decide to come to X university?” Marcia, 2007), but many current assessments are survey based and ask close-ended questions about what one thinks about the processes of exploration and commitment (e.g., “Based on past experiences, I’ve chosen the type of dating relationship I want now,” Bennion & Adams, 1986; “I’ve spent a lot of time reading and trying to make some sense out of political issues,” Berzonsky, 1992). Thus, identity status researchers theoretically emphasize and value the processes of exploration and commitment, but emphasis is placed on the present conception of these processes. Survey-based measures offer researchers less direct evidence about how commitments were reached and what it might mean to base a commitment on past experience. Thus, a complement to the status approaches is the narrative approach to identity, because although narrative is not the only process by which one can examine exploration and commitment, it is one that is ecologically valid, conceptually rich, and also derives from Erikson’s identity theory.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REASONING: THE NARRATIVE APPROACH**

Erikson’s concerns with current and future commitments were rooted in his work on psychobiography, an emphasis that helped to inspire another approach to identity development—one focused on the construction of the self via the reconstruction of one’s past. The narrative approach emphasizes the sorting through of past experiences to better understand one’s current state, as described, for example, by McAdams (1988):

> It is an individual’s story which has the power to tie together past, present, and future in his or her life. It is a story which is able to provide unity and purpose. It is a story which specifies a personalized “niche” in the adult world and sense of continuity and sameness across situations and over time. (p. 18)

Thus, whereas personal continuity from the status perspective is achieved via the adoption of commitments that guide the person from the present into the future, personal continuity from the narrative perspective is achieved
via the creation of a story of how past experiences led to the present self (McAdams, 1988).

Key to weaving this story of the past is the idea of autobiographical reasoning, defined as the individuals’ active reflection on their personal past to make explicit connections between their past and current selves (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). For example, in narrating what happened during a childhood experience, people can and do articulate how the event has shaped their current preferences and beliefs, how the event showcases an important change in their character from past to present, or how the event illustrates a major theme in their entire life to date. All of these types of relationships are contained within the concept of autobiographical reasoning.

Autobiographical reasoning provides a specific process for pathways of exploration, but there are different ways to examine it. Indeed, one can conceptualize narrative research as being focused on either outcomes of a reflective process, typically reflected in stories important to one’s self-definition or on active narration processes about all kinds of stories. In terms of the approach that focuses on outcomes of reflective processes, many researchers view narratives of important life events as reflecting both commitments and processes of reasoning as recalled by participant. For example, researchers have examined the degree to which one reports gaining insights about oneself or the world (e.g., McLean & Thorne, 2003) or making explicit connections between oneself and past events (e.g., Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). These insights and connections are viewed as manifestations of reasoning processes and also as potential commitments such as an insight about the kind of vocation to which one is called.

Other models of narrative identity examine how the act of narrating everyday and important events influences the conclusions that individuals draw about themselves in their stories (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pasupathi, 2006). Although everyday stories may not necessarily be the episodes included in one’s life story, in telling them narrative identity develops and is sustained. Further, this approach provides researchers with a broader lens to examine the role of others and the more everyday aspects of narrative processes. Indeed, the narration of stories may be one process by which identity statuses remain relatively stable; that is, one’s conception of having explored and committed to ideologies may be maintained by telling stories about that process of exploration and commitment.

Audiences play a particularly important role in this process of narrating everyday stories. For example, Pasupathi and colleagues have shown that narratives told to a distracted listener are less detailed and elaborated, particularly about the meaning of the experience (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009), and that talking to a responsive listener results in more meaning-laden and interpretive stories (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Weeks & Pasupathi, in
press). Further, in conversations between romantic partners, creating shared meaning of one individual’s story predicts the retention of those meanings over time (McLean & Pasupathi, 2010; see also Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010).

These two approaches to the study of narrative identity are not in conflict. Indeed, theorists posit that the process of narration leads to the development of the reflective processes necessary for constructing a narrative identity (e.g., McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). In one recent longitudinal study (Reese, Jack, & White, 2010), the more mothers asked elaborative questions of their children in early childhood, the more likely their children were to report personal insights in narrating their life events during an interview in early adolescence. This is one of the few studies that has shown a link between acts of narration in everyday life and outcomes that are indicative of narrative identity development.

COMPARISON OF THE TWO APPROACHES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR INTEGRATION

Both the status and narrative approaches value and place theoretical emphasis on the processes of identity development. However, by virtue of commonly used methods in each approach, we suggest that the status approach does not adequately capture the processes involved in identity development and the narrative approach does not adequately capture the developmental shifts and nuances in identity processes. One integration of these approaches involves using narratives to examine the processes of exploration and commitment, as they work to promote stability and development in identity statuses. Such an integration addresses one of the empirical gaps in the statuses approach—namely, the lack of attention to how people engage in exploration and commitment. It also addresses one of the empirical gaps in the narrative approach—the capacity to link processes of exploration and commitment to assessments of whether or not individuals have developed an identity in Eriksonian terms.

There has been some limited empirical work examining how identity status indicators are related to narrative indicators. One study found that those who have engaged in greater narrative processing of past events scored higher on indicators of identity achievement (McLean & Pratt, 2006; see also McAdams, 1988). Another finding showed that ethnic identity statuses are associated with different kinds of themes in stories about ethnicity (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Specifically, those at the ethnic identity statuses of achievement and moratorium reported more stories about experiences with prejudice than those at lower statuses, and those at the achievement status reported more stories about connection to their own culture than
did other groups. Further, increases in the status variable of exploration predicted changes in story themes over time (Syed & Azmitia, 2010), which is consistent with the idea that exploration was taking place via the construction of multiple kinds of ethnicity-related narratives. Finally, Pasupathi, Wainryb, and Twali (2012) found that various indicators of elaboration and emotionality in ethnic discrimination narratives were associated with ethnic identity exploration and commitment, but primarily for ethnic minority individuals.

These correlations can be interpreted as supporting two claims about relations between the narrative identity and identity status models. One is that people are likely to use narratives to explore possible identities. The second is that narratives are also likely to reflect, and possibly bolster, people’s commitments to important identities. However, the evidence above constitutes the only direct evidence linking exploration and commitment from a status perspective to narrative identity processes. In what follows, we review additional findings within the narrative, status, and related literatures that provide indirect support for these two claims.

**Narrative Is the Means by Which the Identity Process of Exploration Can Be Carried out**

When people construct narratives, they may use narration as a way of exploring potential identity commitments. In doing so, they can also try out those identities and commitments in social contexts. We review evidence to support this claim, which demonstrates that narratives reflect a process of trying out identities (goals, self-views) and that this process is influenced by social contexts.

Many narrative identity researchers have examined indicators of autobiographical reasoning, which include what one has learned about the self from past events (e.g., McLean & Thorne, 2003), connections between events and the self (e.g., Pasupathi et al., 2007), and redemption and contamination sequences (e.g., McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Many of these indicators of autobiographical reasoning seem to be prima facie evidence of the role of narration in identity exploration since people are explicitly articulating relationships between self and experience in the context of storytelling (McLean, 2005; McLean & Thorne, 2003; McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Such contents are also linked to the desire to find meaning in events and to the construction of narratives for the purpose of finding meaning (McLean, 2005; Pasupathi, 2007; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2011). Developmentally, such contents emerge in early adolescence and, for events deemed somewhat important, rise in prevalence through middle age (Habermas & de Silviera, 2008; McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean,
Breen, & Fournier, 2010; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). However, as self-views become more well established over adulthood, the level of engagement in narratives that challenge the self drops off, consistent with the idea that narratives reflect the presence of identity exploration at ages where exploration is salient and frequent and the absence of exploration at life phases where identity is established (e.g., McLean, 2008; Meeus, 2011; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Rice & Pasupathi, 2010).

As Erikson focused on the issue of uncertainty or crisis for identity work, narrative researchers have focused on moments of challenge or threat as potential opportunities for learning about the self (e.g., King, 2001; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010; Pals, 2006). That is, narrative reflection is more likely for unexpected events or outcomes (Bruner, 1990). For example, among adolescents and emerging adults, parental divorce is a common and disruptive event that individuals narrate as important to their self-definitions. Parental divorce provides an opening for thoughts about the meaning of romantic relationships, perceptions of relationships with one’s parents, or myriad other insights that might be drawn about one’s personal character after having experienced such an event. For example, in reflecting on his parents’ divorce, one 18-year-old in one of our studies wrote,

I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason, and that adversity promotes growth. I know that the problems I have encountered in my life [the divorce and subsequent events], and the ability to overcome those problems have shaped who I am as a person.

Thus, this disruptive event created an opportunity for reflection about his character, a reflection that may be critical to his narrative identity. Yet the process of learning about oneself does not usually happen in the moment of experience, but instead when one reflects back on those moments. Indeed, this participant reported these insights about himself 10 years after the divorce.

In the context of arguing that narratives are a process of identity exploration, one way to interpret the findings reviewed above is that experiences that press for exploration via meaning making are experiences that pose challenges to a person’s identity commitments in terms of beliefs about the self and goals for the future. In that line, recent work has pointed to the potential importance of transgression experiences in particular (Mansfield et al., 2010; Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; see also, Nisan, 1991). Such events are negative, but also implicate the narrators as individuals who have violated their own values and beliefs—in short, their identity. Indeed, people have greater difficulty narrating transgressions as
compared to other negative events (e.g., Pasupathi et al., 2007), and transgression experiences are often narrated in more complex ways than other negative events, with more reflective content (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b), particularly for those who are wise (Mansfield et al., 2010).

The types of narrative exploration in which people engage can take place in written or solitary narratives, but often take place in conversations with parents, friends, and romantic partners. These conversations offer opportunities for listeners to support, refute, elaborate, or ignore explored identities (McLean et al., 2007). A large body of work has shown that responsive and supportive listeners help children and adults to express the meanings of their experiences (for reviews, see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; McLean et al., 2007) and that expression is tantamount to exploration. Among adolescents and emerging adults, responsive listeners are key in allowing people to integrate negative events within their sense of themselves (Weeks & Pasupathi, in press) and in supporting the identities they offer in conversational narratives (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010). Interestingly, in adolescence, support and challenge from mothers seem to be important in predicting narrative processes (McLean & Mansfield, 2011). Similarly, conversations about nonautobiographical events in which parents support, as well as challenge, their adolescent’s ideas are associated with adolescent identity achievement (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). This challenge may come at a time when adolescents have more of their own resources, compared to childhood, to articulate their identity claims.

To better illustrate how narration can entail exploring potential identities and the role played by listeners, we present the following story, which was shared in a conversation between two emerging adult romantic partners early in their relationship. The memory that the teller shares is about a recent experience not previously shared with her boyfriend.

*T:* and… uhm… my ex-boyfriend, whom I just broke up with (laugh). Uhm… he brought his new girlfriend to the practice and I noticed that she was lonely so I went up and started talking to her and I found out through my other friends that she does not like me so I tried to make friends with her and I noticed that we had a lot in common. And so, now we are acquaintances, now despite, I just put away all that bad feeling I had towards her and just started talking to her and uhm… you know all my other friends were telling me I could be the…

*L:* … bad person.

*T:* … the bad person. Like not… to be the bad ex-girlfriend if I wanted to. But I just wanted to put that away just because she is a new person and I wanted to meet her and she seemed like an interesting person. So… that’s why I just, you know, started talking to her. It was kind of weird because, like, it was a really hard time. And I just—
In this excerpt, the teller explores a threatened identity (the “bad” ex-girlfriend) and a more appealing alternative—being the type of person who does not hold grudges or maintain or escalate hostilities. The event of making overtures toward her ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend, despite the difficulties it entailed, is proffered as tentative evidence for the viability of this alternative, more morally upright identity. The new boyfriend does not offer explicit meanings, but supports the teller’s exploration by paying attention and being supportive of her even as she expresses a less desirable possible self, suggested most strongly when he actually completes the phrase “bad person.”

Considering narrative as a way of engaging in exploration of identities opens the scope for narrative identity researchers beyond the types of events that constitute life stories. Researchers have referred to these stories as “small stories,” thus distinguishing them from turning points or major life story moments (Bamberg, 2004, 2006, 2008; McLean & Thorne, 2006; Pasupathi, 2006). The above story is a case in point, because it is unlikely to be material for the life story of the teller. In fact, she may not even remember this event 5 years from now.

Given the fact that they are likely to be forgotten over time, small stories are frequently centered on recently experienced events with emotional salience and current goal relevance. Small stories integrate the very recent past with the present and near-term future in ways that are likely nested within the construction of the life story, with its longer temporal perspective and more momentous implications. But one implication of integrating narrative identity work with status identity work is that exploration surely occurs in the context of mundane as well as momentous events and can be examined accordingly.

Indeed, not all narration involves explicit attempts to explore identities as reflected in the content of the narrative. Rather, a lot of narration is engaged in primarily to pass time and entertain others (see McLean, 2005; McLean & Morrison-Cohen, in press; McLean & Thorne, 2006; Pasupathi, 2006), yet even this type of narration may involve exploration of identities for self and other. First, such narration is deemed important to people’s selves because many such stories are nominated as self-defining (McLean, 2005; McLean & Thorne, 2006). Second, such narration often involves exploring an identity by performing it—the “raconteur” self and the nature of the self that is dramatized (Bamberg, 2004; McLean & Morrison-Cohen, in press; Pasupathi, 2006). Bamberg and others (Bamberg, 2004, 2008; Depperman,
2003, 2007) have examined the multilayered processes by which such “light” narrations also constitute identity. From these perspectives, listener responses also serve to support (by laughing and engaging) or ignore (by failing to appreciate the humor) proffered identities. A full treatment of these arguments is beyond our scope, but we emphasize that people build identities in ways that extend beyond just the deep, meaning-laden, and reflective stories that constitute the life story.

Narratives and Narrative Processing Also Reflect Commitments and Can Promote Greater Consistency Between Commitments and Behaviors

Although narrative may be one process by which identities are explored, narratives may also play a role in future commitments. From a narrative perspective, past reconstruction is the foundation on which the current and future self (and perhaps commitments) stand (McAdams, 1988). Here, we present the full divorce narrative excerpted above from an 18-year-old in one of our studies, which exemplifies the idea that current and future commitments are rooted in past experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to those events in narrative.

When I was seven I really didn’t have a clue about life or anything in life, as most normal seven year olds. One night, I remember, after a long drawn out fight, my mom woke me up in the middle of the night and her and my brother and I left...later I found out my parents were getting a divorce. The reason why it is such a self-defining memory is because I came to be very independent and self-sufficient. Obviously, the only people at the time that I could rely on let me down. I became the “man of the family” and took on many responsibilities that a normal 7 year old would not have. [Recently] I was telling my boss at work about my past family life. He was amazed at my strength and character—that something good could come out of those traumatic experiences. I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason, and that adversity promotes growth. I know that the problems I have encountered in my life, and the ability to overcome those problems have shaped who I am as a person.

This narrative articulates an identity commitment to self-reliance and seeking opportunities to grow in the face of difficult times. That commitment is rooted in a traumatic childhood experience and the narrative as a whole suggests that, when this participant next encounters a challenge, he will be able to draw on this experience to bolster and sustain his commitment to being a responsible and strong person.

In considering commitments, a number of motivational constructs from outside the narrative world are also potentially useful to consider. These
include concepts such as finding a goal or identity-linked activity interesting (Thoman, Sansone, & Pasupathi, 2007), intrinsically motivating (Weinstein, Deci, & Ryan, 2011), or need satisfying (Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier, & Lecours, in press), viewing goals as attainable or not (Moffit & Singer, 1994), a tendency to approach or avoid undesired outcomes (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakeda, 2005), a sense that one’s experiences are congruent with identity-related commitments in the form of values and goals (Bauer & McAdams, 2000), and actual, goal-consistent behaviors (e.g., Breen, 2009; Cox & McAdams, 2010). These goal-related concepts tap various aspects of motivational processes and are all associated with a higher likelihood of attaining goals. Below, we review evidence that (a) narratives are linked to these goal-relevant concepts, and (b) narratives are linked to actual goal-relevant behavior. These findings speak to the notion that narration can promote greater consistency between commitments and behaviors.

In many cases, commitments in the form of goals arise explicitly or implicitly from particular ways of narrating experiences. For example, Singer, King, Green, and Barr (2002) found that narrating stories of personal growth about service learning experiences predicted a greater desire to contribute to the next generation. Further, narrating everyday actions to a responsive listener is related to enhanced interest in a novel activity or experience over time (Thoman, Sansone, Pasupathi, & Arizaga, 2010; Thoman et al., 2007).

In addition to goals themselves, goal-relevant concepts like optimism, strivings, and motives have been linked to narrative indicators. Singer and colleagues (Moffit & Singer, 1994) found that the emotional valence of memories is linked to the perceived likelihood of achievement or failure at current strivings, with more positively toned memories linked to greater optimism about achieving strivings and more negatively toned memories linked to pessimism about achieving strivings. McAdams and colleagues consistently found links between redemptive sequences in life stories and generativity motives (e.g., McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). In the longer term, Sutin and Robins (2005) found that affect and motives expressed in self-defining memories predicted changes in personality and well-being over 4 years. For example, those with higher positive affect and achievement motivation expressed in narratives at Time 1 showed increases in self-esteem 4 years later. These findings suggest that narratives articulate general motives and that the pursuit of those motives is consistent with changes in the self over time.

Some studies have examined the link between reflection and behavior over time. For example, Cox and McAdams (2010) found that the degree to which college students narrated stories of self-transformation after a volunteer trip to work with poor citizens of Nicaragua predicted their volunteer behavior after the trip, controlling for previous volunteer experience. Interestingly, in that same study, pretrip volunteerism was negatively
correlated with themes of helplessness in narratives written about the trip. This suggests that current perspectives predict story themes, which predict later behavior, which is consistent with dynamic models of narrative identity (e.g., McLean et al., 2007). Notably, these studies did not examine behavior in vivo, but rather self-reports of behavior (Cox & McAdams, in press) or the anticipation of behavior (Moffit & Singer, 1994).

Outside of the narrative approach, some studies also have suggested a link between past reflection and current and future behavior. Libby and colleagues (e.g., Libby & Eibach, 2009) conducted several experiments manipulating the visual perspective with which one views a past event—from the first or third person. They suggested that viewing past events from the third person perspective creates a self-reflective mode, in which people focus more on the context and meaning of past events, as opposed to the details of past events, which is the focus of the first-person perspective. In this way, the third-person perspective may increase self-awareness in requiring an observer stance on the self. In terms of the clearest connections between past reflection and future behavior, Libby and Eibach (2002) found that using the third person to reflect on past overindulgences predicted less indulgent eating behavior at a future Thanksgiving dinner. Related findings are also found in the moral development literature, in which prosocial behaviors lead to increases in moral identity, but only when participants reflect on their prosocial acts (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Hart, 2005). This research is consistent with the idea that, when people take a self-reflective stance on their past, their future behaviors are more likely to be consistent with their commitments.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR EMPIRICAL WORK

We think that there is clearly good reason to further pursue connections between narrative and status approaches to identity development to garner a deeper and broader understanding of identity, particularly focusing on a breadth of temporal span. We raise several issues for future research that emerged from this review.

Causality

First, the direction of causality is unclear in much of the work we have reported. For example, theories about autobiographical memory and self, which emphasize how current goal structures or motivations influence memory retrieval processes (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Ross & Wilson, 2003; Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990), imply that it is commitments that “cause” narratives to take particular forms and contents.
For the claim that narratives reflect commitments, this is not a concern. However, the findings above also suggest that in some instances commitments arise out of narrative processing, and exploring this possibility will require prospective and longitudinal investigations.

**Exploration Versus Commitment**

Although the findings we reviewed link narrative indicators to exploration and commitment or related concepts, those links were seldom the expressed purpose of the presented study. As a result, the same findings may indicate that narratives that are rich with greater degrees of expressed personal meaning reflect exploration, but also simultaneously commitment. One possibility is that exploration and commitment, from the status approach, are difficult to disentangle and scales attempting to separate them may sometimes be highly correlated (see Pasupathi et al., 2012; Phinney, 1992). From that standpoint, the overlap of narrative indicators of identity exploration and commitment makes empirical sense. An alternative, though, might be that narrative researchers can make use of the concepts of exploration and commitment to conceptualize distinctions between indicators of exploration and indicators of commitment. Some approaches like this already exist in the literature. For example, in her work on the narration of difficult life events, Pals (2006) distinguished between exploratory processing, an outcome consistent with exploration, and positive self-transformation, an outcome consistent with commitment. Similarly, in looking at narratives from those who have experienced different kinds of stressful life events, King and her collaborators distinguished between elaboration and accommodation and closure (e.g., King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; King & Raspin, 2004), processes that sound conceptually congruent with exploration and commitment, respectively.

These issues generally point toward two kinds of additional suggestions for researchers who typically take a narrative or a status perspective on identity development. For narrative researchers, it might be worthwhile to broaden the focus on negative and unexpected experiences to also include the narration of events that should be important from a status perspective. This is analogous to the approach taken by Syed and Azmitia (2008, 2010) in examining ethnic identity and that taken by Bauer and colleagues in looking at important life decisions (Bauer et al., 2005), but could be expanded to involve other domains. For example, in the relationship domain, Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) found that the way couples narrate the history of their relationship is related to marital satisfaction and marital dissolution. Narratives about education- or career-related experiences, such as college visits, career fairs, first days on the job, and career successes and setbacks,
may also be fruitful to explore. Such events are certainly already in the mix of what narrative researchers have been studying all along, as these are events often cited as the turning points and crises in our lives and the momentous events and vivid memories that set us on particular life courses (Pillemer, 1998). However, narrative researchers could cast a broader net for identity-relevant experiences and, in doing so, might be able to capture the processes by which commitments emerge out of exploration.

For identity status researchers, it might be worthwhile to begin by eliciting identity commitments and then to examine how those commitments are, or are not, rooted in the past. We propose that individuals who are able to point to specific past experiences to explain why they have made these commitments may (a) have stronger commitments, (b) be more likely to behave in ways consistent with those commitments, and (c) have commitments that last longer. For example, consider this example drawn from a study of mother-adolescent conversations about past events. In this study (McLean & Jennings, in press; McLean & Mansfield, 2011), mothers and adolescents had a conversation about several memories, and some of the adolescents also had a similar conversation with a friend at a later time point. The quotation is from a 17-year-old boy we call Adam and his mother who are talking about a memory that is important to Adam’s sense of self (emphasis added):

**Adam:** A specific personal memory is Mexico again. It was from being out there kayaking, being outside for so long kind of gave me an idea partially about what I want to do.

**Mother:** Mm hmm

**Adam:** You know just being out there, outside, that’s a part of just hanging out and relaxing, you now, I think that was part of, *that trip definitely taught me partially about...* I’m not going to say something cheesy about who I am, but it kind of gave me ideas about who I want to be.

**Mother:** uh huh, mm hmm

**Adam:** You could say, uh, *it gave me an idea that I want to do something outside.* I had ideas before, but *that really kinda helped solidify them,* gave me ideas.

**Mother:** mm hmm

**Adam:** I’d say that would be the most specific one that says something about me as a person.

**Mother:** Those are both good, Adam. *One of them kind of speaks to a quality you want to have, you know,* and one speaks to kind of what you want to do.

In this conversation, Adam linked a current and future commitment about wanting to “do something outside” to a past experience of kayaking. The conversation about a past event offered Adam the opportunity to make this connection between the past and present or future self and for his
mother to support, validate, and articulate that commitment. Interestingly, a few weeks later, Adam had a conversation with a friend in which they engaged in the same task of sharing several past events with each other. Adam further elaborated on the meaning of the same memory to his commitments in this conversation:

Adam: Yeah whatever. And it really, it kinda started to show me that I really liked being outside a lot more than I’ve ever thought of. Like I never really thought about what it meant for me to be outside and active all the time. And... those trips really kind of showed me that and it kinda showed me that I didn’t want to spend my life inside. I didn’t want to have... I was kind of already to the point where I realized I would never be able to have an office job, I’d never be able to sit at a computer screen from 9 to 5. I needed to be... I still think this, I need to be outside. And it was kind of a realization for me. And that memory, that memory... those two trips... really showed me that I’m an outdoorsy kind of person, I don’t want to sound too arrogant here.

Friend: Yeah, that’s you!
Adam: I’m outdoorsy! Even (inaudible) than me.
Friend: (Inaudible) just don’t hear that.
Adam: It kind of showed me what I wanted to be, what image I wanted to have of myself.
Friend: That’s good.
Adam: It just really showed me things about myself that I’d never been truly aware of.
Friend: Solid.

In this conversation, Adam better articulated how the past event relates to his current and future commitment in the realm of work. He has now received support from his mother and his friend, which we suggest will make this commitment more likely to last. However, only a longitudinal study will be able to answer that question.

In conclusion, Erikson’s seminal ideas are still alive and well, providing rich ideas for the study of identity. His notions of identity synthesis deriving from the reconstruction of childhood experiences to fit with current and future commitments have been articulated, separately, in these two areas of research. Now is a choice moment to integrate these approaches to realize a broader and deeper understanding of identity development.

REFERENCES


