Narrative Identity and Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Narrative identity is an internal and evolving life story in which the narrator integrates conceptions of the personal past, present, and presumed future within a coherent story-based framework. Carrying a number of personal and social implications, this construct represents a psychological resource for the narrator. We contend that, like life itself, relationships are often viewed using story-based frameworks. As such, we argue that the more widespread adoption of the narrative identity approach within the close relationships literature would enhance the study of romantic relationships. Here, we illustrate how the narrative identity approach has been and can be integrated within the close relationships literature. A theoretical and methodological overview of this approach is provided, the emerging area of research that has integrated the narrative identity approach in the study of romantic relationships is discussed, and a series of viable future directions at this exciting nexus are outlined.

Keywords: narrative identity; relationship research; relationship satisfaction

Introduction

In late adolescence and early adulthood, individuals begin to develop integrative life stories, or narrative identities, which are phenomenological representations of personal pasts, presents, and anticipated futures (McAdams, 2013). As a psychological resource, narrative identity provides the narrator with a sense of meaning, coherence, and direction (Singer, 2004). Features of this construct have been associated with a wide range of important life outcomes, including generativity, health, and well-being (e.g., Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; McAdams et al., 1997; Walker & Frimer, 2007). We contend that narrative processing is often used to make sense of a wide array of social and personal phenomenon from whole lives, to particular relationships, to specific life events (Dunlop, 2015; Sarbin, 1986). As such, the narrative identity approach has much to offer the close relationships literature.

In the interest of making the narrative identity approach more accessible to close relationship researchers, in this manuscript, we provide a conceptual and methodological review of narrative identity. We also review the small but growing literature in which this approach has been applied to the study of romantic relationships and, finally, flag a number of viable future directions to ensure that the narrative identity approach is fully optimized within the close relationships literature (and beyond).

The Narrative Identity Approach

The narrative identity approach consists of both (a) recognition of the fact that the self-definitional autobiographical experiences from one's life represent part of a broader integrated life story that the narrator has constructed in the interest of providing himself or herself with a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction, and (b) an orientation to working with narrative data that prioritizes the thematic and meaning-based aspects inherent in these psychosocial constructions (relative to the more linguistic elements of participants' stories). On the basis of this definition, a researcher may collect data relevant to narrative identity

(e.g., autobiographical narratives), but choose to analyze these data outside the purview of the narrative identity approach (e.g., via linguistic approaches). Alternatively, a researcher could analyze non-autobiographical material using thematic approaches (as it is often done in the scoring of responses to the thematic apperception test: TAT; see H. A. Murray, 1943), but this work would not fall within the purview of the narrative identity approach.

Narrative identity itself has most often been explored within social, personality, and developmental psychology (e.g., Adler et al., 2017; Habermas, & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1995; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Much of the attention this construct has received can be credited to McAdams (1995; 2013), who argued that narrative identity constitutes a distinct level of personality. Within his integrative framework (McAdams, 1995, 2015a, 2015b; McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006), personality manifests and develops along three separate (but related) conceptual levels. First, *dispositional traits* capture a person's broad patterns of affect, cognition, and behavior (e.g., John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; John & Srivastava, 1999). Second, *characteristic adaptations* reflect motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental concerns, including a range of motives and strivings (e.g., Little, 1999) that are contextualized in time, place, and with respect to a specific social role. Third, *narrative identity* captures the ways in which individuals integrate the reconstructed past, the present, and the anticipated future into a coherent storyline (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Pals, 2006), reflecting "the most distinctive and unique aspect of the person" (Dunlop, 2015, p. 312). Although narrative identities should be based in reality and be believable (e.g., McAdams, 2006), it is less a matter of the objective facts and more a matter of the subjective interpretations the narrator has applied to his or her life (Adler et al., 2016).

There are many reasons why narrative identity has received substantial attention within certain areas of psychology. Here, we highlight two. First, a consideration of narrative identity is required to truly know a person—to fully capture this individual's personality—and

to understand his or her inner world as well as his or her social functioning (McAdams, 1995).

Second, a number of studies have shown that the constructs derived from participants'

narrative identities correspond with a host of important outcomes (e.g., Adler et al., 2016;

Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; McAdams et al., 1997; Walker & Frimer, 2007). Thus, for both

theoretical and empirical reasons, a consideration of narrative identity is paramount.

Assessing narrative identity. When assessing narrative identity researchers often

prompt participants for narrative descriptions of key autobiographical scenes (in particular,

life high points, low points, and turning points; see, for instance, Adler et al., 2017; Cox &

McAdams, 2004; Dunlop, Hanley, & McCoy, 2017a). As an example of this approach, we

present the prompt used to assess individuals' life turning points:

> In looking back on one's life, it is often possible to identify certain key
> "turning points"—episodes through which a person undergoes substantial
> change. Turning points can occur in many different spheres of a person's
> life—in relationships with other people, in work and school, in outside
> interests, etc. I am especially interested in a turning point in your
> understanding of yourself. Please identify a particular episode in your life story
> that you now see as a turning point. If you feel that your life story contains no
> turning points, then describe a particular episode in your life that comes closer
> than any other to qualifying as a turning point.

These and similar prompts may be administered either in person via the Life Story Interview

(LSI; McAdams, 2008) or via a computer-mediated or paper-and-pencil assessment procedure

(for example, see McCoy & Dunlop, 2016). The former relies on orally-produced responses,

whereas the latter solicits typed or written responses. Given that the prompts contained in the

LSI are the standard for collecting narrative descriptions (Adler et al., 2017), these prompts

are often repurposed when assessing aspects of narrative identity via non-interview

methodologies (e.g., online questionnaires). The LSI usually takes between one to three hours

to complete, resulting in an impressive (and daunting) amount of text. Participants' responses

are subsequently transcribed verbatim and then coded in terms of a number of conceptual

categories. Some participants may be uncomfortable with sharing personal and intimate

information with an unfamiliar interview partner. In our experience, however, people generally report enjoying sharing their stories despite the (potentially) sensitive subject matter they may choose to disclose. In any manner, it is important to train interviewers for empathic competence as well as to instruct them to underscore the fact that, when providing participants with an overview of the interview process, these participants are free to skip any and all questions raised. If responses are provided orally, they are typically transcribed verbatim. These transcripts and/or the written responses provided by the participants themselves are then considered in subsequent coding and analyses.

Coding and analyzing narrative identity data. When quantifying key scenes for thematic and manifest content, groups of trained coders, blind to all participants' information (at a minimum) and blind to the hypotheses of the study (ideally) are sought. These coders rate the data in concert with either pre-existing or novel coding systems. In each case, the training of these coders is not complete until a high degree of inter-rater reliability is established (for discussion, see Adler et al., 2017; Cicchetti, 1994). On the basis of the nature of the coding system (e.g., ratings on a Likert-type scale, presence/absence), this inter-rater reliability may be quantified using a variety of statistics, including intra-class correlations (*ICC*s), Cohen's kappa, Category Agreement, or delta (see Adler et al., 2017).

The above speaks to the "how" of coding. With respect to the "what" of coding, narrative material is often quantified in terms of constructs placed within one of four above introduced broad categories (Adler et al., 2016). *Motivational themes* capture what the narrator has longed for in the past or is currently seeking. Most commonly, these themes are operationalized in terms of agency and communion (Bakan, 1966). Whereas agency manifests in themes of self-assertion and self-expansion (McAdams, 2010), communion captures a sense of social belongingness and connectedness (McAdams, 2010). *Affective themes* refer to the emotional quality of the narrative in question. These themes focus either on the valence of the story or on shifts in this valence. The valence of the story is typically quantified along a

Likert-type scale, ranging from negative to positive emotional tone (i.e., larger values indicate more positive affective tone). Other affective themes include redemption and contamination. Whereas redemptive stories begin negatively and end positively, contaminated stories start positively and finish negatively (e.g., McAdams, Reynolds, Leweis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). *Themes of integrative meaning* capture the interpretative evaluation and meaning the narrator has applied to the storied experience (e.g., King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). These themes provide indication of the degree to which narrated events are psychologically resolved and/or have been integrated into a new understanding of the self and social world, illustrating personal growth and development of that person (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). Finally, *structural elements* capture the configural dimension of autobiographical narratives. They include constructs such as complexity and coherence, the details participants emphasize, as well as the degree to which the narrator tells the story in a sophisticated and expressive manner.

    A case in point. In the following, we provide an example of a coding process typical of narrative identity research. In this particular example, the second author and his research team focused on coding autobiographical narratives for redemptive sequences. By way of recap, a narrative may be understood to contain redemptive imagery when it begins negatively and ends positively. Such a narrative arc features prominently in American culture (think 'rags to riches', 'suffering to salvation') and, for this reason, some have suggested that it represents the story US Americans live by (McAdams, 2006).

    In the project summarized here, the authors explored redemptive stories pertaining to participants' romantic lives (Dunlop et al., 2017a). These participants were asked to provide three key scenes pertaining to the romantic domain (in this case, high points, low points, and turning points) and also to complete a battery of non-narrative measures (including a measure of adult romantic attachment tendencies).

The coding process included a series of steps. First, two coders (blind to the hypotheses and to identifying information of the participants) were recruited to independently code the narrative material. Both coders obtained training from a researcher familiar with the coding procedure. During this training procedure, the researcher provided the coders with a small number of exemplary narratives (i.e., narratives that did and did not contain redemption). The coders and the researcher then reviewed the requirements for a given narrative to be considered a "hit" for redemption (namely a story that begins negatively and ends positively). The entirety of narratives in this sample were next put in a single spreadsheet, the order of which was randomized. Raters were then required to read through each narrative (or a subset of narratives) and denote in an adjacent column whether said narrative did (denoted with a "1") or did not (denoted with a "0") contain redemptive imagery (McAdams, 1999). The following represents an exemplary redemptive narrative from this sample.[1]

> The turning point I can remember now is the time when I was with my girlfriend at the time (now who is my fiancée) and myself. Last year, we had a big argument that saw me leaving her for two months. I thought we ended everything but it didn't work out that way. I was devastated and I tried things that would help me get over her like drinking, dating, but those didn't work. I was still in love with her. Something I thought I could never do. Still had the apartment key so I decided it was time I go get my things. I opened the door. It was her lying on the couch sobbing. I felt awkward. I ask her if I could come in and get my other stuff. She said nothing but looked at me with her puffy eyes. I could tell she was crying a lot. I slowly went into the bedroom and saw my things already packed in two bags. When I took the bags and turned around, I saw her at the door with her hands covering her mouth. I walked towards the door hoping that she would let me through but she stood there gazing into my eyes. Then she grabbed me, hugging me at the waist and told me that I am the best person she has ever been with. I could feel this warmth coming from her. Then I drop the bags, pull her off me and looked at her for a minute. I dropped to one knee and told her that I am a mess without her. I have never been loved the way she did it, and I can't apologize enough for the argument, but I need her in my life. I need her to be my better half, My wife. She started to cry and under the crying, she said yes. She cried for an hour not because of the argument or the fact that I am back but because of love and the fact she was happy she is going to be married to me.

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[1] In the interest of interpretability, we have made minor grammatical edits to this narrative.

After this independent coding process, the degree of inter-rater reliability was determined. On the basis of the nature of the coding system used (i.e., presence/absence), Cohen's kappa represents the appropriate statistic to consider (Cicchetti, 1994), with a value equal to or greater than .60 being acceptable and a value equal to or greater than .70 being preferred. If the degree of inter-rater reliability observed does not meet this threshold, then the training and the independent coding process needs to be redone until an appropriate inter-rater reliability is achieved.

In the current case, the two coders had sufficient previous experience with the redemptive imagery coding manual (McAdams, 1999), and their degree of inter-rater reliability was substantial after their first attempt (which is rarely the case). With the resulting data in hand, two analytic procedures are possible. First, the ratings provided by one of the raters may be treated as the 'primary' coding and considered in subsequent analyses. Alternatively, if both raters have coded the entirety of the dataset, their ratings may be averaged. In the current example, one rater coded only a subset of all responses, so the ratings provided by the other coder were considered in all subsequent analyses.

In the final step in this analytical procedure, the coded narrative material is usually aggregated to the person-level and then examined in relation to other relevant constructs, including demographic information, personality traits, or psychological adjustment. Note that, if the researcher wishes to code the narrative material for more than one theme, it is suggested to consider one coding system at a time.

Narrative identity and life outcomes. The constructs derived from participants' key autobiographical scenes have been associated with a wide array of important outcomes—a predictive validity that often holds over-and-above the predictive power of constructs derived via self-report, such as personality traits, attachment styles, or self-esteem (e.g., Adler et al., 2016; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). Turning first to *motivational themes*, the agency and communion in participants' key scenes have been found to relate positively with well-being

(e.g., Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier, & Lecours, 2011). For example, a study that followed psychotherapy clients (Adler, 2012) revealed that participants' narratives increased in the theme of agency through the course of several months of therapy and that this development was linked to increases in well-being (a finding that remained significant after controlling for participants' differences in the personality trait neuroticism).

With respect to *affective themes*, positive affective tone in key scenes has been associated with higher well-being – happier people typically disclose happier stories (e.g., Adler & Hershfield, 2012). In addition, shifts in the narrative's valence— from negative to positive (which would be coded as redemption) and/or from positive to negative (which would be coded as contamination)—have also been found to share meaningful relations with well-being (Adler et al., 2016). For instance, as recognized above, individuals who specify a higher frequency of redemptive key scenes typically exhibit better personal and social functioning, relative to those who specify fewer redemptive stories (e.g., Adler, Kissel, & McAdams, 2006; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; McAdams & Manczak, 2015).

Next turning to the *integrative-meaning dimension*, the ways in which the narrators apply meaning to the events described in their key scenes often correspond with important life outcomes (Adler et al., 2016). For example, framing difficult or challenging life events, (e.g., the birth of a child with Down syndrome, a divorce), with positive resolutions (e.g., a sense of closure, a hopeful ending) has been associated with psychological growth (King et al., 2000; King & Raspin, 2004), well-being, and health (e.g., Hemenover, 2003). Finally, with respect to the *structural elements* of key scenes, narrative coherence has been favorably linked to a range of physical and psychological health outcomes (e.g., Adler, Chin, Kolisetty, & Oltmanns, 2012; Lysaker, Davis, Hunter, Nees, & Wickett, 2005; Lysaker, Wickett, Campbell, & Buck, 2003). Yet, there is little evidence on an incremental association between the structural elements of participants' key scenes and their well-being above-and-beyond the

association between personality traits and this construct. This illustrates the fact that, though established, much more still remains to be done in the study of narrative identity (Adler et al., 2016).

Narrative and non-narrative research paradigms. Despite our enthusiasm for the narrative identity approach, it is not without its limitations. Perhaps the biggest criticism that may be leveled against narrative research is that it is timely and resource intensive, both in the collection and the coding data. In contrast to the automated programs that exist to quantify the linguistic features of a given narrative (e.g., Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007), there are, so far, no automated programs that can be used to code the thematic and manifest content of narratives. Given this limitation, it is reasonable to ask why a researcher would choose to conduct a narrative study, let alone one in which narratives pertaining to the romantic domain are targeted.

Before directly addressing this question, we wish to underscore the fact that we, nor no known narrative identity researcher for that matter, views the narrative identity approach as a complete *replacement* for non-narrative research paradigms. Rather, we believe that narrative methodologies may be used to complement and enhance these paradigms. Turning to an example from the close relationships literature, the *Relationship Satisfaction Scale* (Hendrick, 1988), which is a self-report inventory in which items such as "How well does your partner meet your needs?" or "How good is your relationship compared to most?" are rated on a Likert-type scale has proven invaluable in quantifying couple members' satisfaction (or lack thereof) with their partners. Despite the benefits of this scale, however, it is less relevant with respect to providing insights into *why* people are more (or less) satisfied with their relationships and *what* led to this evaluation. Again, it comes back to the meaning individuals abstract from their experiences, an element of lived experience to which the narrative identity approach is particularly attuned at assessing. Thus, we view these paradigms as best attuned to different types of research questions, questions that often complement one another.

Autobiographical Narratives and Romantic Relationships

For quite some time, close relationship researchers have prompted couples for co-constructed experiences about their current relationships (e.g., Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Carrère, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000; Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010; Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004). Utilizing various interview techniques, including the *oral history interview*, couples have been asked to provide overviews of their dating and relationship history and how this relationship has changed over time (e.g., Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000; Doohan et al., 2010; Holmberg et al., 2004). The resulting data has been explored in a number of useful ways. For example, the non-verbal behavioral mannerisms displayed throughout this storytelling process have been shown to correspond with a wide range of relationship-specific outcomes, including relationship satisfaction and stability (e.g., Custer, Holmberg, Blair, & Orbuch, 2008; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998).

Researchers more interested in the verbal (rather than the non-verbal) data generated in these and similar interviews have typically focused on participants' word use. For example, partners' linguistic style and, particularly, the degree to which they engage in *we-talk* (e.g., "we", "us", "ours") has been shown to correspond favorably with relationship well-being and a wide array of physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., Alea, Singer, & Labunko, 2015; Gildersleeve, Singer, Skerrett, & Wein, 2017; Kayser, Watson, & Andrade, 2007; Rohrbaugh, Mehl, Shoham, Reilly, & Ewy, 2008; Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009; Simmons, Gordon, & Chambless, 2005; Singer, Labunko, Alea, & Baddeley, 2015).

The aforementioned research provides meaningful and important insights into the nature of romantic relationships, however this work is not without limitation. To begin, quantifying linguistic features of autobiographical narratives is a less than ideal route from which to capture the *meaning* that lay in couple members' stories (i.e., the more thematic elements of these narratives). Second, by focusing primarily on the co-narration and co-

construction of relationship experiences, we have come to know less about how partners independently represent their romantic relationships. For instance, little is known about the degree to which the stories of couple members align, and whether compatibility in autobiographical stories independently provided by couple members is relevant for the subsequent relationship developments. Third, in emphasizing participants' current romantic relationships, relationship researchers have overlooked (a) the manner in which individuals story their entire love lives, and (b) the romantic narrative constructed by single individuals (Dunlop et al., 2017a; Dunlop, Hanley, McCoy, & Harake, 2017b; Dunlop, Harake, Gray, Hanley, & McCoy, 2018). Speaking to the former, for most, one's current romantic relationship represents only a part, rather than the entirety, of his or her personal history within the romantic domain. The manner in which these previous chapters are storied may carry downstream consequences for how one is currently fairing in his or her love life. Speaking to the latter, we challenge that, currently, research exploring the narrative psychology of romantic relationships has been somewhat exclusionary of the experiences of individuals who currently find themselves single. As we illustrate below, adopting a narrative identity approach in the study of romantic relationships would complement the current literature by addressing the aforementioned limitations.

The Narrative Identity Approach and the Study of Close Relationships

The application of the narrative identity approach to the study of romantic relationships is in its infancy. Nevertheless, researchers have started to (1) focus on the more thematic and meaning-based aspects of participants' relationship stories, (2) modified the LSI to allow for the study of narrative representations of romantic relationships, and (3) consider people's entire love life experiences additional to their current romantic relationship experiences.

Meaning making in relationship stories. To capture the meaning-based content of relationship stories, narrative researchers have begun to analyze peoples' *relationship-*

defining memories (Alea & Vick, 2010). These memories are conceptually similar to self-defining memories (McLean & Thorne, 2003) and reflect emotionally-charged autobiographical experiences drawn from participants' current romantic relationships (Alea & Vick, 2010). The quality of these stories (i.e., whether they are perceptually vivid, emotionally positive, emotionally intense and often rehearsed) have been shown to relate to peoples' level of relationship satisfaction (Alea & Vick, 2010). In addition, researchers have examined how the narrative representation of intimacy and affect present in relationship stories predicts relationship and health outcomes (Frost, 2013). In Frost's noteworthy research, the intimacy-related content and the affective tone of relationship story endings have been found to positively relate to relationship quality (i.e., higher relationship satisfaction and closeness, fewer break-up thoughts) and to mental health (fewer depressive symptoms and higher psychological well-being), while linguistically-coded affect was not related to these outcomes. In his longitudinal analysis, the affective tone of the ends of participants' stories was linked to relationship stability.

   Assessing narrative representations of romantic relationships. In a manner paralleling the LSI (McAdams, 2008), researchers have recently developed the Relationship Narrative Interview (RNI; available here: https://osf.io/bq8yw/?view_only=912d314af25f4a76a80845bd46dfabc3). The RNI contains a series of prompts for autobiographical recounts of relationship-specific scenes, including relationship high points, low points, and turning points, as well as sexual high points, low points, and turning points (Bühler, Maghsoodi, & McAdams, 2018). This interview may be administered to each couple member independently or collaboratively and the data collected in concert with the RNI can be used to address a number of research questions. For instance, one may examine the relevance of whether intact couple members independently recognize the same experiences in the same way. For example, both partners might recognize the birth of their first child as high point in their relationship story. However, while one couple

member might construe it as ultimately having strengthened their relationship, the other may construe it as having destabilized their relationship bond. These and similar divergences hold the potential to offer insights into why couple members are more or less satisfied with their relationships.

Narrative representations of love lives. Finally, to acknowledge that one's current romantic relationship reflects a part rather than the entirety of one's love life, researchers have begun to focus on the narrative construction of entire love lives. In much of this work, researchers have developed a variant of the LSI targeting narrative representations of entire love lives (available here: https://osf.io/2edvg/?view_only=b23f9687973e4b2dbf428c24d2ff6693). Among other insights, this work has identified the manifest events people tend to report as love life high points, low points, and turning points (Dunlop et al., 2017b). Other work by this research group has provided indication that, when compared to single individuals, coupled individuals tend to narrate the key scenes from the romantic domain with greater communion and more positive affective tone. The affective tone of these stories has also been found to correspond negatively with participants' avoidant attachment tendencies (Dunlop et al., 2017a; Dunlop et al., 2018).

Furthering the Interplay between Narrative Identity and Study of Close Relationships

On the basis of the fledgling nature of work incorporating the narrative identity approach in the study of romantic relationships much more could and should be done to further marry these two fields. One way that such an integration can be enhanced will hopefully be accomplished by this article— that is, alerting close relationship researchers to the narrative identity literature as well as the ways in which this approach has (and could) be applied to the study of romantic relationships. We hope that that this awareness will manifest in two tangible outcomes. First, relationship researchers may be more likely to consider the inclusion of narrative assessments in their subsequent research. Second, these researchers may

be more likely to consider whether some of the narrative data that is currently in hand may be amenable to a reanalysis via the coding systems associated with the narrative identity approach. Much of the content in the oral history interview, for example, could be coded for themes of agency and communion and possibly redemption and contamination as well.

Further addressing the topic of preexisting datasets, we see a fruitful future pathway in exploring responses to the short narrative prompts often incorporated in large-scale datasets, such as national household panels (e.g., German Socioeconomic Panel [GSOEP], the British Household Panel Study [SHPS], and the Swiss Household Panel [SHP]). The majority of questions in these panels are based on scales with items that are closed-ended, but some questions are posed employing open-response formats (i.e., Question 148 in the GSOEP: "What else are you worried about?"). Recently, researchers have started to use these open answers (e.g., from the GSOEP dataset) in relation to respondent's individual and socio-demographic characteristics (Rohrer, Brümmer, Schmukle, Goebel, & Wagner, 2017). The narrative identity approach, however, has yet to be applied to these data.

We see at least four ways in which the open-ended prompts in national household panels might enrich narrative research and related fields. First, these datasets contain large, representative samples with individuals across the lifespan, allowing for the exploration of certain developmental hypotheses. Second, given that most countries conduct some sort of household panel, researchers can approach the study of narratives and romance from a cultural (or cross-cultural) perspective. Third, household panels are routinely collected over periods of several years, which allows for exploration regarding the stability of the coded material over time. Finally, given that household panels are distributed within families, the coded material can be related to answers of other family members, specifically those provided by respondents' romantic partners.

We also see several ways in which the current literature exploring romance and romantic relationships from a narrative identity perspective may be enhanced. There now

exists interviews to assess both narrative representations of current romantic relationships as well as love lives in their entirety. Given that such interviews invariably occur at a specific moment of the ongoing relationship story and/or love life, work exploring the manner in which these stories change with time is warranted (e.g., whether a couple's story becomes more similar as the duration of their relationship increases). Another aspect worth considering in the context of relationship narratives is the ways in which narratives might change among individuals who seek therapy for relationship-related issues and how these changes may relate to personal and relational well-being (e.g., for a similar approach in individual psychotherapy, see Adler, 2012). Finally, one may consider how relationship stories change if and when these relationships end. It is known that, when people are no longer in the relationship and need to adjust to singlehood, they change their pronoun use and tend to use fewer we-words (e.g., Blackburn, Brody, & LeFebre, 2014), but the ways in which the thematic aspects of individuals' stories change during the transition out of coupledom still remains largely unexplored.

Conclusion

The narrative identity approach entails a variety of possibilities and offers substantial methodological flexibility. The avenues that we have illustrated here are but some of these possibilities. Researchers interested in applying the narrative identity approach to the study of romantic relationships may, of course, consider alternative pathways. For instance, if an entire interview process is deemed too time-consuming, relationship researchers interested in narrative identity may also collect short narrative pieces from their participants. Even the information derived from single narrative responses has been found to relate significantly with certain outcomes (e.g., Alea & Vick, 2010; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). We contend that the more widespread adoption of the narrative identity approach within the close relationships literature is necessary to further the story of the nature of romantic relationships. We hope that the reader will agree that such a story is one worth telling.

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