



Downloaded from: <http://bucks.collections.crest.ac.uk/>

This document is protected by copyright. It is published with permission and all rights are reserved.

Usage of any items from Buckinghamshire New University's institutional repository must follow the usage guidelines.

Any item and its associated metadata held in the institutional repository is subject to

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Please note that you must also do the following;

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
- a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

You may not

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

If you need further guidance contact the Research Enterprise and Development Unit
ResearchUnit@bucks.ac.uk

Narrative Identity: From The Inside Out

This article will share the preliminary findings from a wider and ongoing interpretative synthesis of narrative identity literature. First, we provide the analogy of Dante's journey through the 'inferno' to contextualize the review. Second, we share interpretations of literature pertaining to how life stories create meaning and suggest polarity might play an important role in forming complex and coherent meanings of life and selfhood. Meaning making in life stories is seen as a dynamic position of equilibrium between polarities in experiences that lead to themes and patterns. We suggest as an example the interplay between self and the world creates a person's sense of agency, the extent a person believes they create their world or are created by it. Third, we interpret literature pertaining to how meaning creates life stories and suggest some examples of practise that may increase complexity and coherence of the expression and embodiment of meaning. Finally, we consider if it is the balance between these different experiences of meanings that may provide a person with the greatest sense of who they are.

Keywords: Narrative Identity; Life Story; Meaning; Complexity; Coherence.

Part One: A Hero's Journey

“Midway in the journey of our life

I found myself in the midst of a dark wood -

the true way was lost.”

(Dante, *Inferno* - Canto 1, cited in Baxter, 2018 p. 4)

This article will use the poetic narrative of Dante's 'Divine Comedy' with its contrasting imagery as an allegory that we believe holds true for life's entire journey. In essence, we will use a story to explain a story. In his writing, Dante describes a spiritual and personal journey down into and out through the 'inferno'. He attempts to bring order and understanding to his chaotic world that is full of contrasting opposites. By writing the *Divine Comedy*, Dante was attempting to unite and overcome the divisions between two cultures of his day; the courtly culture of worldly love and the monastic culture of delayed bliss. So he takes readers on an experiential journey through his beliefs by travelling through polar landscapes, through history and through his psyche. He takes readers on a journey 'inside out'. As we follow Dante's journey we will share some preliminary findings from an ongoing and wider literature review as part of a Masters degree project that the second and third authors are advising on.

For this project, we are using a meta-ethnographic approach to review narrative identity literature from the perspective of meaning. The purpose of this is to undertake an interpretative synthesis of the three main narrative identity theories as identified by Vassilieva (2016) in order to develop an integrated model. Meta-ethnography has been chosen because as Campbell et al (2012, p. iv) suggests it an “effective method for synthesising qualitative research”. Meta-ethnography is also an interpretative approach

that translates studies into each other through the analyst's worldview whilst maintaining the character and holism of each study, an aim that we wanted to achieve in this project (Noblit & Hare, 1988). It is through this translation of meaning that possibilities may be created. Translation takes place via metaphor, which we acknowledge for some this might seem unscientific or imprecise and yet as Stein (2004, p. 11) concludes "Metaphors can help us think our way into new territory. They can provoke reflection and suggest new avenues" or as Lakoff and Johnson (2008, p. 3) posit "If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor." For these reasons and for the purpose of this project we will embrace the use of metaphor and invite you to read this article through these intentions. Our hope is to discover new relationships, create a new synthesis of ideas and find new perspectives in narrative literature that might contribute to a greater understanding of the topic and increase discourse. We will tentatively describe some preliminary interpretations emerging from these early stages of the review that align with the spirit of 'second wave' or existential positive psychology (Wong, 2011) and may act as a useful reminder to guide our practice with others. First, we will set the scene by describing the landscape we will be travelling through. Next, we will descend inwards exploring how life stories create meaning then finally we will ascend outwards suggesting how meaning then creates life stories.

We are all 'heroes' in our own epic story that we call life. We may not feel like a hero all of the time or even some of the time. We may not be prepared to accept that we have heroic qualities to our character, but we all have faced challenges that bring fear, anxiety, sadness, hurt, loss or doubt to our lives. We have all suffered in facing these challenges and we are changed, as a result we might grow as a people and our lives will

be shaped accordingly. Perhaps, heroism is an inherent quality of being human if as Efthimiou (2017, p. 152) suggests “heroism is understood as transformation through struggle, experienced and expressed in the everyday in varying degrees or forms “. In Baxter’s (2018) examining of the classic poetic narrative ‘The Divine Comedy’ we find an unlikely hero in Dante. In his journey through the ‘inferno’ there is a useful allegory for not only an outward spiritual journey of self-transcendence but also an inward psychological journey of self-actualisation, simultaneously unfolding. Dante’s journey is a ‘pilgrimage’, a mindful and attentive journey through the landscapes of experience to create a life and become a person or as Van Deurzen (1998, p. 39) states “What I let myself go into, gets absorbed in, becomes part of me, temporarily”.

For Dante, the ‘inferno’ is a mysterious inner world of shadows, historical ghosts and misshapen figures taking part in paradoxical struggles (Hollis, 2013). In this underworld we may catch fleeting glimpses of inner stirrings, the ripples on the surface of our personal depths that may provide direction, elicit strength and build courage or immerse a person in confusion, weakness and fear. Yet at the same time it is from the passage through the ‘inferno’ that transformation takes place for Dante. A person’s journey through his or her own ‘inferno’ is a journey of seeing through, of going inwards to come outwards in order to reach ‘paradiso’ a place of enlightenment (Hillman, 1975). It is a hero’s journey of striving to bring harmony to our world and balance to the dialectical experiences of life that may challenge a person (Campbell, 1949; 2004). Living is creating a story of meaning that bridges divides and accommodates the understanding that ‘light’ cannot exist without the ‘fire’. Life is our own individual story of creation, of creating a life and of being created.

Part Two: From The Outside In

“But I? Travelling there? Who would grant that?”

I am no Aeneas, nor am I Paul.

For that, neither I nor any other thinks me worthy?”

(Dante, *Inferno* - Canto 2, cited in Baxter, 2018, p. 16)

Dante’s journey is a descent into the ‘fires’ of the underworld, his inner desires, passions and drives. It is a descent into himself, a journey of interiority. There is also an alchemical quality to the journey. In this fire and heat of the underworld there is a decomposition taking place, a breaking down of his old ways of being, his old beliefs and his old life that has been lived with little awareness or questioning (Jung, 1967). Dante is confronted with images of the horrors of hell, the extremes of humanity and himself. The darkness of humanity is being illuminated, the paradox and polarity in living is brought into Dante’s full view. Wracked with doubt of his own worthiness to be on this journey, Dante is encouraged onwards by ‘Virgil’, the spirit of the admired Roman poet who comes to guide and mentor him on his journey. Is it not true that everyone has at sometime in life been torn between two opposing choices or felt the inner tension of life pulling them in different directions or has had to confront reconciling some paradoxical situation? Experiencing life’s polarities often brings doubt and indecision. Perhaps as Hollis (2004, p. 88) suggests this is because both life and selfhood are “full of mystery, full of riddles, full of paradox that cracks the brain and divides the heart”.

The Narrative Landscape

What are life stories?

Life can be thought of as travelling through diverse landscapes of experience, from the ‘dark’ of overcoming obstacles and bridging divides to the ‘light’ of climbing the peaks and enjoying the views. In doing so we may create and become the story that represents this journey of life. A person’s life story may also be their identity. This idea has been explored by researchers in a number of theories such as ‘Life stories’ (McAdams, 1993), ‘Self-narratives’ (Bruner, 1990 Polkinghorne, 1988; Hermans, 1996a, 1996b) and ‘Personal myths’ (May, 1991; Hollis, 2004). In each case these stories, narratives and myths are dynamic, evolving maps of reality that create a sense of self, how the world works and how a person fits into their world. For Bruner (1990, p. 46) they are “metaphor(s) of reality” and for May (1991, p. 20) “self-interpretations of our inner life in relation to the outside world” and for McAdam’s (2012, p. 119) “an internalised and evolving story of the reconstructed past and imagined future that aims to provide life with unity, coherence and purpose.” We shall refer to these collectively as life stories for ease of reading. Life stories evolve from the structuring, interpretation and integration of our experiences across a lifetime (McAdams, 1993). They are how “people make sense of their lives” (Bauer, McAdams & Pals, 2008, p. 84) “give meaning to their lives and relationships” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 13) and may be viewed as being “polyphonic” in nature or a “plurality of consciousness” (Hermans, 1996b, p. 5). As Spector-Mersel and Ben-Asher (2018, p. 2) suggest “we interpret ourselves and our world through stories”. Life stories are meaningful explanations of the experiences that shape the consistent and coherent nature of selfhood. They are evolving and unifying self-creations drawing on a person’s inherent resources and cultural heritage (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Life stories are interwoven with characters,

plots, tone, mood and narrative themes. McAdams (1988; 1993) describes narrative themes as the recurrent motivational themes contained within life stories. These are clusters of story content that describe a person's goals, intentions, desires and wants through time, similar to a piece of music containing a melody. At least four narrative themes relating to self-growth and well-being have been identified (Bauer, McAdams and Pals, 2008). The *agency* theme, a person's striving to master their world, assert their autonomy and expand their selfhood so differentiating themselves. The *communion* theme, a person's striving to lose their individuality, participate in something larger, beyond the self and relate to others. The *intrinsic* theme, a person's striving to meet their own internal motivational concerns as opposed to those of others. The *integrative* theme, a person's striving to deepen their understanding and integrate their perspectives on life and self (Bauer, McAdams and Pals, 2008; McAdams, 1993).

How do life stories relate to meaning?

Literature suggests meaning is central to life stories. For Bruner (1990, p. 116) we are drawn into activities "in which the 'meanings of self' are achieved" and for Polkinghorne (1988, p. 152) "the self then is a meaning". Martela and Steger (2016, p. 531) describe meaning as constituting three overlapping yet distinctive facets; *coherence*, that life makes sense, *purpose*, that life has direction and *significance*, that life is worth living. Joseph (2015, p. 101) suggests, "people are intrinsically motivated to find meaning and seek benefit from experiences". Sommer, Baumeister and Stillman (2013) go further suggesting as humans we have a need for meaning to contribute purpose, self-worth, efficacy and value. A life story may be thought of as a way in which life is organised so that it makes sense for a person. It is the vessel in which experiences are sequenced, organised and interpreted by creating a structure of meaningful connections and patterns. In order for new meaning to be created, old order

and meaning may be re-made, deconstructed and broken apart. The story being lived is disrupted and its meaning changed. Jung (1959), Erikson (1959) and Levinson (1978) describes life as passing through these cycles of stability and disruptive change creating and shaping meaning by asking a person to find new balance, resolve contradictions and make choices. Stories follow a similar pattern, something changes, something falls apart, old order breaks down, and there is a separation that creates a polarity in the story (Booker, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Hillman, 1975; Hollis, 2004, Neumann, 1954).

Tensions arise from conflicting goal priorities and imbalances in life's relationships (Worth, 2015). New order emerges as a person's actions attempt to resolve the tension and find new balance in those relationship thus integrating the polarity (Booker, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988). "All things are woven together and all things are undone again...all things unite and all things separate" (Jung, 1967, p. 65). It is in the chaos or trauma of 'falling apart' with the challenge, fear and suffering which this brings that life may be experienced as meaningless, worthless or directionless (Crossley, 2004; Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012; Martela & Steger, 2016). And yet, it is in this crucible of chaos that as Martela and Steger (2016) rightly suggest a person may choose to change their story and create new meaning to their life. From chaos, order may come. From non-being, being may come. Is this a creative and emergent self-meaning making process that may be central to all life stories?

The Journey Inwards

In the first part of this article we journey inwards asking, "How might life stories create meaning?" in order to identify examples in literature and make some preliminary interpretations. Here we bring together the role of polarity in experiences with stories and the creation of meaning.

Identifying the divide

McAdams (1993, p. 112) states, “A good story raises tough issues and dynamic contradictions”. As discussed earlier, life stories contain polarities, opposites or paradoxes in experience creating tension or conflict that needs to be resolved (Worth, 2015). Similarly, Capra and Luisi (2014) suggest a basic conflict in life is between self-assertive and socially integrative thinking and values, Angus et al (2004) suggest it is between internal and external worlds and for Little et al (2002) it is between personal and social needs. Similarly, Spector-Mersel (2011, p. 173) concludes “Identities through stories is a process carried out within a complex web of influences, bringing together individual, society, and culture; inner and outer worlds; free choice and limiting factors; past, present, and future - all of which point to its holistic nature”. Polarities in experience create divides that brings dimension to the experience. From our investigations the dominant theme in narrative literature is the self - world divide. A person makes sense of their selfhood in relation to their world and vice-versa. For instance, we have all at sometime or another asked questions of ourselves like “What is wrong with me?” because of experiencing a negative life event. In this situation we are viewing selfhood against the context of experiences in the world. We are creating a sense of our selfhood from our experiences. This relationship of co-creation may be seen in Fosnot and Perry’s (2013, p. 11) consideration of evolutionary process concluding, “organisms create their environment and are created by their environment”. Similarly, from a psychological perspective Bruner (1997, p. 147) concludes, “the experienced world may produce Self, but Self also produces the experienced world”.

What story may be living within me?

What story may be living through me?

Exploring the divide

The self - world divide creates spatial positions from where a person may view their life, their experiences of the world and themselves. One is inseparable from the other and yet one may not be the other. The spatial positions are perspectives between and within experiences in a life story, positions of 'here' and 'there' or different 'voices' of selfhood (Hermans, 1996a). A person's interactions with the world provide feedback in the form of reactions and experiences. These interactions help shape perspectives beyond the person's own. Life stories convey these perspectives and they have long been described with metaphors such as 'I' and 'Me', the 'knower' and the 'known', the 'author' and the 'actor' (Bruner, 1990; James, 1890; McAdams, 2015; Sarbin, 1986). It is recognised that these different metaphors add nuances to each perspective because that is the beauty and depth that metaphor offers (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). However, we interpret these holistically to reflect that life stories are ultimately concerned with the hero (the person) and their world (their experiences of life). As Spector-Mersel and Ben-Asher (2018, p. 2) state there is a "tendency in narrative literature to address "narrative" as general metaphor for subjectivity". It is our interpretation that narrative encapsulates more than a subjective perspective of experience because of this inter-relationship with the world. The world provides an objective experience that a person projects their subjective experience onto, thereby life and life stories contain both perspectives wrapped up in the other (Neumann, 1954). In a sense, our perspectives connect across the divide.

What reflections of my world may I see in my story?

What reflections of my story may I see in my world?

Bridging the divide

“A good story provides narrative solutions that affirm harmony and integrity of the self” McAdams (1993, p. 112). Literature suggests that a person’s stories can act as ‘*meaning bridges*’ across self - world divide (Anderson, 2004; Osatuke et al, 2004). The story may represent a conceptual position that encompasses, integrates and balances the polarities in experience. “The existence of polar opposites in the human mind requires an ordering, in which the contrasting elements are combined, reconciled, separated, or treated in some other way” (Hermans, 1996b, p. 1). McAdams (2006) suggests stories coherently order life to explain how a person came to be. Similarly, Habermas and Bluck (2000) describe stories as a fundamental way of organising a person’s experiences to create a global coherent understanding of their selfhood and their world. This coherence depends on their cognitive capacities; to sequence the event *temporally*, to understand their *cultural* normative life course, to draw *casual* connections between important life events that explain actions, change or development and to extract overarching *themes* from life. Fournier et al (2018) expand on these ideas suggesting a coherent selfhood depends on a person being a coherent agent who’s goals, values and needs fulfillment are coordinated and a coherent author who’s life is comprehensible and thematically unified. Their story is narratively coherent. Similarly, Piaget (1970; 1977) suggested cognitive processes are rooted in a person’s biological structure that is a product of evolution. Learning and the development of selfhood share a similar dynamic, organising process that balances dialectical positions (Fosnot & Perry, 2013). Balancing the polarities in experience can then be thought of as creating narrative coherence, a process of meaning or sense making. Here agency is being represented as a thematic point of equilibrium in a life story system, functioning to equilibrate a person’s perspectives of being ‘self’ created or created by ‘world’. Bamberg (2010) makes a

similar point when discussing the dilemma of who constructs agency in life stories, the self or the world? Concluding, it is a “navigation between the two poles as a dynamic process, as one that is situated and continuously in flux” (Bamberg, 2010, p. 7). Van Deurzen (1998, p. 39) similarly concludes, “the balancing act that we all have to work with is that of going outwards towards the world whilst maintaining a centeredness and equilibrium”.

What creates tension in my story?

What creates balance in my story?

Living the divide

Each action and choice whether small, momentary or large a person makes creates change in the world. A life story is unfolded, networks of connections are created experientially, organising and uniting experiences to becoming an *embodied meaning*. Their life story is acting as a framework or a simulation of reality based on their accumulated understanding of themselves and their world (Feldman-Barrett, 2017; Ferrari, Weststrate & Petro, 2013; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005). Through the living of their story meaning is experienced and embodied (Johnson, 2013). By reflecting on and expressing meaning it may be re-received, evolving the meaning, creating an *expressed meaning* and further unfolding the story (Polkinghorne, 1988). In this way a person authors and re-authors their story as it is lived through choices both intuitive and reasoned (Ferrari, Weststrate & Petro, 2013; Joseph, Murphy & Regel, 2012; McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). As a person grows the complexity of their story will grow (McAdams, 1988). Numerous, seemingly random events are woven together to form a complex, organised, living and changing pattern; who I am at this moment (Capra, 2004; Capra & Luisi, 2014). Embedded in this is a person’s sense of agency, a perspective formed from living and experiencing their own beliefs about the extent to

which they can shape the world or are shaped by world (Little, Snyder & Wehmeyer 2006). Their life story is acting as a framework to organise the flow of experience thus creating a coherent, unified perspective of who they are and what they can do. It is through this story that a person acts in the world and interacts with the world.

What meanings am I choosing to live?

What tensions am I choosing to live?

We have journeyed inwards through the ‘darkness’ of the ‘underworld’ that is full of polarity, paradox and tension. We have also witnessed the breaking down or pulling apart that takes place in the fires of the ‘Inferno’ and its role as the source of creation of ‘light’. Now we journey outwards and explore how we radiate our light.

Part Three: From The Inside Out

“Light that took the shape of a river,

Dazzling in its radiance. It rested between two banks,

each of which were painted with the miracles of spring.”

(Dante, *Paradiso* - Canto 30, cited in Baxter 2018 p. 175)

From the crucible of the ‘inferno’ Dante emerges softened and thickened by the fires. He is changed and changing becoming more cohesive, coherent and complex. There is a sense he has gained self-knowledge and a depth of selfhood that afford him the wisdom of his own being and from this he may bring forth his radiant light as a gift to the world. He may shine, his true spirit released. Dante sets verses in polar opposition in the ‘Inferno’ to verses in the ‘Paradiso’ drawing out the polarities in opposition that are

found in a person's experiencing of life and yet also demonstrating there is a balance that may be achieved. There is a re-forging of selfhood, a reconstituting of parts and as form changes there becomes the possibility for a person to shine, to reveal their realised potential.

The Journey Outwards

In the second part of this article we journey outwards asking, "How might meaning create life stories? Here we explore how the meaning we make may impact our daily practise of living in the world.

A journey of change

"The evolution of lives is akin to the process of re-authoring, the process of persons entering into stories, taking them over and making them their own" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 13). Life's journey is one of creating meaning as McLean suggests (2007, p. 263) "The life story is an extended but selective autobiography of personal experiences and interpretations of those experiences". It is also a journey of living this meaning. As we have already suggested in this article, the equilibration of polarity or the balancing of dialectical positions in experience may drive the creation of meaning but does this automatically equate to a more coherent life story? McAdams (2006, p. 122; p. 118) suggests, "Good life stories need to be coherent, but coherence is not enough" and "Life is messier and more complex than the stories we tell about it. Yet the stories need to convey some of that complexity..." Perhaps a life story is a person's attempt at balancing coherence with complexity? Loevinger's (1966) conceptualisation of ego development describes the increasing complexity found in the relationship between selfhood and the world over time (Bauer, Schwab & McAdams, 2011; McAdams, 1988). This complexity can be viewed from the perspective of both self-complexity and

narrative-complexity. Mansfield, McLean and Pals (2010) describe complexity as indicating a psychological maturity and depth. Growth inherently involves a person becoming more complex. Self-actualisation and self-transcendence are both processes of recognising complexity in our selves and our lives. If we act through our stories then they need to contain a degree of complexity that encompasses the complexity found in life. A point Spector-Mersel and Ben-Asher (2018) similarly imply when identifying narrative crafting styles using coherence and complexity as their continuums. Perhaps in essence there are two processes in action in the journey of change, a self-actualising process of *becoming a person* (Bauer, Schwab & McAdams, 2011) and a self-transcendent process of *authoring a life* (Wong, 2016).

How am I authoring my story?

How am I becoming my story?

A journey together

Pasupathi (2007) reminds us that coherence may be created at the expense of complexity. Stories are edited for ourselves and for audiences. How we listen as an audience has the ability to rob a person of their complexity and the power to be fully themselves. In Pasupathi and Billitteri's (2015) studies investigating the impact of listening on autobiographical storytelling found listeners co-construct stories with tellers reducing emotional distress. Attentive listening influences the extent, elaboration and coherence of the storytelling. The extent and elaboration of storytelling may allow complexity to emerge. Skills such as honouring the teller's autonomy in telling, being congruent in disagreeing, scaffolding through questioning and sharing expertise adds to the listening affect. Spector-Mersel (2011) identifies six selection mechanisms used in autobiographical storytelling; *inclusion*, facts are added; *sharpening*, facts are elaborated; *meaning attribution*, significances are added; *omission*, facts are deemed

irrelevant and missed out; *silencing*, facts are deemed conflicting and missed out; *flattening*, facts are minimised. We can speculate these contribute to whether an event is adjusted to fit a person's life story, maintaining the status quo or their life story is re-authored to accommodate the event, changing their sense of selfhood and model of the world (Joseph, Murphy & Regal, 2012). McLean, Pasupathi and Pals (2007) suggest narrating problems helps meaning emerge and we further suggest this is likely to be a more complex and encompassing meaning. Negative life events have a privileged position in the development of selfhood and self-understanding. The repeated storytelling of negative events increases the likelihood of meaning making and recognising enduring themes that increase coherence. Coherence then takes effort (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). In telling our story we are inherently *expressing meaning* that may have a different extent of complexity and coherence to the meaning we inherently create through the experience of living our story that creates an *embodied meaning*.

How am I expressing my story?

How am I embodying my story?

A journey through

In this busy and hectic modern world, it is important that we create time and space so we might provide ourselves with what we need psychologically to further unfold our life stories. As Joseph (2015, p. 104) suggests a person is able to change and grow when the "environment is able to meet the individual's needs". Mindfulness and meditation skills may help a person create a richer, deeper and more complex reservoir of experiential information from which our life stories may draw and create meaning. "Before one can deepen as a person, one must visit the depths within" (Hollis, 2004, p. 74). Developing practices of open awareness, shifting attention between inside and outside experiencing, contemplative inquiry and journaling inner experiences may all

help foster a greater recognition of and a positive relationship with the complexity of the stories we are living (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2016; Progoff, 1980; Zajonc, 2009). Complexity and polarity are not something to be overcome with 'one' being better than the 'other' (Hermans, 1996b). If mindful awareness opens a window into our depths then life's questions may invite a person to live through this depth. At some point on life's journey, we are each invited to consider more intimately who we are and what the purpose of our life may be. Living asks big questions of each us. Furthermore, as Hollis (2004, p. 114) suggests, "If we do not ask large questions our lives will be small". Our sense of proportion to these questions is a personal perspective and relative to the choices we make. Perhaps, these big questions prompt us to go deeper into ourselves for the insight to live with complexity and live beyond polarity (Cousineau, 2001; Elder & Paul, 1998; Neumann, 1954). Life stories invite such questions because we need to make choices and take steps to unfold stories. In doing so we reason, conceptualise and assesses the coherence, reliability, novelty and believability of our beliefs, (Mercier & Sperber, 2011). Questions invite this reasoning for answers however, as Cousineau (2001, p. 24) concludes perhaps it is not "answers we are seeking, it is understanding". If this is so, might meaning be our greatest psychological need in life? How we 'hold' our questions may help us connect with our understanding of experience. If we hold questions with ease, gentleness and patience then learning may unfold for a person to experience and fully absorb. Facione et al (1995) identified seven dispositions of critical thinking that may yield clues to the nature of 'holding' a question; truth-seeking, open-mindedness, self-confidence, inquisitiveness, and maturity, analyticity, systematicity. If as Hollis (2004, p. 114) states, the "meaning of our life is really wrapped around specific questions" then how we hold these questions might allow a more complex meaning to be lived, after all "Meaning is not something found or sought, it is

something experienced” (Hollis, 2001, p. 90).

What meaningful question is my story requiring me to live?

A Final Reflection

We are the authors of our stories, the actors in our stories and the audiences for our own stories. In these self-defining roles we create our lives, live out our lives and experience our lives. In doing so, meaning is created of our lives and ourselves that is seeking to be increasingly coherent and complex. To be heard and experienced as a person through their life story in meaning orientated therapies such as White and Epston’s (1990) ‘Narrative Therapy’, Frankl’s (2014) ‘Logotherapy’ and Wong’s (2010) ‘Meaning Centered Therapy’ is an invitation to re-envision, re-shape and further unfold their life. Perhaps this re-envisioning and re-shaping is the client’s process of finding balance between the self-complexity and self-coherence that may play out in the expression and embodiment of meaning in their life. If the stories we live and tell create an *expressed meaning* then it is because the experience of living and hearing of our stories creates an *embodied meaning*. Perhaps the deepest divide and yet seemingly the simplest to bridge is found between this meaning we express and embody. Perhaps, it is the balance between these different meanings that imbues a person with the greatest sense of who they are? It may also at the same time offer us all the greatest challenge to who we are and who we are becoming.

“Life consists of living contradictions, living contradiction takes courage” (May, 1991, p. 73)

Word count = 5269

References

Anderson, T. (2004). To tell my story': Configuring interpersonal relations within narrative process. In: Angus, L. E., & McLeod, J. (Eds.). *Handbook of narrative and psychotherapy: Practice, theory, and research*, (pp. 315-329). Sage.

Angus, L. E., & Greenberg, L. S. (2011). *Working with narrative in emotion-focused therapy: Changing stories, healing lives*. American Psychological Association.

Angus, L. E., Lewin, J., Bouffard, B., & Rotondi-Trevisan, D. (2004). "What's the Story?" Working With Narrative in Experiential Psychotherapy. In: Angus, L. E., & McLeod, J. (Eds.). *The handbook of narrative and psychotherapy: Practice, theory and research*. (pp. 87-101). Sage.

Barrett, L. F. (2017). *How emotions are made: The secret life of the brain*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Baxter, J. M. (2018). *A Beginner's Guide to Dante's Divine Comedy*. Baker Books.

Bauer, J. J., McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2008). Narrative identity and eudaimonic well-being. *Journal of happiness studies*, 9(1), 81-104.

Bauer, J. J., Schwab, J. R., & McAdams, D. P. (2011). Self-actualizing: Where ego development finally feels good?. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 39(2), 121-136.

Booker, C. (2004). *The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories*. A&C Black.

Bruner, J. S. (1990). *Acts of meaning* (Vol. 3). Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1997). A narrative model of self-construction. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 818(1), 145-161.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.

Campbell, J. (2004). *Pathways to bliss: Mythology and personal transformation* (Vol. 16). New World Library.

- Campbell, R., Pound, P., Morgan, M., Daker-White, G., Britten, N., Pill, R., & Donovan, J. (2012). Evaluating meta ethnography: systematic analysis and synthesis of qualitative research. *Health Technology Assessment*, 43(15).
- Capra, F. (2004). *The hidden connections: A science for sustainable living*. Anchor.
- Capra, F., & Luisi, P. L. (2014). *The systems view of life: A unifying vision*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crossley, M. L. (2002). *Introducing narrative psychology*. University of Huddersfield.
- Cousineau, P. (2001). *Once and future myths: The power of ancient stories in modern times*. Conari Press.
- Efthimiou, O. (2017). The Hero Organism: Advancing the embodiment of heroism thesis in the 21st Century. In: Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., & Kramer, R. M. (Eds.). *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. (pp. 139-162). Taylor & Francis.
- Elder, L., & Paul, R. (1998). The role of Socratic questioning in thinking, teaching, and learning. *The Clearing House*, 71(5), 297-301.
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle*: International Universities Press.
- Facione, P. A., Sanchez, C. A., Facione, N. C., & Gainen, J. (1995). The disposition toward critical thinking. *The Journal of General Education*, 1-25.
- Ferrari, M., Weststrate, N. M. & Petro, A., (2013). Stories of wisdom to live by: Developing wisdom in a narrative mode. In: *The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom* (pp. 137-164). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Fosnot, C. T., & Perry, R. S. (2013). Constructivism: A psychological theory of learning. In: Fosnot, C. T. *Constructivism: Theory, perspectives, and practice*, 2, (pp. 8-33), Teachers College Press.
- Fournier, M. A., Dong, M., Quitasol, M. N., Weststrate, N. M., & Di Domenico, S. I. (2018). The Signs and Significance of Personality Coherence in Personal Stories and Strivings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(8), 1228-1241.

Frankl, V. E. (2014). *The will to meaning: Foundations and applications of logotherapy*. Penguin.

Germer, C., Siegel, R. D., & Fulton, P. R. (Eds.). (2016). *Mindfulness and psychotherapy*. Guilford Publications.

Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a life: the emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological bulletin*, 126(5), 748.

Hermans, H. J. (1996a). Voicing the self: From information processing to dialogical interchange. *Psychological bulletin*, 119(1), 31.

Hermans, H. J. (1996b). Opposites in a dialogical self: Constructs as characters. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 9(1), 1-26.

Hillman, J. (1975). *Re-visioning psychology*. Harper & Row.

Hollis, J. (2004) *Mythologems: Incarnations of the invisible world*. Inner City Books.

Hollis, J. (2013). *Hauntings: Dispelling the ghosts who run our lives*. Asheville, NC: Chiron Publications.

James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*, Vol. 2. NY, US: Henry Holt and Company.

Johnson, M. (2013). *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. University of Chicago Press.

Joseph, S. (2015). *Positive therapy: Building bridges between positive psychology and person-centred psychotherapy*. Routledge

Joseph, S., Murphy, D., & Regel, S. (2012). An affective–cognitive processing model of post–traumatic growth. *Clinical psychology & psychotherapy*, 19(4), 316-325.

Jung, C. G. (1959). The archetypes and the collective unconscious. *Collected works*, 9(1). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Jung, C. G. (1967). Alchemical studies. *Collected works*, 13. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Kunzmann, U., & Baltes, P. B. (2005). Theoretical and Empirical Challenges. In: Sternberg, R., & Jordan, J. (Eds.). *A handbook of wisdom: Psychological perspectives*. (pp.110-138). Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2008). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago press.

Little, T. D., Hawley, P. H., Henrich, C. C., & Marsland, K. W. (2002). Three Views of the Agentic Self: A Developmental Synthesis. In: Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (Eds.). *Handbook of self-determination research*. (pp.389-404). University Rochester Press.

Little, T. D., Snyder, C. R., & Wehmeyer, M. (2006). The Agentic Self: On the nature and origins of personal agency across the life span. In: Mroczek, D. K., & Little, T. D. (Eds.). *Handbook of personality development*. (pp. 61-80). Psychology Press.

Loevinger, J. (1966). The meaning and measurement of ego development. *American Psychologist*, 21(3), 195.

Mansfield, C. D., McLean, K. C., & Lilgendahl, J. P. (2010). Narrating traumas and transgressions: Links between narrative processing, wisdom, and well-being. *Narrative Inquiry*, 20(2), 246-273.

McAdams, D. P. (1988). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. Guilford Press.

McAdams, D. P. (1993). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. Guilford Press.

McAdams, D. P. (2006). The problem of narrative coherence. *Journal of constructivist psychology*, 19(2), 109-125.

McAdams, D.P. (2012). Meaning and personality. In: Wong, P. T. (Ed.). *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications*. (pp.107-123) Routledge.

McAdams, D. P. (2015). *The art and science of personality development*. Guilford Publications.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new big five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American psychologist*, *61*(3), 204.

McLean, K. C., Pasupathi, M., & Pals, J. L. (2007). Selves creating stories creating selves: A process model of self-development. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *11*(3), 262-278.

Mercier, H., & Sperber, D. (2011). Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, *34*(2), 57-74.

Neumann, E. (1954). *The origins and history of consciousness*. Princeton University Press.

Noblit, G. W., & Hare, R. D. (1988). *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies* (Vol. 11). Sage.

Osatuke, K., Glick, M. J., Gray, M. A., Reynolds Jr, D. J., Humphreys, C. L., Salvi, L. M., & Stiles, W. B. (2004). Assimilation and narrative: Stories as meaning bridges. In: Angus, L. E., & McLeod, J. (Eds.). *Handbook of narrative and psychotherapy: Practice, theory, and research*, (pp.193-210). Sage.

Pasupathi, M. (2007). Whither unity and at what cost? Fragmentation in the life story. *Human Development*, *50*(2-3), 124.

Pasupathi, M., & Billitteri, J. (2015). Being and becoming through being heard: Listener effects on stories and selves. *International Journal of Listening*, *29*(2), 67-84.

Piaget, J. (1970). *Structuralism*. New York. Basic Books.

Piaget, J. (1977). *The development of thought: Equilibration of cognitive structures*. New York. Viking

Progoff, I. (1980). *The practice of process meditation: the Intensive Journal way to spiritual experience*. Dialogue House Library.

- Sarbin, T. R. (1986). *The narrative as a root metaphor for psychology*. Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2006). Narrative inquiry in psychology: Exploring the tensions within. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(3), 169-192.
- Sommer, K. L., Baumeister R, F., & Stillman T, F. (2013). The construction of meaning from life events. In: Wong, P. T. (Ed.). *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications*. (pp.297-313). Routledge.
- Spector-Mersel, G. (2011). Mechanisms of selection in claiming narrative identities: A model for interpreting narratives. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17(2), 172-185.
- Spector-Mersel, G., & Ben-Asher, S. (2018). Styles of narrative selection in crafting life stories. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1-22.
- Stein, M. (2004). *Transformation: Emergence of the self* (No. 7). Texas A&M University Press.
- Van Deurzen, E. (1998). *Paradox and passion in psychotherapy: An existential approach*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Vassilieva, J. (2016). *Narrative psychology: identity, transformation and ethics*. Springer.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. WW Norton & Company.
- Wong, P. T. (2010). Meaning therapy: An integrative and positive existential psychotherapy. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 40(2), 85-93.
- Wong, P. T. (2011). Positive psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 52(2), 69.
- Wong, P. T. (2016). Self-transcendence: A paradoxical way to become your best. *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 6(1), 9.

Worth, P. (2015). Positive development – Our journey of growth. In: Ivztan, I., Lomas, T., Hefferon, K., & Worth, P. *Second wave positive psychology: Embracing the dark side of life*. (pp.31-54) Routledge.

Zajonc, A. (2009). *Meditation as contemplative inquiry: When knowing becomes love*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books.