

# The Present of the Past: Dialogues With Memory Over Time

Ruthellen Josselson

The Fielding Graduate University

**ABSTRACT** This study analyzes the self-constructing meanings of an autobiographical episode in the life of one woman told at repeated intervals over 35 years. It demonstrates the ways in which the present constructs the past and shows how autobiographical memory may be used dialogically to create and contrast with current self-constructions, to disavow intolerable aspects of self, and to preserve disused but valued self-representations. Memories, in this sense, operate as texts whose meaning changes as the dialogue within self changes. The meanings of past memories, rather than their contents, are reshaped to hold aspects of a layered, multiple self.

Autobiographical memory is a process of reconstruction rather than faithful depiction. The events may be constant but the vantage point from which one interprets transforms the meaning of the past (Ricoeur, 1991). Thus, the present can be viewed as constructing the past and creating an implicit dialogue between the remembered and the remembering self (Freeman, 1984; Neisser & Fivush, 1994). The personal past is available to be viewed from different perspectives, depending on the interpretation being constructed (Cohler, 1982). Bruner (2003), in summarizing the literature on the self, notes that

Versions of this paper were presented at the International Society for the Dialogical Self meeting in Braga, Portugal, in June 2006; at the Center for Family Studies, University of Cambridge, in November 2007; and as a keynote address for the Society for Research in Identity Formation, Washington, D.C., in March 2007. The author wishes to thank Bill Peterson, Avril Thorne, Hanoch Flum, Amia Lieblich, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ruthellen Josselson, Ph.D., The Fielding Graduate University, 2112 Santa Barbara Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93105. E-mail: [rjosselson@fielding.edu](mailto:rjosselson@fielding.edu).

*Journal of Personality* 77:3, June 2009

© 2009, Copyright the Authors

Journal compilation © 2009, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.2009.00560.x

one primary aspect of the understanding of the self is that it relies on selective remembering to “adjust the past to the demands of the present and the anticipated future” (p. 213). Considering earliest memories, Adler (1927) asserted that these memories, rather than condensing childhood, represent aspects of a person’s inner experience in the present, and this has been documented (Josselson, 2000). Many researchers take as a starting point the idea that the self- and autobiographical memory are linked (Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi, Weeks, & Rice, 2006), but, as Fivush and Haden (2003) say in the introduction to their recent volume on autobiography and the self, “We still know surprisingly little about the nature of this relation” (p. vii). In particular, the process by which the self adjusts memory over time is not yet well understood.

Most of the work on reconstruction of the past is retrospective and has theorized or demonstrated the ways in which the past is reworked to seem consistent with and continuous with the present (Kotre, 1995; Pasupathi, 2001). Such memories may be used to create a personal myth (Kotre, 1995; Kris, 1956; McAdams, 1985). Research has shown that the particular autobiographical memories chosen for disclosure by research participants in standardized research situations reflect important aspects of current personality (Conway & Holmes, 2004; Markus, 1977; McAdams, 1993; Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995; Thorne & Michaelieu, 1996). These studies investigate the relationship of a particular memory or set of memories to personality or developmental variables. Their implicit model seems to be that the remembering person chooses memories to disclose that are consonant with current self-structure. Memories in these studies are coded for content or process variables that classify the nature of the event being remembered. In Conway and Pleydell-Pearce’s (2000) model, goals of the self determine access to the knowledge base and which memories will be retrieved. These approaches assume a fixity of event memories, memories that may or may not be retrieved depending on the current conditions.

“Should one expect to find longitudinal continuity in life-narrative accounts?” ask McAdams et al. (2006) in a 3-year longitudinal study of emerging adults’ written memories. Coding emotional tone, agency, communion, personal growth, and narrative complexity, these researchers demonstrate both stability (in emotional tone and narrative complexity) and change (in personal growth and narrative

complexity) in narrative accounts over time on what they term “simple” measures. Although most of their participants offered different autobiographical memories over time, their memories showed continuity in thematic content. Similarly, Thorne, Cutting, and Skaw (1998) found thematic consistency in memories told to an interviewer with 6 months between interviews, even though, in most cases, different memories were offered at each telling. These researchers did, however, pay special attention to the actual narrative of “twice-told” memories and noted that memory is a dynamic process that may involve shifts in use of memories for various purposes.

Mishler (2004) critiques identity theory that relies on the notion that there is a single life narrative storyline and does not take into account that the same identity-defining episode may be told very differently in different settings, thus constructing quite different identities. If autobiographical memory is related to constructing, maintaining, and regulating the self (Bluck & Alea, 2002), then the telling of memory and the arrangement of identity ought to change in tandem (Thorne, 2000). Single tellings of a given memory, while offering a window into current personality organization and concern, do not illuminate the processes by which self and memory are narratively coconstructive. What has not been investigated, in part due to the logistical difficulties of long-term longitudinal studies, is the way in which the same memory may be reevaluated over long periods of time in light of ongoing experience and the restructuring of the self.

In particular, critical decision-making moments during adolescence or late adolescence that are constitutive of identity may be reconstructed as adulthood progresses. Some of these memories are often considered self-defining (Singer & Salovey, 1993), but it is unclear how they may change as the experience of self transforms over the life course. Memory content may persist, but the evaluative component (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), the meaning-making of the memory, may alter as identity evolves.

Both Erikson (1968) and Gregg (1995) have argued that identity is as much what one declares one is not, the not-me equally defining of identity. Selves that one was, especially in life stories of transformation or redemption, serve as powerful contrasts with the self that one has become (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 2006). These selves are disavowed, and their disavowal serves to buttress the meaning of the current dominant self (or selves). But there also can be aspects of the

self that are relinquished or shelved, that have no role in current action, that are not consistent with the current self, but are recreated in memory to enact a dialogue with the present.

The self is multiple, partial, and dialogic (Hermans, 1995), a set of fluctuating “I” positions, each with a voice, so that dialogue between positions becomes possible. At any given time, researchers can induce or identify some of these “I” positions, but we as yet understand little about how this internal dialogue among aspects of self changes over time or what role memory serves in the dialogue.

This study investigates the narrative changes in an identity-defining episode of adolescence as the internal representation of the event changes over the life course. It attempts to view and conceptualize the function of disused or recreated selves as they are transmuted in memory. In this paper, I take a close look at the construction of a late adolescent experience in the life of one woman, a memory told at four different stages of her life. The study of a unique individual offers contextualization for nomothetic research in autobiographical memory.

## METHOD

The data for this study are drawn from a longitudinal study of women’s identity development, now of 35 years duration (Josselson, 1987, 1996). Women have been interviewed (for 3–5 hr) in depth at approximately 10-year intervals from ages 21–56, spanning the years 1971–2006. The interview asks participants to recount their life story, focusing on the most recent period but also reflecting on aspects of the past that have contributed to “who you are today.” The memories examined in this paper were abstracted from the full, narrated, autobiographical text at each interview.

Narrative inquiry (see, e.g., Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Clandinin, 2007; Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003) spans a wide range of research designs, among them the intensive study of an individual case, as presented here. This design rests on an in-depth reading of one person’s story, focused on a particular topic of interest. Other designs may involve cross-case readings that look for common or discrepant processes among participants. Narrative inquiry does not test hypotheses; instead, patterns are inductively adduced, documented, and conceptualized (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Narrative inquiry begins with a respectful, ethical, nonjudgmental, responsive, and empathic research relationship (Josselson, 2007) in which

participants are invited to narrate aspects of their lives that are of interest to the researcher. The focus of narrative research is on the experience of life as lived (and understood) by the participants, in their own terms, rather than in a framework offered by the researcher. Interviews are open-ended. Ideally, an opening question orients participants to the aims of the researcher, and follow-up responses are primarily empathic prompts rather than directive questions. In this study, over 35 years, interviews became less structured as I learned more about how to conduct narrative research. Earlier interviews had a more prearranged set of questions, but within these subframes (questions about parents, friends, goals, beliefs, etc.), participants were invited to narrate freely. The researcher endeavors to invite stories (Chase, 1995) rather than general descriptions of participants' lives. The data obtained in a narrative research interview reflect the trust and rapport the interviewer is able to create with the participant as well as the way in which the participant constructs the interviewer.

Narrative research is reflexive in the sense that the researcher recognizes that the process of observation structures the phenomena under consideration. Researchers have an impact on the narration produced (and the narration is having a reciprocal impact on the researcher), even though efforts are made to influence the data as little as possible. In this study, I developed a relationship with my participants over many years, as someone who appeared and reappeared at unexpected intervals to inquire about the progress of their lives. Many participants had read what I had written about them (I sent a copy of my last book to those who requested one), and I inquired at each interview about their reactions to reading these works and to their ongoing participation in the study. Maria, the participant to be presented here, said at age 55 that she "never thinks about" the study and "never even remembers" that she was in it until she hears from me. (I, however, have been strongly affected by Maria as I have struggled over the years to understand her. I have also admired her fortitude and her courage and sometimes wish I could contact her in between interviews to find out how she is doing, but I do not do this with my participants.) She also said that she thinks I "must have done a very good job of disguising us cause I couldn't really *find* myself." (This mystifies me, but I think that she must not have been looking too hard.) I think, then, about Maria's willingness to continue participating and conclude that she finds my interest in her appealing and seems to enjoy the opportunity to recount her life. The act of speaking about oneself and feeling understood by another can be itself meaningful (Miller, 1996). Maria works with psychologists and in a research setting, so she is not particularly fearful of talking to a psychologist, something I have to take into account with other participants. At age 55, Maria was interviewed by my research assistant, Dr. Devon Jersild, but I was in touch with Maria in a

phone conversation in advance of the interview to help her make a relational link to Devon. Maria was quite comfortable with this, especially as she remembers me only generically, given the passage of time.

The data of narrative research are (primarily) the transcribed words of the participant. The work of narrative analysis is to extract, frame, and conceptualize meanings that can be demonstrated in the text. The focus of this analysis is on intraindividual processes, meanings contextualized within the text, and the interrelationship of the elements of experience. Thematic analysis involves the notation of primary themes in an interview, but a narrative analysis inquires as to the embeddedness of these themes within the interview as a whole. Thus, in my consideration of Maria's memory, told at four different ages, my interest was in *how* the memory appeared in the narration, what its telling served in the larger autobiographical story. Narrative analysis also pays attention to form as well as content (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), to the pattern and structure of speech, and to metaphor and associative linkages in the unfolding of the story, all of which are potential pointers to meaning.

Narrative texts can be read as representations of experience as lived and the analysis can be aimed at re-presenting meanings at a different level of discourse or abstraction—a hermeneutics of faith, borrowing Ricoeur's term (Josselson, 2004). Texts can also be read as disguised and analyzed for hidden meanings. In this study, my stance is to employ a hermeneutics of faith to "restore" Maria's meanings as best I can understand them and then witness how these meanings change over time. I take interpretive authority (Chase, 1996) for my understanding of her words (rather than checking my interpretations with the participant). As evidence for the credibility (Polkinghorne, 2007) of my interpretation of her meanings, I liberally reproduce Maria's own words.

## MARIA

Maria<sup>1</sup> grew up in an immigrant Italian family in suburban Newark, surrounded by relatives and embedded in Catholicism and old-country values that she felt restricted her freedom. Consistently over time, she described her mother as emotional, giving, and loving and her father as reserved and strict, the harsh disciplinarian. Maria became

1. Further biographical information about Maria at ages 21 and 33 has been published in Josselson (1987) where she is called "Amanda" and presented as an example of Identity Achievement identity status. Further description of her life at age 43 is available in Josselson (1996), where she is called Maria, an example of a "Pathmaker," a renaming of the Identity Achievement status.

a nurse, eventually a director of nursing at a major teaching hospital; raised two children; and cared for a disabled husband. These are the basic contours of her identity and her life.

Over the course of 35 years, Maria narrated an autobiographical episode that demonstrates a dialogue between her emerging contemporary selves and her constructed remembered selves. The central narrative of interest to me here concerns a relationship she had as a teenager with an African American boy that lasted for 6 years.

### Maria in College

When I met her while she was a senior in college (1971), Maria was a vibrant, engaging young woman. She had been a cheerleader in high school and on the student council. Her college years were filled with study and work and many friends but no political engagement with the clamorous late 1960s/early 1970s. Her focus was on her goals and her personal relationships; she professed no ideological views.

Maria was forming an identity as a helper of others. Planning a career in psychology, she was doing an internship in a residential school for disturbed children and wrestling with the limits to realization of her ideals for helping others. She was serious about her studies, although she felt she learned more from her internship experiences. She had done a lot of volunteer work in agencies that helped others, and “mothering” needy others was a central metaphor for how she wanted to express herself in life. She hoped to go to graduate school and to have a career, with time out when the children she wanted to have were young, a different model from her close, extended family where none of the women worked outside the home.

Speaking of her life to the interviewer, Maria described herself as in love with Jack and intending to marry him. As she told it at the time, age 20, she had taken seriously all her Church’s teachings about loving one’s neighbor and had expected her family and friends to accept Jack, whom she had grown up with, as her boyfriend. She described him adoringly as “intelligent, very independent, as unemotional as I am emotional, athletic, plays semi-professional basketball and interested in going to law school.”

Reflecting on this relationship when I interviewed her in college, she said, “That was a decision I had to make. With religion talking

about love thy neighbor and all men are equal, and it was all right until he asked me out. Now, after 6 years, my family has accepted it." She intended to marry him. "It's a decision I've thought about for a long time and it still bothers me. But when I think about it, I know its going to be my life and I can't go against my own ideas for my parents." Still, the friction with her family troubled her.

From a psychological point of view, Maria was in the process of individuating herself from her family and, although going to college and planning a human service career were important parts of her goals and the process of growing into her own person, Jack was emotionally a more central part of her staking her independence. Maria's adolescence was happy and secure, but a part of her was reaching for her own definitions—through her relationship with someone her family would never have expected her to choose. Although she did not speak about the political aspects of racism that were then coming into the public's awareness, Maria's view of the Church as "bigoted" had distanced her from her familial childhood religion. Jack served her psychologically as a badge of differentiation from her family and her traditional background, a position from which she could create a distance from her childhood self. But she remained fiercely loving of her family. Her sense of individuality did not undo her ties to them. Thus, we could say that Maria was making use of this relationship to construct an independent self (i.e., an "achieved" identity—see Marcia, 1966, and Marcia & Friedman, 1970) still very much a part of her family. The construction and maintenance of her relationship with Jack was a self-defining experience at this age.

### Age 33

When I met Maria again when she was 33, she had married another man, had two children, had become a nurse, and had advanced to Director of Nursing. She (like many of the other participants) did not remember having been interviewed previously.

Maria again narrated the story of her relationship with Jack, but this time told it very differently, as a minor theme that contrasts with the main concerns of her present life. She said spontaneously only, "I was dating someone for many years. This relationship ended and I began dating the man who is my husband." I prompted her to tell me more about "the relationship that ended." It seemed to have oc-

curred in an emotionally distant time and she described him only as a foil to her husband, George. As she told it at this point, Jack would not have been a good life partner for her. What was important was a stable life focused on family. George was a friend she had known and worked with for many years. Although she never “fell in love” with him in an intense way, she, knew George to be “sensitive, caring, handsome, somewhat shy and responsible.” He loved children and had the same values as she, and she felt that they “fit together” well. They married just a month after she graduated from college. At this telling, Maria described Jack as involved in the drug culture, selling drugs—“I didn’t want to have to cope with that,” she said. “He was not motivated to finish school or to work. He had a big circle of friends that didn’t include me, there were lots of times he wasn’t there for me. I ended the relationship—I needed to see what else was out there. He wasn’t interested in marriage or children.”

Maria remembered that there had been a lot of emotional pain in this relationship and contrasted this with the steadiness of her husband. “I was always tugged around emotionally,” she says of Jack while describing how she and George “play off against each other really well that way.” Because Maria does not remember the earlier version of her relationship with Jack that she had told me 12 years earlier, she does not narratively try to reconcile her highly positive view of him at age 20 with this current characterization. As her sense of herself has changed, so has her construction of Jack. Whether she was, at age 20, aware of the negative aspects of her relationship with him and denying them or discounting them or whether there had been some event (she does mention that Jack had dropped out of college) that led to a different view of him, we cannot know from these data. It is noteworthy, though, that Maria does not choose to narrate this part of the story that is, at this point, primarily about George and, by implication, the set of values to which she committed herself. She is no longer much interested in Jack—and she does not mention the racial issue at all. (To have asked about the end of her relationship with Jack during the interview would have been intrusive and shaped the account, although, with hindsight, I wish I would have found a way to have learned more about what she felt had happened. As I reread the interview, it appears that I did not ask because Jack was so much a minor character, appearing in the narrative only as a contrast to George, and I had already once directed her to tell me more about him.)

Maria's life structure, at age 33, also brought her closer to her family of origin, an event in which Jack also has a role, now seen as a disruptive one. "My father pretended my relationship with Jack didn't exist," she emphasized, "but he likes George." The relationship with Jack was "a real struggle knowing he disapproved of it so much. . . . As I became more traditional, we visit back and forth a lot. He adores my children." At this point, Maria's more "traditional," family-centered current self is in dialogue with her adolescent self that is portrayed as more misguided than anything else but as a self that displeased and created distance within her family. Maria-with-Jack is dramatized as a less contented Maria than Maria-with-George, and her valuing of George's stability and devotion to fatherhood is increased by remembering Jack, who did not even want children. She was thus constructing a self who did not need to be in love or in an emotionally volatile relationship—this self had been discarded. Instead, her current self was one that most wanted to be with a man whom she felt would be a good father to her children and a reliable husband to her.

### Age 43

By age 43, Maria was, with good reason, more beleaguered by life. She had been feeling that her life structure and ways of coping were running smoothly when, 3 years ago, George, at the age of 46, developed a brain tumor. Although he survived a very risky surgery, he was left with multiple disabilities, and Maria had to take on herself the support and management of the family. There were many other losses of family members, so, for Maria, "the last 10 years have been an extended period of trauma." They were also years of great professional success.

Maria was at this point even more deeply committed to George. She said, "I have such respect for him—how he would never accept the limitations that others kept putting on him. And I think he also saw a strength in me. I held things together. I worked. I took care of the kids, visited him in the hospital every day. It brought us closer. We found each other. We care about each other. We care a lot about our kids. We are committed to each other. We've been through some rough times together and I can see where this could drive people apart." Reflecting on her marriage, Maria feels that it has turned out much as she expected. "I wanted someone who is very family-

oriented and that's what I got. I wanted a husband who was around—I compare him to other people I know and I think this is really what I wanted. I didn't want a part-time husband or a part-time father for my kids. There were times I wished we had more financial security and I could take golf lessons or belong to a gardening club and not have to work as much as I do." Maria cannot look to George to be the traditional breadwinner, and this is a source of disappointment that she bravely bears.

As Maria detailed for me all the pain and struggle in her life, I did not expect Jack to appear at all in her narrative. Clearly, Maria no longer needed the Jack episode to construct a self independent of or differentiated from her family or to define George by contrast or to justify her choice of him as a life partner.

But Jack did appear, and her memory of him served quite a different function. In this autobiographical telling at age 43, Maria was most passionate in the interview when discussing her daughter, Linda, now 17.

"I'm having a tough time dealing with her. She has been dating a boy for over a year which I am having a real hard time with. And what's funny is that I was involved with this guy before I got married for 7 years and I was at my cousin's for Easter and we were talking about our daughters and I said I wish she'd broaden her horizons and I don't know why she'd want to stick to one guy and my cousin turned to me and said, 'Sounds just like her mother.' And I thought, my God, you're right. And the more I try and discuss it with her, the more she digs her heels in. She's always had a stubborn streak, but we've always had a good relationship and this is the first thing that we've hit that we just don't see eye to eye on at all. And I'm not particularly fond of him. He's not a bad kid, but I think he has some real problems and I think she sees herself as a helper. I never drank as a teen and neither does she, but she went to a party the other night and all the guys gave her their keys to hold and it was like looking in the mirror. I was called the 'Mother' of my high school. And I see Linda—she is the dependable one and I look at her and I think, she is me. Yet it's making me angry to see her in this long-term relationship at this young age. She won't even let me open my mouth about it. I've used all the skills I have to talk to her about it. And my colleagues, who are therapists, are telling me that this is her separation issue and lighten up about it, so I try but I find this is the first big struggle I'm having with her. She's a very bright girl, does well in

school, has never been in any trouble. She's a child most parents would die for. Talking to her about college is a real struggle—she could care less. She's got so much potential, but she is so caught up in this relationship."

I wondered why it would make Maria so angry to see her daughter repeating her own pattern. "Because I look back and know why I rebelled. Because my parents were so strict. But I've let her do almost everything. I feel like I've done just the opposite of my parents in bringing her up, and here she's doing the same thing. I didn't expect it from her. I expected her to be a little more worldly and not to get caught up, intensely in a relationship. She's seen her mother be very independent and work. I've supported the family for 3 years, I've always worked outside the home. The different awards I've gotten. She's come to the dinners, so she's seen her mother. So I always felt she didn't have the same role model as I did, you know, a mother for whom marriage was almost arranged and was very subservient. She saw a very different relationship than I did with my parents. I just don't understand why she's had that need to get so involved in such a monogamous relationship at such a young age. . . . She says to me don't worry I'm not going to marry him. And I say then why are you doing this? They spend almost every waking moment together, and I've tried to limit the time but she just gets more angry so I kind of let up. She does what she's supposed to do, but that's been a major struggle."

Now, in this long narration at age 43 are many complex dialogues among many of Maria's various constructed selves, all entangled with the meanings she is currently making about her relationship with Jack. First, it is noteworthy that she tells me that she did not even make a connection between her relationship with Jack and Linda's relationship with her boyfriend until her cousin called it to her attention. Thus she indicates that the self with Jack had been buried somewhere, suppressed, repressed perhaps, but not alive in her consciousness. In terms of the Self Memory System theory outlined by Conway, Singer, and Tagini (2004), one might say that her conceptual self at this age kept her from accessing this memory in her "autobiographical knowledge base."

But once her cousin tells her that Linda "sounds like her mother," the old (now discordant) memory of her relationship with Jack—in some form—comes into consciousness and must be made consistent with Maria's current self-understanding. Some psychological theories might predict that Maria would call on the memory of her old

self-with-Jack to better understand her daughter. This would be one way of making her life narrative consistent, drawing on her past to illuminate the present. But instead, Maria reconstructs her adolescent self as “rebellious,” a construction she has not offered before in her narrations. Now, she depicts her earlier self as engendered by the strictness of her parents, as an oppositional rather than a principled self, a self that was fighting her parents rather than a self fighting bigotry or groping for independence. She has lost the self that was in love and cannot even imagine Linda as a girl in love. “I just don’t understand why she’s had that need to get so involved in such a monogamous relationship at such a young age,” Maria says. The Maria self-in-love has vanished. The consistency here lies in decrying her own adolescent self as she struggles against the rebelliousness she sees in Linda.

Maria’s need to do this is tied to another aspect of her dialogue with her adolescent self. This is the dialogue between Maria as a mother and Maria as a daughter. Maria’s current investment is in seeing herself as a good mother. In mothering Linda, Maria is also, in some way, mothering her own projected adolescent self. Maria the daughter was without a role model, under the thumb of a closed-minded mother, and this self has created the mother she has tried to be—accepting, open, available to her children. So her dialogue with Linda is also a dialogue with the mother aspects of herself, the mother she has tried to be and the angry, controlling mother she fears she is helplessly becoming. Thus, Maria now casts her earlier self as an inevitable result of overcontrol as a contrast to the Linda who she had hoped would develop differently.

A third dialogue is with the self that Maria remembers as “the dependable one,” a self that seems to her to be continuous but now is viewed with some ambivalence. This is the element that leads her to say, with some repulsion, that “Linda is me.” She finds in Linda aspects of a self that she wishes to disavow. And what she wants to disavow is the adolescent self who is overly involved in a relationship, the adolescent girl who steadies an impulsive boy. She does not mention the racial issue. She reshapes her remembered adolescent self to correspond to her view of Linda.

In her current experience of self, Maria is proud of having become a professionally successful woman who has balanced love and work, especially because her background oriented her toward a traditional route where family would be the sole focus of her life. But there is a

part of Maria that may have been even more professionally ambitious, more self-oriented, and these hopes she locates—and tries to engender—in Linda. So when Linda refuses to discuss college, Maria engages a complex internal dialogue about ambition and relationships. In this sense, her reconstruction in memory of her adolescent self is as a foolish girl who, in dialogue, she admonishes.

As she narrates the meanings of her relationship with Jack, at age 43, the self with him is now constructed as rebellious, overly dependable, and reactive, a bad example for her daughter, a discarded and devalued self, a self better forgotten. That her relationship with Jack was once a way of defining herself as principled, independent of her family, or a means of discovering the importance to her of a devoted, family-oriented man are all no longer part of the remembered self. The discarded self that she remembered at age 33 now takes an emotionally meaningful role on the stage; it is called forth to be actively disavowed. This self has become, in Ogilvie's (1987) terms, an "undesired self" from which Maria now actively distances herself.

### Age 55

So what could now be the fate of this autobiographical episode at age 55, I wondered? In the intervening 12 years, Maria has gone on to yet more professional responsibility and success, although her main focus is still her family. George's condition has remained stable, but he has become somewhat more of a burden. Linda married a boy next door whom Maria adores and has had a child. Much of Maria's autobiographical narrative at this age is about her children, their decisions, her experience of them, and her belief that she and George did a good job as parents by affording their children independence. There are also many stories of career challenges, all of which she has met and overcome. Maria has also had some health problems and has taken a lot of responsibility for caring for her aging parents. With all this, after 4 hours of autobiographical narration, Jack, or references to him, did not appear. At one point, Maria mentioned that she had been a rebellious teen who would sometimes sneak out of the house, but the relationship itself was not in the story. So the interviewer asked about it.<sup>2</sup>

2. The exact question was: "One of the episodes that was really important in your first interview was your relationship with your boyfriend at that time. That you'd

“That’s funny,” Maria laughed, “‘cause I was thinking about it the other day. (pause) He, uh, that he was my first sexual partner. And, I guess, George and I have been together now 33 years and, you know, intimacy has, has never been his strong suit. But, you know, I’ve come to terms with it. . . . And it’s not that we don’t love each other or he doesn’t love me, but in terms of the fire or the passion kind of end of things, um, you know, it’s, I don’t want to say—It’s just been a long time that we’ve had those kinds of feelings. And I think, when I think of that, or me, or the fact—I, I think thank God I had that first relationship because, from that perspective, I felt really desired. You know, that someone really desired me, or wanted me, or. And (pause) I’m glad I got to experience that. Even though for a lot of other reasons it didn’t work out. (pause) And it’s not that I, I really wish it did, or that I have fantasies about that it should have, or—Cause I know that it shouldn’t have, we were moving in, in different directions. (pause) He got very involved in, in pot and wasn’t motivated in terms of school. And I just, you know, it got to the point that I knew that we just weren’t meant to be together. It just, that wasn’t, wasn’t going to work for me. (pause) But I think back, in terms of, you know, kind of the, the ideas you have about, uh, romance and passion and all that, that, well, yeah, I experienced that.”

So now we have a very different construction of this autobiographical episode, one that is part of Maria’s more private life and not proffered in the official account. Maria’s remembered relationship with Jack now is the container for Maria’s passionate, sexual self, a self with which Maria enjoys dialogue or reminiscence but speaks about in this interview only haltingly and with difficulty, as evident in the speech pattern. There is something poignant about her saying “I experienced that.” This is a self that exists now only in memory, as Maria does not imagine that she will ever realize it again. So how can we theorize this kind of self? It is inactive, not on a developmental line with the present, but embraced. This self is not so much discarded as enshrined.

Therefore, we can see in this longitudinal accounting the many uses to which a single autobiographical episode can be put. This episode holds various, shifting aspects of self. Like a kaleidoscope, the

had for quite a while and then, then you ended up meeting George. Um, so I was wondering, looking back on it now, how do you think about the importance of that episode in your life?”

same elements are recombined to show a different pattern, all in the service of the dominant selves of the moment. The story of Jack is variously a story of independence, principle, rebellion, and passion and is differently used to help her define her relationship with her husband, then her daughter, then with herself. These various constructions and reconstructions become for her sites of internal (and external) dialogue, serving her specific self structure at discrete life periods—her remembered self evolves along with her.

Maria, consistently over time, has not been a particularly introspective or self-reflective woman. She is outwardly directed, a problem solver, a woman oriented to caring for others and doing a good job of it. She seems not to try to remember her earlier selves or how they transmuted over time; her focus has always been on the challenges of the immediate present. It is I who am linking these narrations to witness their evolution; Maria would be highly unlikely to do so. Her narrations of her relationship with Jack indicate that she does not recall previous tellings. It is I who have made this episode into a kind of a “prototypical scene” (Schultz, 2003), a prismatic event through which we can see reflected important aspects of Maria’s life and identity.

At any point, we could imagine a different narrative, a narrative in the epic mode (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) that would relate past and present on a single experiential plane, as would typify a “self-defining memory” (Singer & Salovey, 1993). Such an epic memory would serve as a wellspring of action in the present. Maria could have seen her earlier self in Linda and said to herself, “This is a phase I went through to work things out for myself and I turned out okay,” and thus have been more understanding of Linda. Or, having remembered her sensuality, she might have begun to look for current outlets for it before it is too late. But the changes in Maria’s memory of Jack are not epic changes. Instead, they are novelistic, in the Bakhtinian sense. The change is internal, shifts in interior voices, and therefore the experience of self, reflecting the “dynamics of inconsistency and tension” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 34) in the multilayered self. Retrospective narrations, then, are like different voices in a novel as the person reconfigures the personal past not to be consistent with the present but to make it into a meaningful (though “unfinalized” in Bakhtin’s terms) whole. This may involve the past containing aspects of the self that cannot or dare not be given expression in the present.

## DISCUSSION

In a recent review, McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) summarized the mounting research evidence that autobiographical stories and selves are reciprocally related in important ways. In most studies, the self-concept is presumed to be singular. The consideration of Maria's memory narrated over time, its meaning fluctuating with her contemporary life experience, demonstrates the variation in the relationship between story and life as different selves take center stage.

In any life event, all parts of the self are present, although some may be silent observers to the action. In autobiographical memory, which is, as many writers have pointed out, always a reconstruction, it may not be the objectivized "facts" of the experience that are malleable but the meanings assigned to the event (Brockmeier, 1997). Rather than representing fixed episodes permanently encoded awaiting retrieval (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), these autobiographical facts can be transmogrified and remembered differently as they enter into dialogue with selected aspects of the contemporary self. In Hermans and Kempens's (1993) terms, memory represents the self in a particular position in an "imaginal space" where it is available for dialogue.

Following Kelly (1955) and trait conceptions of personality, the self is often conceptualized along dimensions of opposition. But the I-positions of remembered selves are not necessarily Hegelian contrasts (Gregg, 2006; Hegel, 1967)—that is, not necessarily dialectical oppositions. Discarded or disused selves *may* oppose the current self by forming counterpoints, but they may also exist on different dimensions or in different realms of experience from the contemporary self, neither consistent nor orthogonal. Hermans (1995) argues that memory is the wellspring of emergent selves, and this is often demonstrated. Discarded selves may eventually find a new place and will then be narrated to *seem* consistent with the present. But memory is also a container of selves that serve by staying in the wings, either witnessing or commenting on the action.

We might think of this process as a movie director picking out aspects of a scene to put in focus while other aspects are blurred or shadowed and from which different shapes can emerge. As we learn from Maria's autobiographical recountings, this process of shifting focus serves the dialogic self in the present by sharpening the contours of current experience and creating new meanings.

In Maria's case, it makes little sense to speak of the "veridicality" of her memory of this segment of her life. What changes is not the facts of the episode but her interpretation of it and her perspective on the aspects of self that "lived" the experience. She was, perhaps, at one and the same time, principled and rebellious, idealizing of Jack and suspicious of him, excited by the intensity of her sexuality and fearful of it. Over time, she reworks the narrative to highlight aspects of all these partial selves ("I" positions).

Mishler (2004) points out that when we, as researchers, elicit people's narratives of their life (or autobiographical memories), we think we have the basis for classifying them with respect to some identity-relevant concepts. He argues that people story their lives differently in different retellings depending on the occasion, the audience, and the motivation to tell. But, he points out, we know very little as yet about what factors affect these changes or what varies in the tellings of the storied experience. In Maria's case, the memory of the Jack episode arises, at age 43, in response to her cousin's prodding and at age 55, to the interviewer's question. We don't—and perhaps cannot—know how this memory is held internally apart from her speaking about it to someone. At age 55, because she prefaces her narration of the memory by saying "I was thinking about it the other day," we might suppose that she was musing about the selves that she planned to present in the interview and considering if and how she might bring this particular one.

Narrative therapy and, it could be argued, psychoanalysis operates not so much by retrieving repressed memories as by reframing existing ones. Ultimately, it is the meanings that people assign to their autobiographical past that shape the present self. These meanings change over time and in the context of changing relationships with others, thus forming the narrative truths that Spence (1982) elucidates. This case-based, longitudinal study of a memory demonstrates that across the life span it is the meanings assigned to memory rather than the contents of the memory itself that are reworked in order to anchor, illuminate, counterpoint, disavow, or otherwise enter into dialogue with current self-experience.

## CONCLUSION

In contrast to research programs that examine autobiographical memories that are directed and decontextualized, this study analyzes

an autobiographical episode that occurs *in situ* and at repeated intervals over 35 years. It demonstrates the ways in which the present constructs the past and shows that autobiographical memory may be used dialogically to contrast with, and thereby scaffold, current self-constructions, to disavow intolerable aspects of self, and to preserve disused but valued self-representations. Memories, in this sense, operate as texts whose meaning changes as the dialogue within self changes (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). The self, from this point of view, might best be viewed as a kaleidoscope, with continuity in its elements but change in their arrangement and in the dominance (or inertness) of certain elements at different times. Identity is a lifelong process of rewriting the texts of one's experiences, assigning different roles to the various aspects of the self, "positioning possible pasts . . . in the light of an end, that is the present of the story at the time" (Brockmeier, 2000, p. 55). The meanings of the past are reshaped to hold aspects of a multivocal self that are either consistent with, foils for, or lost aspects of the contemporary self (Ricoeur, 1991). The fungibility of meanings may also provide the foundation for emerging selves. Thus, the memories that underlie "I coulda been a contender" may signify a lost self, a future one, or a regretful present self (see King & Hicks, 2007).

George Vaillant (1977), remarking on the sense of continuity of memory, says that when the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, it does not remember being a caterpillar—it remembers being a little butterfly. I would agree, but I would also submit that it may also, at least at certain times, remember being a caterpillar in order to feel more fully its butterfly-ness.

## REFERENCES

- Adler, A. (1927). *Understanding human nature*. New York: Greenberg.
- Andrews, M., Squire, C., & Tamboukou, M. (2008). *Doing narrative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bluck, S., & Alea, N. (2002). Exploring the functions of autobiographical memory: Why do I remember the autumn? In J. D. Webster & B. K. Haight (Eds.),

- Critical advances in reminiscence work: From theory to application* (pp. 61–75). New York: Springer.
- Brockmeier, J. (1997). Autobiography, narrative and the Freudian concept of life history. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, **4**, 175–199.
- Brockmeier, J. (2000). Autobiographical time. *Narrative Inquiry*, **10**, 51–73.
- Bruner, J. (2003). Self-making narratives. In R. Fivush & C. A. Haden (Eds.), *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Chase, S. E. (1995). Taking narrative seriously: Consequences for method and theory in interview studies. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Interpreting experience: The narrative study of lives* (pp. 1–26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chase, S. (1996). Personal vulnerability and interpretive authority in narrative research. In R. Josselson (Ed.), *The narrative study of lives: Vol. 4. Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives* (pp. 45–59). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clandinnin, J. (Ed.). (2007). *The handbook of narrative inquiry* (pp. 537–567). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cohler, B. J. (1982). Personal narrative and life course. In P. B. Baltes (Ed.), *Lifespan development and behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 205–241). New York: Academic Press.
- Conway, M., & Holmes, A. (2004). Psychosocial stages and the accessibility of autobiographical memories across the life cycle. *Journal of Personality*, **72**, 461–480.
- Conway, M. A., & Pleydell-Pearce, C. W. (2000). The construction of autobiographical memories in the self-memory system. *Psychological Review*, **107**, 261–288.
- Conway, M., Singer, J. A., & Tagini, A. (2004). The self and autobiographical memory: Correspondence and coherence. *Social Cognition*, **22**, 491–529.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Fivush, R., & Haden, C. A. (2003). *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self: Developmental and cultural perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Freeman, M. (1984). History, narrative and life-span developmental knowledge. *Human Development*, **27**, 1–19.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gregg, G. (1995). Multiple identities and the integration of personality. *Journal of Personality*, **63**, 617–641.
- Gregg, G. (2006). The raw and the bland: A structural model of narrative identity. In D. McAdams, R. Josselson, & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Identity and story: Creating self in narrative* (pp. 63–87). Washington, DC: APA Books.
- Hegel, G. (1967). *Phenomenology of mind*. New York: Harper.
- Hermans, H. (1995). Voicing the self: From information processing to dialogical interchange. *Psychological Bulletin*, **119**, 31–50.
- Hermans, H., & Kempen, H. (1993). *The dialogical self: Meaning as movement*. New York: Academic Press.

- Josselson, R. (1987). *Finding herself: Pathways to identity development in women*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Josselson, R. (1996). *Revising herself: The story of women's identity from college to midlife*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Josselson, R. (2000). Stability and change in early memories over 22 years: Themes, variations and cadenzas. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, **64**, 462–481.
- Josselson, R. (2004). The hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. *Narrative Inquiry*, **14**, 1–29.
- Josselson, R. (2007). The ethical attitude in narrative research: Principles and practicalities. In J. Clandinnin (Ed.), *The handbook of narrative inquiry* (pp. 537–567). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Josselson, R., Lieblich, A., & McAdams, D. P. (2003). *Up close and personal: The teaching and learning of narrative research* (pp. 151–176). Washington, DC: APA Books.
- Kelly, G. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- King, L. A., & Hicks, J. (2007). What ever happened to “what might have been?” Regrets, happiness and maturity. *American Psychologist*, **62**, 625–636.
- Kotre, J. (1995). *White gloves*. New York: Free Press.
- Kris, E. (1956). The personal myth—A problem in psychoanalytic technique. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, **4**, 653–681.
- Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts: Proceedings of the 196th Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society* (pp. 12–44). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **3**, 551–558.
- Marcia, J. E., & Friedman, M. (1970). Ego identity status in college women. *Journal of Personality*, **38**, 249–262.
- Markus, H. (1977). Self-schemata and processing information about the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **35**, 63–78.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- McAdams, D. P. (1985). *Power, intimacy and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (1993). *Stones we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York: Morrow.
- McAdams, D. P. (2006). *The redemptive self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McAdams, D. P., Bauer, J. J., Sakeda, A. R., Anyidoho, N. A., Machado, M. A., Magrino-Failla, K., et al. (2006). Continuity and change in the life story: A longitudinal study of autobiographical memories in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality*, **74**, 1371–1400.
- McLean, K. C., Pasupathi, M., & Pals, J. L. (2007). Selves creating stories creating selves: A process model of narrative self-development in adolescence and adulthood. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **11**, 262–278.

- Mikulincer, M. (1998). Adult attachment style and individual differences in functional versus dysfunctional experiences of anger. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 513–524.
- Mikulincer, M., & Orbach, I. (1995). Attachment styles and repressive defensiveness: The accessibility and architecture of affective memories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *68*, 917–925.
- Miller, M. (1996). Ethics and understanding through interrelationship: I and Thou in dialogue. In R. Josselson (Ed.), *The narrative study of lives: Vol. 4. Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives* (pp. 129–150). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mishler, E. (2004). Historians of the self: Restorying lives, revising identities. *Research in Human Development*, *1*, 101–121.
- Neisser, U., & Fivush, R. (1994). *The remembering self: Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ogilvie, D. M. (1987). The undesired self: A neglected variable in personality research. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *52*, 379–385.
- Pasupathi, M. (2001). The social construction of the personal past and its implications for adult development. *Psychological Bulletin*, *127*, 651–672.
- Pasupathi, M., Weeks, T., & Rice, C. (2006). Reflecting on life: Remembering as a major process in adult development. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *25*, 244–263.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007). Validity issues in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *13*, 471–486.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991). Narrative identity. In D. Wood (Ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and interpretation*. London: Routledge.
- Schultz, W. T. (2003). The prototypical scene: A method for generating psychobiographical hypotheses. In R. Josselson, A. Lieblich, & D. P. McAdams (Eds.), *Up close and personal: The teaching and learning of narrative research* (pp. 151–176). Washington, DC: APA Books.
- Singer, J., & Salovey, P. (1993). *The remembered self: Emotion and memory in personality*. New York: Free Press.
- Spence, D. (1982). *Narrative truth and historical truth*. New York: Norton.
- Thorne, A. (2000). Personal memory telling and personality development. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *4*, 45–56.
- Thorne, A., Cutting, L., & Skaw, D. (1998). Young adults' relationship memories and the life story: Examples or essential landmarks? *Narrative Inquiry*, *8*, 1–32.
- Thorne, A., & Michaelieu, Q. (1996). Situating adolescent gender and self-esteem with personal memories. *Child Development*, *67*, 1374–1390.
- Vaillant, G. E. (1977). *Adaptation to life*. Boston: Little, Brown.