

# 3.4

## Culture, Continuity, and the Limits of Narrativity

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### A Comparison of the Self-Narratives of Native and Non-Native Youth

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This chapter is all about how it is that Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> and culturally mainstream adolescents differently undertake to story their own and others' lives. It details a developmental and cross-cultural program of research that (1) begins by obliging young participants to argumentatively redeem their beliefs about their own personal persistence in time, and related matters of sameness and change in the lives of various familiar story characters, and (2) ends by undertaking to submit participants' responses to several different forms of narrative analysis. Although this work is carpeted wall-to-wall in narrativity (i.e., the work is all about life narratives, it employs published narratives as stimulus prompts, it collects respondents' spontaneous narratives as primary data, and it employs various forms of narrative analyses), a main conclusion to be drawn from all of these efforts is that only about half of what of our respondents actually have to say seems

best characterized as narrative-like in structure. Of course, by some especially forgiving lights just about everything (e.g., Leonardo Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*, as well as the question "Could you pass the salt?") qualifies as a narrative. The work reported here is not like that; it has instead the different aim of working out what might qualify as an appropriate contrast class—a class made up of things said about self and others to which the rhetoric of narrativity scarcely applies. To anticipate the conclusion to which this chapter leads, our research prompts us to conclude (1) that there are two contrasting ways of understanding the topic of personal persistence—one Narrativist,<sup>2</sup> one not and (2) that Native and non-Native young persons subscribe to such views in ways that are "culturally appropriate." Well before coming to these conclusions, however, it is important for us to begin by clarifying how we intend to use and restrict the notions of "narrative" and "narrative analysis" in ways that are meant to ensure that some things, at least, are left to the side.

## A Show of Colors

In certain colorful but typically still ghettoized quarters, talk of narrativity has, of late, become very much the talk of the town. Many reading this book likely frequent, if not inhabit, just such places, and in the process such readers have picked up enough of the local patois that words like "narratological" and "narratory" no longer seem outlandish. Elsewhere, however, including most of the usual haunts of psychology's more polite society, things are quite otherwise. Homebound critics of this more mainstream variety are often impatient with, if not intolerant of, all talk of narrative matters—an imagined affectation of speech that is routinely discounted as simply the next in a long line of dubious French fads. In such methodologically more circumspect quarters, narrative analysis tends to be bracketed and dismissed along with other so-called qualitative (by which is meant suspect) methods, all of which are judged to be favored only by the quantitatively challenged. In such company, merely being suspected of consorting with known narratologists is often seen to be enough to tarnish one's scientific reputation.

Given such "uptown" attitudes—this "them" versus "us" drawing up of sides—a chapter such as this would do well, you might imagine, to begin by clearly displaying its true colors, declaring plainly for or against narrativity. We mean to give no such satisfaction. Instead, the more Janus-faced position to be developed here will be spoken out of both sides of our mouths at once, sometimes for and sometimes against the prospects of

adopting a narrative approach. We mean to do this illustratively, by way of example, pointing off in two different directions at once. One of these lines of sight shows that large parts of a data set we are currently assembling demand being analyzed and understood using tools of narrative analysis. The other identifies whole stretches of data in which narrative or relational forms are either entirely missing or in especially short supply. In brief, we regularly find occasions for narrative analysis—but *not* whenever and wherever we look.

Before going on to provide backing for these oppositional claims, two things, at least, need to be taken up by way of introduction. First, and in order to set the context for our own ambivalent account, we need to begin with at least a rough sketch of the broad program of research from which our examples will be drawn. Second, and because our claim is that the language of narrativity applies to some but not all of our data, we need to get especially clear about what we are and are not prepared to call narrative-like. The first of these tasks is, far and away, the simpler of the two.

## Folk Conceptions of Selves and Identities

Broadly speaking, our research focuses on the question of how young people think about and respond to questions concerning the persistence of their own and others' identities. More particularly, we are interested in possible variations (age-related variations, cultural variations) in those forms of self-understanding that promote and preserve the conviction—we suggest the necessary or “constitutive” conviction—that we each deserve to be seen as “numerically identical” (i.e., as persistently ourselves despite the inevitable changes that time holds in store). Although our reasons for saying so are still to come, the thrust of our findings is that what young people have to say about the paradox of their own personal persistence amounts to one or the other of two broad solution strategies. One of these—what we have called “Entity” or “Essentialist” solutions (Chandler, 2000, 2001; Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003)—involves an accounting system according to which persistent persons are understood as analogous to stobs in the stream of time, enduring “things” that, while subject to inevitable wear and tear, nevertheless possess certain more or less abstract but always enduring bits or pieces that are said to defy time by remaining relentlessly the same. Change, in this view, may well be inevitable, but it is not ubiquitous, and selfhood is owed to the parts of ourselves that stay the same. In short, Essentialist strategies discount or turn a blind eye to change and are imagined to work by defeating time.

Alternatively, other individuals undertake the identical job of vouchsafing their own and others' personal persistence not by pointing to some imagined (Essentialist) "something" that has putatively remained hidden from the ravages of time but, rather, by understanding all of the admittedly distinct time slices that make up their own or others' biography as related chapters in what is argued to be one and the same life. Solution strategies of this second "Relational" or "Narrativist" sort succeed by running a continuous thread of meaning through what are recognized to be substantively different incarnations of the self. Practitioners of this Narrativistic logic believe themselves to have succeeded in solving the paradox of sameness within change so long as some unbroken chain of linked circumstances can be forged that binds together life's various changing moments.

Of these two contrastive ways of attempting to make a case for personal persistence, Essentialist solutions, while still in need of some better explanation of their own, have the easy virtue of involving "things" or essential parts that can be straightforwardly named or indexed. That is, warranting one's own perpetuity by pointing to the enduring presence of, for example, one's strawberry birthmark, or arguing for one's numerical identity by repeatedly dragging out the same signature soul, may well be bad metaphysics, but, at least, doing so involves indexical gestures that point to something in particular to which personal persistence is supposedly owed.

By contrast, claiming, for example, as Dennett (1978) does, that selves are something like a "narrative center of gravity," or insisting, as do many of our own research participants, that one's own and others' continuing identity is vouchsafed by something like a gapless story we choose to tell about ourselves, is altogether less straightforwardly declarative and requires rather more explaining. A stab in the direction of just such an explanation follows. It follows in three parts.

Part one has nothing directly to do with selves per se, and is concerned instead with what is variously had in mind by calling something—anything—a narrative. Next, we consider some of what is meant by those who have imagined, in some metaphorical sense, that selves are analogous to personal narratives, that lives lived are like stories told, and that methods common to narrative analysis can serve as useful source models for analyzing the intricacies of selves or persons. Finally, and apart from the issue of whether selves actually *are* somehow narrative-like in character, we take up the still more focused question of whether people of any or all stripes actually *think* of themselves and others in narrative terms. We take up these three separate matters in turn in the three subsections that immediately follow.

## How to Recognize a Narrative When You Meet One

Scholarly talk about narratives—like where they begin and end and how they might best be analyzed—did not, of course, get its start with attempts, such as our own, to characterize à la mode matters of personal persistence, nor, for that matter, with any other issue of contemporary psychological concern. Narrative analysis is much too old for that. Rather, long before being belatedly pressed into service by latter day social scientists, narratives and their analysis were the familiar stock and trade of literary scholars and semiologists whose thoughts strayed only occasionally, if at all, toward systematic examinations of the process of identity development. Consequently, anyone bent upon turning some part of this venerable academic tradition to their own different and more work-a-day purposes is naturally obliged to begin by attempting to sort out how the term “narrative” was traditionally played on its own home court.

Although any serious plan to attempt a full exegesis of the notion of narrativity, and the myriad forms of analysis to which narratives are commonly subjected, is beyond the necessarily limited scope of this summary account, it does not require a full account for the reader (even if he or she is not an insider) to quickly come to the realization that, outside of the social sciences, as well as in, the general enterprise of narrative analysis continues to be in what Mishler (1995) charitably calls a “state of near-anarchy” (p. 88). One large part of this confusion is owed to persistent disagreements over what a narrative is and what, if anything, it is not. Another concerns the possible aims, methods, and procedures of narrative analysis. Some potential gain in understanding is to be had by separately taking up these broad questions before turning to the more localized issues of if and when something narrative-like might serve as a metaphor or source model for better understanding matters of the self.

Although demanding too much in the way of up-front definitional precision is an uncharitable first move in any interdisciplinary venture, it probably goes without saying that social scientists are unlikely to make much headway in figuring out whether people can be usefully understood as somehow narrative-like unless or until some progress is made in learning to recognize when one is or is not in the presence of anything that deserves to be called a narrative. As it is, even this much in the way of precision is extremely hard to come by. Still, on the assumption that any concept term that applies everywhere and without remainder automatically falls short of meeting the minimal standard of being discriminating, what we are looking for is a contrast class—something that being a narrative is not.

## 250 Readings Through the Forces of History

Awkwardly, not everyone who seems eager to promote the potential utility of narrative analysis seems equally ready to play by these familiar rules. Jameson, for example, argues that narratives are simply “the central function or instance of the human mind” (Hardt & Weeks, 2000). Similarly, Turner (1996) counts narratives as “the fundamental instrument of thought . . . our chief means of looking into the future, or predicting, or planning, and of explaining” (pp. 4–5), and Barthes (1966/1987), going Turner at least one better, works to defend the claim that “narrative is universal, international, trans-historical, and trans-cultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (p. 7). All of this seems strangely reminiscent of Monsieur Jordan in Molière’s (1670/1992) *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who, in his 40th year, came to the insight that all of his life he had been “speaking prose without knowing it.” However potentially clarifying looking at the world through narrative lenses might initially appear, if narratives prove to be all that there is to see—if narratives really are “like life itself”—then, in the absence of any real contrast class, we would all appear to be better off dropping the constant prefix “narrative” and simply going on with life itself, much as before. Alternatively, one could work to set some sort of limits on runaway narrativity by trying to work out some criteria by means of which certain things could be fairly designated as narratives and others not. Unfortunately, few if any of these attempts at even minimal precision are uncontroversial.

Working to satisfy at least this minimal standard, some (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13) have proposed that in written reports, at least, the term “narrative” is standardly used to distinguish prose from, for example, graphics. The germ of the idea at work here is obviously that things without words fail to qualify as narratives. Others are quick to disagree. Wildgen (1994), for example, makes a persuasive case that Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper* is a perfectly acceptable narrative rendered in oil and egg tempera. Others, going for length, suggest that narratives necessarily consist of triptychs or sentences or paragraphs and cannot be rendered as single pictures or words or phrases. Even this much can hardly be taken for granted, however. For some (e.g., McQuillan, 2000, p. 10), even “Pass the salt” and “Help!” easily qualify as narratives. Worried that all this gives too much away, some hold out for a group of words expressing a complete thought (e.g., “The cat sat on the mat”), while still others raise the ante, requiring at least two such thoughts (e.g., “The cat sat on the mat, then the dog sat on the mat”) that do not logically entail or presuppose each other (McQuillan, 2000, p. 323). More commonly, many (e.g., Harmon & Holman, 2000, p. 36) hold out for some patterning of events, or insist on “plots” or other “schemes” that recognize the contributions that certain events make to the development and outcome of

others (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18). Each of these increasingly demanding claims has its own critics. Frank (1995), for example, will have none of the necessity of plots or patterns, claiming that they rule out of court “chaos narratives” and other disjointed and fragmentary accounts that seem all but obligatory in the narration of traumatic events. Near the limit, there are those who insist that simple stories only become narratives when they can boast having beginnings, middles, and ends (e.g., Abbott, 2002, p. 194). As Rorty (1987) points out, however, even “squirrels, a particular patch of pachysandra, and the Mediterranean basin all conform to the condition: they have life stories with beginnings, middles, and ends” (p. 66).

Faced with this much in the way of “elasticity” (McQuillan, 2000, p. 323) and what Bell (1994, p. 172) calls the “rich charge of suggestiveness” that circulates around the term “narrative,” many have come to the conclusion that the word qualifies as an instance of what Danziger (1997, p. 148) calls “essentially contested concepts,” such as love or freedom, that possess an inescapable and seemingly inexhaustible supply of ambiguity born of the different interpretive interests that have prompted their use.

All of this persistent confusion about where narratives end and things that are not narratives begin is obviously cold comfort to social scientists, such as ourselves, who continue to hold out hope that something is to be gained by seeing otherwise intractable psychological problems in their most narrative-like countenance.

### **Whatever Narratives Are, Are Selves, Lives, or Life Stories Somehow Narrative-like?**

A rather long list of reasons can and has been offered up in support of the intuition that narrativity is, if not the “essential genre” (Flanagan, 1996, p. 67), or “natural” (MacIntyre, 1984), or “native tongue” (Weintraub, 1975) of the self, then it is at least “natural to think of the self in narrative mode” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 192), and to assume that it represents our “best” and most “privileged” way of giving voice to it (Kerby, 1991). However true this may be of selves caught in some frozen moment, it seems truer still of selves seen or understood in their fully diachronic aspect. This is widely seen to follow because narrativity is “the language structure having temporality as its ultimate referent” (Freeman, 1984, p. 9). As Dilthey (1962, pp. 201–202) put it, “the connectedness of life can only be understood through meaning”—meaning that works to build bridges between the disparate time slices that together form the archipelago of our lives (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). On such

accounts, “selves are understood to be the narrative embodiment of lives told (Spence, 1982), and “it is in telling our stories that we give ourselves an identity” (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 214)—what, as indicated earlier, Dennett (1978) has termed a “narrative center of gravity.”

Although we are, no doubt “story-telling animals” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 201) who “find it natural to think of the self in narrative mode” (p. 192), there are good reasons to be slow to equate selves with personal narratives and to be cautious about dissolving the process of identity formation into a species of literature. Support for such caution comes from many quarters. Ong (1982), for example, warns against eliding the difference between thought (and its oral expression) and written texts. Thought, he argues, “is nested in speech, not in texts” (p. 75). Moreover, a life lived is always in “the midst,” its beginnings, middles, and endings ascertainable only in posthumous biographies conjured up by other people. Being always in “the midst,” lives, according to Bell (1994), lack the organization and intrinsic meaningfulness that characterizes narratives, in which everything is put there by some real or implied author. In short, lives may sometimes be lived like a story, but they are not stories, they are lives. On these and related arguments it would seem unwise to attempt to indiscriminately raise narrative to a universal principle.

### On How to Do Narrative Analysis

Even if it were clear, as it obviously is not, what does and does not qualify as a narrative, it would still be necessary to work out what constitutes narrative analysis, as opposed to some other form of analysis. As previously mentioned, Mishler (1995, p. 88) points out that this unsettled matter, like the definition of narrative itself, is also in a state of “near-anarchy” that works to obscure often incompatible differences in the numerous distinctive uses to which the term is often put. Imposing some sort of order on this tangle of meanings consequently seems a necessary first step in any effort to get clear about one’s own and others’ work. Some part of this housecleaning operation can be accomplished by simply throwing things out. As Bell (1994, p. 172) points out, in at least some instances, the idea of narrative analysis is used primarily as an “illustrative analogy,” (that is “the reference to narrative could in fact be removed without damage to the substantive case”). Such instances, he suggests, and we agree, should probably be left to the side. Doing just this much helps to clear the decks, but it hardly solves the problem. The number of radically different things all reasonably called by the same name still continue to be awkwardly thick on the ground. In response, there have been numerous efforts to somehow classify

the diverse ways in which serious talk of narrative analyses might be ordered up (e.g., Cortazzi, 1993; Langellier, 1989; Riessman, 1993; Young, 1987). Especially helpful among these, we find, is a “typology” recently proposed by Mishler (1995), as a way of sorting out what he regards as three distinctive “models of narrative analysis.”

According to Mishler (1995, p. 90), the full panoply of contrastive approaches to narrative analysis lends itself to being rough-sorted into the following not altogether mutually exclusive bins, having to do, in turn, with the study of (1) narrative “*reference*” (i.e., the relations between events and their representation), (2) narrative “*structure*” or “textual coherence,” and (3) narrative “*function*” (i.e., the work done by, or problem-solving function of, narrative strategies). On this account, most psychologists, along with other “life-scientists,” most commonly employ brands of narrative analyses that qualify as instances of Mishler’s last and most *functional* model, by spelling out the kinds of work that narratives are thought to do, the settings in which they are produced, and the effects they are assumed to have. The analyses of narrative *structures*, by contrast, are more often the work of literary scholars, who commonly focus their attention on matters of textualization, including explorations of the poetics of narratives. Finally, what Mishler characterizes as *reference* models of narrative analysis all share a common interest in temporality, and they take as their common task the job of explicating the nature of whatever “tying relations” are assumed to hold between the “telling” and the “told,” that is, between scholars’ interpretations and the actual texts that they mean to interpret.

Such type-three referencing relations, according to Mishler (1995), tend to come in one or the other of two basic types. The first and most familiar of these involves efforts to recapitulate or reconstruct the “told” from the “telling,” or to fashion some veridical temporal ordering of events from their often scattered representations. Historians are commonly numbered among those most committed to such reference models and often (though, of course, not always) view their task as making sure their own particular telling is somehow “true” to (i.e., that it stands in a veridical referencing relation with) the “actual” events being told about. Something similar is also frequently taken to be the common business of interviewers or therapists or other students of life histories, whose job, by these lights, is seen to be that of correctly mining the resources of some patch of discourse, or some stretch of text, situated in the “tale world,” in an effort to accurately reconstruct what really and truly transpired.

Alternatively, one can undertake to run the relation between the told and the telling in the opposite direction by attempting to make what Mishler (1995) calls “a telling from the told” (p. 100). The clearest instance of this

strategy can be seen in the efforts of certain comparative historians, political scientists, and sociologists who work to “narrativize” often large-scale social processes or events, and for whom narrative is a mode of *theorizing* or *interpretation*. World War I was, for example, almost certainly different from World War II, and both differed from the innumerable wars that preceded and followed them, but they can all be imagined to find their place in some overarching narrative that is argued to make them all of a piece.

Our own research efforts, and our own focal uses of the term “narrative,” find their best place in Mishler’s last “reference” model of narrative analysis, or at least they do so with an important difference. Mishler’s working example of moving from the told to the telling is a shifting train of large-scale social events seen to be in need of being narrativized or interpreted by historians or political scientists. The resulting “theories” offered up by practitioners as a way of imposing some common meaning on distinctive slices of historical time are then tallied up by Mishler as instances of his third key forms of narrative analysis. In our own research, by contrast, we confront individual young people (not historians or political scientists) with “evidence” of dramatic changes (not sweeping historical changes, but personal changes) in their own and other people’s unfolding lives. We then invited them (our research participants) to “theorize” about, or interpretively redeem, their own commonly held conviction that they and others somehow go on being one and the same continuous or “numerically identical” person despite agreed upon evidence of personal change. The scale of events and the theoretical maturity of our respondents is obviously different from those Mishler had in mind, but the formal task of creating a “telling from the told,” of providing some interpretation or “folk” theory to account for personal persistence in the face of change is not.

Despite other similarities, one key point of difference importantly distinguishes our own analyses from those of Mishler. Perhaps because the temporal dimension running through the large-scale social events featured in his examples was never in doubt, Mishler seems prepared to take more or less any form of associated theorizing as inherently narrative-like in character. Although the self-continuity warrants offered up by the young participants in our own research did, naturally enough, always consist of large or small stretches of discourse about personal sameness and change (and so perhaps qualify as “narrative” accounts under some especially loose definition of the term), they were not, as we will go on to argue, always offered as “Narrativist” or “Relational” accounts that were intended to “make a telling from the told.” Rather, as we go on to show in detail, only some, but not others, of our interviewees share in the premise that their identities are altered in any fundamental way as a consequence of the passage of

time—and so experience some need to search out what Mishler calls prospective “tying relations” intended to connect up the successive time slices that form the archipelago of their lives. Others, as we will go on to demonstrate, imagine instead that whatever it is that they judge to be the kernel of their own or someone else’s identity somehow manages to hide out from the ravages of time and, consistent with this view, they work to vouchsafe their personal persistence by repeatedly pointing out those features of theirs that they imagine to have persisted unchanged in all of the episodes that taken together form their personal biography. Such Entity or Essentialist (as opposed to what we earlier characterized as Relational or Narrativist) accounts are meant, then, to discursively redeem their claims for self-continuity or personal persistence, but, as we insist here, they are not, in any strong sense, narrative-like accounts meant to “make a telling from the told,” however many words might get used up in the telling.

In brief, then, these are the assumptions and claims that have guided the program of research that we now mean to briefly summarize as our own working example or case in point. First, contemporary talk of narrativity and narrative analysis is so richly Byzantine and so apt to go flying off in all directions at once that it would be a serious disservice to our readers to simply launch into yet another such profligate account without first trying to find a plainer way of speaking—a way that leaves room for some remainder (some one or more contrast terms) and that ends up characterizing some things as narrative-like and others not. Second, because we are interested in not only sorting out what is narrative-like and what is not but also determining where so-called narrative analysis is and is not appropriate, we attempt to trade on and further extend Mishler’s recent stab at developing a typology of alternative forms of narrative analysis and find our own place in his descriptive framework. Doing this allows us to mark some of what various participants in our ongoing program of research actually do in response to our interview protocol as being of a Relational or Narrativist form—a way of moving “theoretically” from the told of one’s life to a possible interpretive telling. On this account, other response forms (Essentialist or Entity forms) common to other of our research participants, although naturally made up out of words, are hardly the sort of stuff that can serve as the proper grist—at least for the sort of narrative analysis that we have in mind. In short, we proceed in an effort to convince you that sometimes we are in possession of data that has a meaningful narrative structure and that profits from narrative analysis and that on other occasions we are not. What follows is an effort to line out these two distinctive classes of responses that cross-cut our data, and to make the point that what is narrative-like and what is “remainder” interestingly divides itself along cultural lines.

## A Distinction in Search of a Method

Our research question, you will recall—the interpretive problem that we have so far posed to more than 400 adolescents—is how young persons understand themselves or others to be “one and the same” continuous or temporally persistent individuals despite the inevitability of personal change. What we claim and mean to show is that what respondents say in response to this line of inquiry sometimes does, and for others does not, deserve to be understood as having a narrative structure. Here, in detail, is how the question was put and how the answers offered up appear to rough-sort themselves into what we have termed Essentialist and Narrativist responses.

## The Personal Persistence Interview

When asked directly, young persons, it will not surprise you to learn, are typically neither eager nor especially quick to share their best thoughts about how it is that selves in general, or they themselves in particular, can be understood to “embody both change and permanence simultaneously” (Fraise, 1963, p. 10). That is, directly confronting adolescents with the question of interest—“How is it that you are still the same person despite the fact that you have changed?”—typically draws little more than a bewildered stare. Our own more roundabout way to seriously engage young people in discussions about self-continuity or personal persistence regularly begins by asking them to describe themselves, first in the present, and then at a point (depending on the age of the participant) either 5 or 10 years in the past. Our purpose in drawing out such self-descriptions has been to confront our young interviewees with evidence of obvious changes in their own lives. How, we routinely press them to explain, can you justify or warrant the claim that you are still the same person when you have changed in all of the important ways that you have listed out? Several hundred such structured interviews later, it has become clear that even preteens can be counted on (1) to acknowledge the paradox of persistence and change as it applies to the details of their own lives and (2) to work to offer up a set of reasons that they believe is sufficient to reconcile their own apparently competing claims about the permanence and malleability of their own identity.

Still, as effective as this technique has proven to be, launching immediately into a long series of personal questions is hardly the best way to begin an interview of almost any kind. This frontal approach, with its clear emphasis on the continuity of the self, also fails to adequately assess the participants’ thoughts about persistence in the lives of others. To avoid

awkwardly beginning with “tell me all about yourself,” and to gauge the thoughts of our participants on the general issue of change and continuity, our interview protocol opens by first focusing attention on persistence in the lives of others.

We could, of course, have elected to minimally shift the spotlight off of our participants and onto some friend or acquaintance—someone about whom they are well positioned to comment. But such a strategy would have been problematic. Obviously, different participants know different people, some of whom will have changed a lot and others only a little. Without some ready means of equating or controlling for these differences, there would never be a way of being sure that our participants were addressing a common question. The solution to this procedural problem that we eventually settled on involves persistence and change in the lives of fictional story characters drawn from classic works of literature (e.g., Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*). Such stories of character development—or *bildungsroman* (Kontje, 1993)—are stories that set out to document lives that are transformed in some profound and followable way over time. Such stories typically succeed or endure, at least in part, because the persistence of the character across these transformations is somehow followable and believable.

What such heroes and heroines may lack, when set against the flesh and blood relevance of friends and acquaintances in the everyday lives of our research participants, they more than recoup in common coinage and in allowing us more control over how their biographical details are presented. The first target of that control is the length of the story. If beginning an interview with personal questions is bad, asking a taciturn teen to wade through original works by Dickens or Hugo might seem worse. Overcoming these obstacles proved relatively simple. We used “Classic Comic” versions of these familiar narratives—comic books that, as the series title implies, are pint-sized, graphic retellings of classic works of literature in which the story is reduced to a handful of densely illustrated pages. In the case of *A Christmas Carol*, we also used an extensively edited version of the 1951 Alistair Sims film. Also, because our research eventually came to involve young people from aboriginal cultures—adolescents for whom works drawn from the Western European literary tradition might prove especially “foreign”—we also made use of counterpart First Nations stories that were similarly edited and presented in either comic book or video format.

In creating these heavily abbreviated and easily digestible story materials, we worked to retain all of the crucial plot elements such that, after reading or viewing the story, our adolescent participants could easily report what the main character was like at the beginning and end of the story, as

well as recount the radical changes in the life and person of the character that had occurred over the course of the narrative. In ways meant to directly mirror the procedures employed in asking our participants about continuity in their own lives, we worked to first obtain their “before and after” descriptions, and then pressed them to provide an account of the continuities in the lives of, for example, Scrooge or Jean Valjean.

There, in a nutshell, is our personal persistence interview protocol. We begin by focusing on changes in the lives of others as depicted in either comic book or video format, and then broach the topic of persistence of the self by asking about the details of change with the participants’ own lives. The data of interest concern the various ways in which young people of different ages and cultural backgrounds undertake to resolve the paradox of personal persistence. Because the full details of how such data are derived and coded from the typed transcripts of these interviews have been reported elsewhere (Chandler et al., 2003), they will not be repeated here.

Even a cursory glance at these transcripts reveals, much as you might expect, that some young people have much to say about these issues, others relatively little. Some are quite sophisticated in their treatment of the topic, while the arguments offered by others are rather simplistic. Although there is no inevitable relation between the length of the transcripts and various measures of the sophistication of their contents, it generally proved to be the case that sophistication increases with age. Older adolescents, on average, exhibit more complex forms of thought and language than do their younger peers. That much is hardly surprising. While there is more to say about differences in complexity, of more immediate interest are differences in the *form* of the arguments that young persons employ when reasoning about personal persistence.

As noted above, our work has led us to identify two default solution strategies (Essentialist and Narrativist) that are employed by young persons asked to justify their commitment to the persistence of identity. Essentialist strategies aim to defeat time by making a villain of change and by seeking sameness in those features or aspects of the self that have managed to endure despite change in other quarters. Such strategies range from claims about concrete aspects of the self remaining constant across time (e.g., a person’s name or favorite activity) to increasingly abstract notions of personality traits and enduring souls. Though such claims differ in the level of abstraction at which they are pitched, they all trade on the heartfelt conviction that perdurability is maintained, at some more or less subterranean level, through structures or features that remain unaffected by what are judged to be more trivial changes to surface layers of the self. Narrativist strategies, by contrast, begin from the opposite shore and proceed by granting the point that change

is neither always nor only apparent and by concentrating instead on sets of functional or narrative connections between what are admitted to be different instantiations of a person's identity. Here, sameness is found in change when a person's life is rendered in some followable storied form. Not all of the young persons who employ this strategy are, of course, equally skilled at constructing narratives. The youngest often conflate "chronology" with "plot" and point to the simple sequence of life events—like beads on a string—as the thread of a narrative. Like early "picaresque" novels, or medieval romances, the least sophisticated of these accounts fail to count as transformational stories of character development and often lack any real plot or coherent change in the characters. Still, the types of narratives employed range upward in sophistication from maturational, cause-and-effect plots through convictions that the only real "plot" to a person's life is the story created in each of an endless series of attempts to interpretively reread the past in light of the present.

Within these two broad approaches to the problem of personal persistence, we have thus far identified and empirically distinguished five different "levels" or sets of ordered and increasingly adequate ways of framing either Essentialist or Narrativist arguments. The sequencing principle that we employed as a means of sorting responses into higher as opposed to lower levels concerns the extent to which the argument makes room for evidence of both sameness and change. At the lower end of the Essentialist sequence, for example, change is effectively ignored and the argument consists of a listing of features (name, or hair color, or street address) that remain the same. Similarly, the least sophisticated of the Narrativists simply list off changes in serial order, and life is understood as simply "one damned thing after another." Farther along in this ascending sequence, the contest between change and sameness is more apparent. In the middle, at Level 3 for example, Essentialists adopt "preformist" or "epigenetic" accounts that see change or novelty as the coming to fruition of some always present but previously hidden aspect of the self: "Monsieur Madeline was inside Valjean all along. It's just when he helped those people in that burning fire, he changed. Madeline came out and stayed out." Level 3 Narrativists, on the other hand, find continuity across change by rendering the present as the inevitable consequence of the antecedent causal events of their own individual pasts. At the highest levels, Essentialists begin to wrestle with the possibility that the theorylike self-understanding they have labored over may require constant or perpetual revision and that their efforts may amount to nothing more than the creation of an endless succession of working hypotheses. Endstate Narrativists face the similarly disquieting realization that each and every plot that they wrap around the events

of their life is just one among any number of plausible readings and that their only real hope of finding continuity lies in their own continuing efforts to interpretively reread the past in the light of the present.

Knowing that young persons can, under the right circumstances, be urged to produce arguments that we can reliably classify as being either Essentialist or Narrativist in form, and at one or another of five levels of complexity, is just the beginning. Before rushing into cross-cultural comparisons, we first wanted to know whether individual young persons wield these arguments with any degree of regularity or selectivity. That is, do they use one solution strategy with regard to the circumstances of their own lives and another when asked about Scrooge or Valjean? Or are they consistent in using the same form of argument regardless of whether the target character is the self or another and irrespective of the cultural source or medium (comic or film) in which the story appears? Similar questions can be posed regarding development. Does the chosen strategy endure over time, or are all bets off when trying to predict reasoning from one testing session to the next? Finally, and regardless of the general form of the chosen strategy, does the complexity of reasoning increase over the course of adolescence and into adulthood? To anticipate some of the answers to these questions, our work has shown that young persons typically employ the same strategy for self and others, and that they do so in ways that are largely unaffected by the medium through which we present the topic or the cultural source of the stories we employ.

Although scarcely “inductive” in the full bottom-up sense, it was not the case that our Essentialist and Narrativist scoring categories were born into the world fully formed. Rather, we found ourselves several years into this still ongoing program of research before becoming convinced that the various flavors of Essentialist thought initially identified were not exhaustive of the things that young persons (even culturally mainstream youth) had to say on the topic of their own and others’ personal persistence. In our early studies, which featured young persons living in the comfortable shadow of our own ivory tower, it was almost universally the case that these culturally mainstream participants answered in ways that we have since come to label as some variant Essentialist thinking. When we did occasionally find, within the transcripts of these participants, responses that we would now confidently classify as examples of Narrativist thought, such commentaries, typically provided only by the oldest and seemingly most sophisticated of our urban sample, were read (i.e., miscoded) as an advanced (Level 5) form of Essentialist thinking. Where some see all things as narrative, we once saw none.

We have come to see in hindsight that this single-mindedness resulted from the fact that both we and our research participants are equally steeped

in a cultural tradition heavily committed to seeing almost everything by Essentialist lights—a view according to which genotypic truths (including supposed truths about the self) are always imagined to be hidden away in the depths and distinct from mere surface appearances. In such a view, the changes that inevitably mark individual lives can be discounted as trivial phenotypic variations on some bedrock of Essential sameness.

What we came to suspect, however, and subsequently went on to explore, was the prospect that Essentialist solution strategies do not represent the full range of possible responses to the problem of personal persistence. That is, although we are all arguably obliged to come to some working understanding of our own and others' personal persistence in time, it increasingly struck us as problematic that the only workable solution to the problem of sameness within change had, once again, emerged as the product of Euro-American, Enlightenment thought. What struck us as required, in order to plumb the depths of our own ethnocentric bias, was some contrast group of young persons whom we had good reason to suspect might not automatically share in our own reflexive "metaphysics of substance" (Polkinghorne, 1988). One such coincidentally ready-to-hand group, located just beyond the shadow cast by our own university community, is the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. The intuition that we set out to test was that Narrativist conceptions of self-continuity would be consistent not only with the interpretive and oral traditions of such Aboriginal groups but also with their more thoroughgoing "metaphysics of potentiality and actuality" (Polkinghorne, 1988). Whereas Euro-American cultures are commonly said to promote structural or Essentialist strategies, First Nations communities, we reasoned, might support more narratively based or functional approaches to the problem of personal persistence. In the section to follow, we mean to demonstrate that what the majority of adolescents drawn from these two groups actually have to say about such matters reflects these same contrasting cultural traditions.

## The Distribution of Essentialist and Narrativist Strategies Across Cultural Groups

The Aboriginal peoples of Canada comprise a remarkably diverse set of cultural traditions. In British Columbia, where our research has been conducted, there are 196 separate First Nations communities (bands), 29 tribal councils, and 16 distinct language groups. The issue of deciding which of these cultural groups to invite into our research enterprise was made even more complicated by the fact that some members of the First Nations live on government sanctioned

“reserves,” others are scattered in cities and towns across the province, and still others regularly live both “on” and “off-reserve.” Judging it important to at least attempt to represent this geographic and cultural diversity, we were fortunate to gain the cooperation of two First Nations communities, one situated on a reserve located within the boundaries of a major urban center and the other located on an island some 30 miles off the west coast of Vancouver Island.

Young persons from each of these communities, along with a comparison group of non-Native youth, were asked to complete our Personal Persistence Interview. A subset of these participants completed the interview again after a 2-year interval. Transcripts from these interviews were then coded and each participant was given a “Track” (Essentialist or Narrativist) assignment and a “Level” (1–5) score. Some of the manipulations that did not differentially affect performance included the use of different story presentation media (using comics versus video) and the cultural source of the stories themselves (Native versus non-Native stories). Similarly, no gender differences were anticipated or observed. As in our previous work, age differences were apparent in the Level scores—with older participants receiving higher level scores than their younger counterparts, indicating the expected increase in complexity of reasoning with age. No differences in reasoning complexity were observed between the cultural groups, nor between those who employed Essentialist and Narrativist strategies.

More important, however, are the results by cultural group and the results of our longitudinal follow-up. Our hypothesis that reasoning about matters of personal persistence is, like other conceptions of the self, “culturally contingent” (Holland, 1997, p. 163) was supported by a strong dissociation between the groups: Over 86% of our Native participants employed Narrativistic forms of reasoning, compared with less than one quarter of the non-Native youth. Within the Native group, Narrativist reasoning was employed in virtually identical proportions by the Native youth living in urban and remote settings. Among the Native youth tested across a 2-year interval, the proportion using Narrativist forms of reasoning actually increased from two thirds to nearly 90%. While the form of reasoning appeared consistent at follow-up, the Level or complexity showed a statistically significant increase.

It might have been the case that the First Nations youth who employ Essentialist practices—those who behaved in countercultural ways—were somehow more “Westernized.” That is, they might represent failures of enculturation or accelerated acculturation, or otherwise indicate a loss of commitment to their culture of origin. If that were so, then one should expect Essentialist First Nations youth to be less intensely committed to their Aboriginal cultures than their First Nations peers who adopted Narrativist strategies. This was not the case. On multiple measures of

cultural identification, both Essentialist and Narrativist First Nations youth show equal, and decidedly high, levels of commitment to Aboriginal culture. The distribution of these different solution strategies is neither entirely determined by cultural membership nor obviously yoked to a person's sense of belonging to one culture or another.

## Summary

In the world of concept terms, scope is the enemy of precision. "Narrativity," which many have come to regard as borderless, and market as being of unlimited scope, is no exception. What we have attempted to argue and demonstrate in this chapter is that talk of narrativity without remainder (without some contrast class to which the term "narrative" scarcely applies) threatens to become too imprecise for words. In our own empirical efforts, we have worked to show that important individual and cultural differences can be usefully illuminated by drawing on insights owed to what is, for most social scientists, a newly emerging narrative tradition. At the same time, as our illustrative data show, not everything that some of our young participants had to say, and practically nothing said by others, especially lends itself to being seen in its most narrative countenance. Such contrasts, in our view, are the real stuff out of which the future of narrative analysis will be made.

## Notes

1. The term "aboriginal" refers to indigenous people in general, while "Aboriginal" is meant to reference specific groups within Canada. The Aboriginal peoples of Canada consist of three distinct groups: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The First Nations were once termed "Indian." The Inuit were formerly referred to as "Eskimo." The Métis trace their origins to marriages between the First Nations and European settlers.

2. As will become apparent shortly, the terms "Narrativist" and "Essentialist" will be used throughout this chapter to refer to one or the other of two data scoring categories.

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