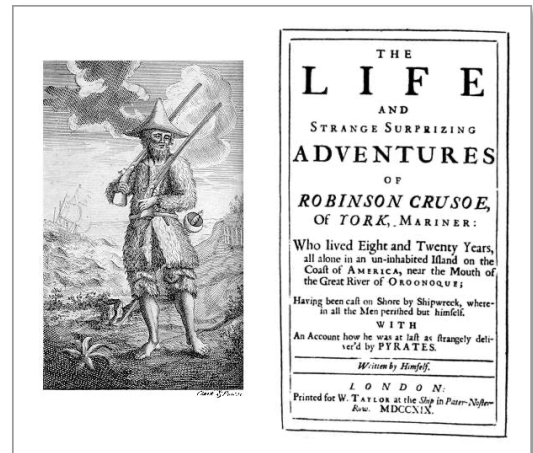


McAdams (2015)

## Chapter 8 The Stories We Live By

- Rise of the modern novel in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1718).
- Novels permitted the exploration of “subjective human experience with extraordinary breadth, depth, and authenticity” (p. 239) including how people change over time.
- Emergence of a *modern sense of selfhood*: Industrial Revolution, spread of democracy, advances in science and technology, rise of capitalism and free markets, urbanization and globalization, extension of the human lifespan, et al. (p. 239)
  - Self as multifaceted, complex entities, who develop over time and who are responsible, in a fundamental sense, for their own development” (p. 240). The individual person as a “project” across life, one who plays many social roles, pursues many different goals, and interacts with others in many ways.
- YOU as an extended prose novel (!) who, beginning in adolescence, become storytellers of the self: autobiographical authors.



### Storytelling

Bruner's (1986) distinction between the *paradigmatic* and *narrative* modes of thought (p. 241)

- *Paradigmatic thinking*: understanding how the world works through logic, empirical proof, theories, and carefully-crafted arguments—analytic approaches. Science, philosophy, everyday engineering, and explanations in the physical and chemical world. *Aims at the truth.*
- *Narrative thinking*: people creating stories about intentional agents who pursue goals over time. Attempt to explain why people do what they do, thus, fundamentally about motivations (p. 242). Narratives/stories are not usually successful in explaining the physical world. Rather, they teach us how people function as humans, what it means to be a human. Stories *seek verisimilitude*, that is, be “life-like” (p. 243).
  - In reading, we live *vicariously*, that is, our brain treats the story as real life itself and breaks down the barrier between what is real and what is fiction. Similarly, when we watch a good movie, we are seeing social interaction “close up” (see Mar & Oatley, 2008).

### *Children's Stories*

- The development of autobiographical memory in children is linked to “their growing understanding of human agency... *Autobiographical authorship depends on (and derives from) motivated agency*” (p. 245). Children have “to get” that other people are motivated agents.
- Development of autobiographical memory and self-storytelling takes place within the social context of the family. “Parents provide children with what developmental psychologists call *scaffolding* for the development of memory and narration” (p. 245). As parents prompt children to talk about their experiences, they are helping the child develop story-telling abilities.
- *Parental elaboration*: Some parents ask their children to further reflect on the stories or experiences they tell: what did you feel? What did you want? What were you thinking at the time.
- By age 5 most children typically know that stories are set in a particular time and place, and involve characters (agents) who act on their desires and beliefs over time” (p. 246), that is, they expect stories “to conform to a conventional story grammar or generic script concerning what kinds of events can occur and in what order” (p. 247)

### *Becoming the Author: The Emergence of Narrative Identity*

- *Emerging Adulthood*: the period of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> decades of life when we more centrally engage in the wider adult world. Who am I? How do I fit in?

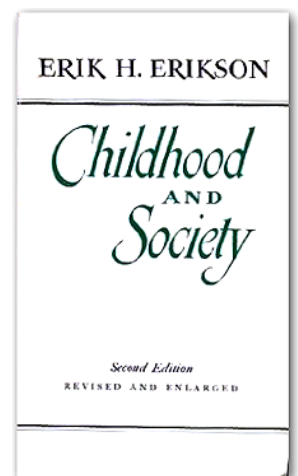
Elaborated in Erik Erikson's concept of *identity* (p. 248)

During adolescence individuals begin to ask themselves various questions in large part because the social world around them wants to know how they answer them, too. The questions include

- Where/how do I fit into the world around me?
- What part(s) of me is (are) stable and enduring? What part(s) is (are) changeable?
- How do I deal with the changing demands of life on a day-by-day basis?
- What role(s) do I play in how I live out my life?
- How do I feel about myself physically? psychologically? spiritually? intellectually?
- What are my fundamental beliefs about what is true about the world and how it functions?
- How do others see me? How do others relate to me?



JOAN & ERIK ERIKSON  
AUSTIN RIGGS INSTITUTE 1950S  
STOCKBRIDGE, MA



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In many ways, the fundamental concern has to do with *Personal Continuity vs. Change in the Self*.

Erikson proposes that adolescents (and younger adults) strive to develop an “identity” across six interrelated areas of life (Habermas & Körber, 2015):

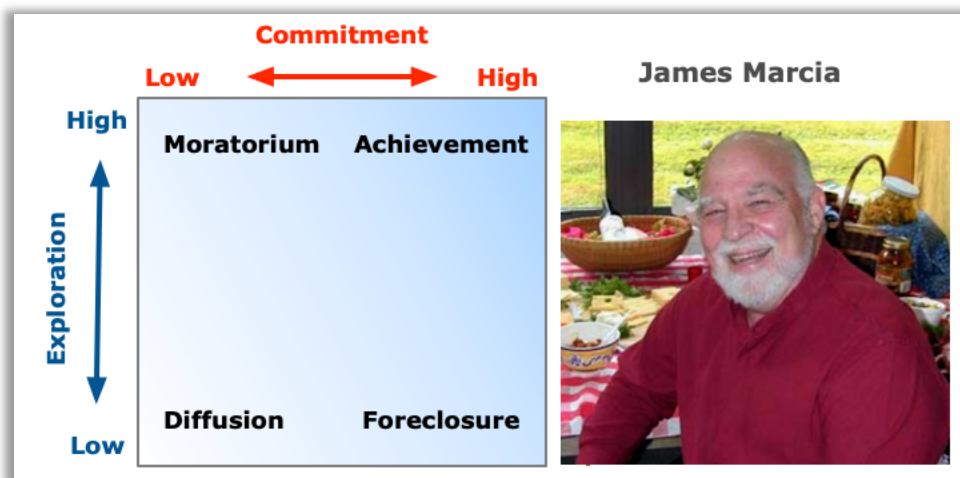
1. Finding a balance between **Individuality vs. Belonging** [vs. not belonging & being no-one special]
2. Finding a balance between **Synchronous sameness vs. Flexible adaptation to situational requirements** [vs. clumsily not adapting to situational demands or changing chameleon-like from situation to situation]
3. Finding a balance between **Diachronic sameness vs. change** [vs. being frozen in time (e.g., with depression) or feeling disconnected with one's past self].

Note: *synchronous* means “at the same point in time” while *diachronic* = “across a stretch or duration of time”

4. Experiencing a **sense of agency** [vs. feeling helpless & controlled by others]
5. **Feeling at home in one's body** [vs. feeling that one is living in a strange body]
6. Feeling **self-esteem** [vs. being/feeling worthless]

According to Erikson, failure to come up with satisfactory forms of response in these areas leaves an individual in a state of “*role confusion*”.

James Marcia's 4 types of “*identity statuses*” in late adolescence/early adulthood



- *Identity achieved*: committed self to self-chosen goals and values for the future
- *Moratorium*: Still exploring beliefs, goals, and occupational options; not yet committed
- *Foreclosure*: Never explored options or goals, but accepted values and occupational futures presented early on, especially by parents.
- *Identity diffusion*: Neither knows who one is nor is trying to find out

**TABLE 8.1. Milestones in the Development of Narrative Identity**

| Age (years) | Developmental emergence   |
|-------------|---|
| 2-3         | <b>Autobiographical memory.</b> Young children begin to remember personal events as things that have happened to them, or as things they have done. These episodic memories become attached to the self—"my" little memories about "me." Parents often encourage children to talk about these memories, and through conversation, the memories may become solidified or elaborated.   |
| 3-4         | <b>Theory of mind.</b> Children come to understand that people are motivated agents who have minds containing desires and beliefs, and who act upon those desires and beliefs. Stories are fundamentally about the exploits of motivated agents (characters) played out over time. Therefore, the folk psychology of motivation provided by theory of mind lays the cognitive groundwork for telling intelligible stories.  |
| 5-6         | <b>Story grammar.</b> By early grade school, children have a clear, albeit implicit, understanding of how a story should be structured. A story should begin with a motivated agent who seeks to accomplish goals; the goal striving is thwarted or complicated in some manner, revealing a conflict and ushering in suspense; the story should build to a climax, and then it should be resolved. Stories should have a clear beginning, middle, and ending.   |
| 10-14       | <b>Cultural script.</b> Children and adolescents learn what a human life typically contains and how the life course is typically sequenced and structured. They come to understand that there are periods or stages in life—birth, schooling, leaving home, getting a job, marriage, having children, retirement, and so on. Different cultures offer different scripts for living a life.  |
| 12-25       | <b>Autobiographical reasoning and advanced storytelling skills.</b> Adolescents and emerging adults gain proficiency in deriving personal meanings from autobiographical events. For example, they may string together events to explain a development in their own lives ( <i>causal coherence</i> : Habermas & Bluck, 2000), or they may derive a theme that organizes their life as a whole ( <i>thematic coherence</i> ). They may come to understand particular scenes in their life stories as providing <i>lessons or insights</i> (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Over time, they may use sophisticated narrative devices to make sense of their lives, such as foreshadowing and flashbacks. |

- Narrative identity emerges gradually, through daily conversations and social interactions, through introspection, through decisions young people make regarding work and love, and through normative and serendipitous [unexpected & surprising] passages in life... (p. 254)
- Constructing narrative identity is shaped by gender, ethnicity, race, and social class.

In Search of Self: The Case of Barack Obama (see also, McAdams, 2013)

Discusses the life of Barack Obama

What Life Stories Look Like, and How They Relate to Other Features of Personality

- Two ways of looking at a life story
  - A full history of a person's life
  - Taking the first-person perspective of the individual themselves, i.e., “the idea of a person's own internalized and changing story about who he or she was, is, and may become” (p. 259)
- Autobiographical memory is often inaccurate for details, but better at conveying feelings associated with events.
- People tend to divide their lives into episodes, i.e., extended periods of time which have time markers indicating a shift from one period to a new period of life.
- Jefferson Singer's concept of the “self-defining memory” which is “vividly, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories ,and related to an important unresolved theme or recurrent concern in an individual's life” (Singer & Salovey, 1993, p. 13).

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