When the self is thought of as a narrative or story, rather than a substance or thing, the temporal and dramatic dimension of human existence is emphasized. The operation of narrative “emplotment” (Ricoeur, 1983/1984) can configure the diverse events and actions of one’s life into a meaningful whole. One’s self-concept or self-identity is fashioned by adaptation of plots from one’s cultural stock of stories and myths. Stories of personal identity differ from literary productions in that they are constructed within an unfolding autobiography and incorporate the accidental events and unintended consequences of actions. Under stressful conditions, a self-narrative may decompose, producing the anxiety and depression of meaninglessness. One function of psychotherapy is to assist in the reconstruction of a meaning-giving narrative of self-identity. (Psychotherapy)

The self is a fundamental concept in psychological theory, holding a central position in psychoanalytic (e.g., Kohut, 1977) and humanistic (e.g., Rogers, 1959) theories. Traditionally, the self has been identified with the type of conceptual structure used to understand substances or agents. Narrative or story structure, which has been the focus of increasing interest (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986), offers an alternate way to conceptualize the self. Viewing the self as a narrative or story, rather than as a substance, brings to light the temporal and developmental dimension of human existence. The purpose of this article is to examine the concept of self as it appears when structured as a narrative.

We humans find the contents of our experience significant and understandable. We do not encounter a buzzing confusion of indistinct and unstructured perceptual elements, but a world that appears as meaningful. Our experience is a construction that results from the interaction of cognitive organizing processes with cues emanating from our external perceptual senses, internal bodily sensations, and cognitive memories. The processes of consciousness
interpret and give meaning to cues by identifying them as elements or parts of a structure. For example, an object in the room is experienced as a chair, not as discrete pieces of wood and metal. Similarly, a child can be experienced as a student, a ball player, or someone with a scratched knee, depending on the interpretative frame used to give meaning to the experience.

We know what we mean when we speak of sensations and memories. But what are the cognitive organizing processes? One of them, as I argue in this article, is narrative. Narrative is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot. The narrative structure is used to organize events into various kinds of stories; for example, the stories or histories of nations, biographical or autobiographical stories of individuals, and imaginative or fictional stories in the form of novels and fairy tales. In addition to these public stories, individuals construct private and personal stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes. These are stories about the self. They are the basis of personal identity and self-understanding and they provide answers to the question “Who am I?” These narrative representations or concepts of our selves share with other kinds of stories the narrative structure; they differ, however, in the unfinished nature of their plots and in the personal nature of the events available for inclusion in the story. Therapists working with clients as they reconstruct their self-concept through “re-employment” must understand the operation and power of narrative configuration in the creation of stories of self-identification.

This article begins by presenting the role of organizing structures in human cognition. The next section differentiates narrative structure and its temporal organization from other cognitive structures. The third section describes the role of narrative structure in the formation of the concept of the self. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the implications for psychotherapy of understanding the self as a form of narrative.

ORGANIZING STRUCTURES AND HUMAN COGNITION

Human knowledge is organized. A primary way in which we know something involves recognizing it as an instance or part of something. We order our experience by relating particulars to a conceptual whole.

An example of the process of cognitive structuring is the visual configuration described by Gestalt psychology (Gurwitsch, 1964). Three dots that do not sit on a straight line can be seen as the angle points in a triangular figure. The dots are perceived not as isolated but as related to each other by being parts of a whole figure. The significance of one of the dots comes to include its participation in the figure. This process of visual configuration composes the elements (the three dots) into a unified perceptual experience. When we “see” something as a kind of thing—seeing a wooden object as a chair, for example—the object gains its significance through its being related to the
concept “chair.” Although many concepts identify concrete or sensate objects, a large proportion identify abstract entities, such as friendship, justice, or self. The idea that cognition requires a prior conceptual framework within which environmental cues are organized and interpreted has recently received considerable attention in the literature of cognitive psychology (e.g., Margolis, 1987).

Narrative structuring has a part–whole or Gestalt organization. It allows the self to be grasped as a whole in which the meaning of the individual events and actions of one’s life are derived from their relationship to the whole. Conceiving the self as a temporal Gestalt differs from the traditional conception of self. The traditional conception was a result of the belief that concepts only operated as a kind of abstract container in which the meaning of objects was understood as a function of having the properties that identified it as an instance of the concept. For example, an object is identified as a “cup” because it has the properties of a cup; that is, it is a “small, open container, usually with a flat bottom and a handle, used for drinking” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1975). Or an event is identified as “running” because it consists of “moving on foot at a pace faster than the walk and in such a manner that both feet leave the ground during each stride” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1975). This traditional view of conceptual structure is represented by dictionary-type definitions of concepts and is used in the premises of classical syllogisms (e.g., all humans are mortal). Within the traditional perspective, the concept of self was understood to be structured by particular attributes that distinguish one person from others. The answer to “Who am I” was a collection of nouns and adjectives (e.g., a salesperson, tall, heavy, American, etc.).

In recent years, researchers have challenged the traditional idea that cognitive structuring is limited to identifying objects (or the self) as members or nonmembers of a set (e.g., Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Mandler, 1984; Rosch, 1978). Their list of conceptual structures proposes a variety of organizing patterns with which humans produce the meanings that make up their experience. In this article, I propose that the self is more fully understood by the part–whole narrative structure. It is only by use of narrative conceptualization that we can produce out of our separate life events the meaningful whole that we are.

Mandler’s (1984) description of the variety of cognitive structuring processes serves to differentiate narrative operation from other ways of understanding. She held that knowledge is not an enumeration of discontinuous facts; rather, it is an organized and structured composition of facts according to particular patterns. She proposed four kinds of structures that organize particular bits of information into knowledge—the categorical or taxonomic, the matrix, the serial, and the schematic.

1. Categorical (or taxonomic) knowledge structure. Facts are related according to a shared similarity of form, function, or other aspect; for example, taxonomic knowledge about an individual animal is created by locating it in
a particular category, such as feline, through the size and shape it shares with other known members of this category.

2. Matrix knowledge structure. In the matrix structure, which is related to the categorical structure, knowledge is organized through a matrix and is characterized by class intersection. It is formed by overlaying several independent categories; for example, knowledge of an individual tiger or lion would be derived from the intersection of the categories of which it is a member, such as ferocious and feline.

3. Serial knowledge structure. The meaning of items comes from their connection to one another along a unidirectional dimension. The letters of the alphabet and chronologically ordered historical events are forms of serially organized knowledge.

4. Schematic knowledge structure. Schematic structure gives meaning by organizing elements into Gestalt part-whole relations. For example, a window, a door, a ceiling, and walls are known schematically as parts of a room and are related to one another through being parts of a collection that makes up a whole. Whereas in categorical knowledge each entity is an example of the class through which it is known (a tiger is an example of the class of felines), in a schematic organization the entity is known through its participation in the collection (the tiger is a part of the jungle scene, not merely an example of the scene).

Schematically organized knowledge can be related either spatially, as when one collects and comes to know the aspects as parts of a spatial whole (a room, for instance), or temporally, as when one links together various events to make a story or a narrative. Schematic organization of temporally occurring life events can produce a coherent and integrated self-understanding.

Schematic knowing, in contrast to serial knowing, allows us to experience life as a whole, rather than simply one event following on another. Schematic knowing contains the notion of a whole or theme that pulls together and configures the bits of information into a systemic relationship: a “scene” in the case of spatial schemata, a “plot” in the case of temporal schemata. In the serial ordering of temporally occurring events, by contrast, the information is merely placed along a timeline from the earliest to the latest occurrence. The determinative characteristic is the timing of the event, not its significance or its contribution to a plot or a theme. Serial knowing ends with a list or chronicle of events having no relationship to a theme or unifying notion.

Stories are narratives that operate as a schematic structuring of temporal events. Mandler (1984) wrote that “stories have an underlying, or base, structure that remains relatively invariant in spite of gross differences in content from story to story” (p. 22). The structure consists of a number of ordered constituents. The story sequence begins with a setting in which the narrator introduces the characters, the location, and the time in which the story takes
place. After the setting has been established, the story proceeds with one or more episodes, each of which has a beginning and a development. In the episode, the character, reacting to the beginning events, sets a goal and outlines a path to attain the goal. Each episode includes the outcome of the attempts to reach the goal and assumes that the attempts are understood as the causes that bring about the outcome. When the outcome has been given, the episode ends, and the ending links the episode to the whole story. After a series of episodes has been presented, the narrative includes ending portions that show that the episodes coalesce into one story.

Events or entities can be known in various formats, as, for instance, a particular tiger can be known as a member of the feline category, as part of the scene viewed, and as a character in a book about the jungle. Also the self can be understood in various formats, as a member of the human race, as a participant in a group, and as a configuration relating events and actions.

**TEMPORALITY AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURING**

Cognitive structures produce meaningful experiences by relating their elements as parts of a conceptual pattern. In the preceding section I have described a repertoire of structures that humans employ in relating or configuring experiential elements. Elements are configured into two primary relations: spatial and temporal. Spatial organization (e.g., of a kitchen or a laboratory) consists of topological relations, such as up, down, left, right, next to, inside, and so forth. Temporal organization (e.g., a trip to the market) consists of causal and enabling relations.

In this section I propose that temporality is the primary dimension of human existence and that our actions and life-events are made understandable through the cognitive process of narrative (see Ferccero, 1986).

**Time as Configured Episodes**

Time is one of the most fundamental and pervasive phenomena of our lives. It is difficult to grasp and understand, having no directly observable properties. Time has always confounded and vexed human understanding. Western European tradition has used for an analogy of time the idea of instantaneous moments advancing along a geometric line (Slife, 1980). Time is represented as a serial order and as a succession of “nows” that measure the movements of objects across space. Clocks and chronological instruments are used to locate the length of time between events on the time line. In human experience, however, time does not appear as a succession of nows or a series of snapshots. Nor does time appear as an undifferentiated continuous flow. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) correctly pointed out, a pure Heraclitean flux or Berg-
sonian durée pure is as much an abstract version of time as is its atomization in timeless points. Our awareness of space is wholly dependent on our knowledge of the relationships among objects in space. In just the same way as we experience space in terms of objects, we are aware of time in terms of events—things that take, or take up, time. Our experience of time is structured and configured into meaningful units. “We perceive duration only when it is organized” (Kermode, 1967).

Husserl (1928/1964), in his investigation of time-consciousness, found that awareness includes the experience of temporal thickness; that is, present awareness includes the elements of retention and protention. For example, a melody is not experienced as one note at a time, a mere sequence of things one after another. It is experienced as a whole in which the notes already heard and those anticipated are drawn together into a unified tune. Human temporal experience consists of drawing out from the continual flow of successive moments episodic patterns by marking off beginning and ending points. Linking events into a unified episode lifts them from their temporal surroundings and yields a whole that is internally articulated into its contributing parts. This configuration creates a temporal part–whole relation through which events are grasped as temporal Gestalten.

Temporal configuration not only includes the present and past but extends protentionally into the future. The anticipated part of the configuration may not, in fact, occur. If the anticipation is not fulfilled, the actual happening brings about a reconfiguration of the past parts of the event into a differently experienced configuration.

The idea of an “event” is already that of something that takes time, has temporal thickness, and has a beginning and end; and events are experienced as the phases and elements of other, larger scale events and processes. These make up the temporal configurations, such as melodies and other extended occurrences and happenings, that are the stuff of our daily experience. Even though, being temporal, they unfold bit by bit, we experience them as linked together, thanks to our protential and retential “gaze,” which spans future and past.

Our actions, as well as other elements of our perceptual experiences, are temporally configured. Actions unfold in time as phases leading to an end. Activity is not independent movements merely succeeding one another; the movements are parts of a whole enterprise. For example, sending out invitations has significance as a part of the whole event of having a party. Practical time involves a sequence of distinguishable events or event-phases that we live through or act out one at a time, one after the other, to bring about the completion of a project (Brockelman, 1985).

Experienced time is structured and configured time. Our experience is directed toward, and itself assumes, temporally extended forms in which future, present, and past mutually determine one another as parts of a whole.
Our conscious life consists of temporally configured episodes or lived experiences.

**Narrative Configuration**

The part-whole structure by which temporal experience is configured and given coherence is narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative structure and organizational features function as an organizing scheme of everyday experience and action, whether or not the narrative structure or the act of narrative structuring takes the form of explicit verbalization. In a narrative configuration, the parts of the whole are differentiated as beginning, middle, and end of a single episode (Kermode, 1967). Carr (1986) identified five kinds of beginning-middle-end narrative episodes: (a) departure and arrival, (b) departure and return, (c) means and end, (d) suspension and resolution, and (e) problem and solution.

Narrative configuration takes place through the process of emplotment (Ricoeur, 1983/1984). Emplotment is a procedure that configures temporal elements into a whole by “grasping them together” and directing them toward a conclusion or ending. Emplotment transforms a list or sequence of disconnected events into a unified story with a point or theme. Through the operation of emplotment, particular actions take on meaning as a contribution to the unfolding plot of the story. Without the recognition of significance conferred by being taken up into a plot, each event would appear as discontinuous, and its meaning would be limited to its categorical identification or its spatiotemporal location. Emplotment is the means by which narrators weave together the complex of events into a single story. Through its operation, the historical and social contexts in which events take place exert influence in the understanding of the story. The synthesizing function of the plot provides narrators and storytellers a means to draw together information about physical laws, personal dispositions and character, responses to actions, and the processes of deliberation in reaching decisions. Although emplotment can consist of a single thread that serves to draw elements together, it often consists of multiple threads of subplots woven together into a complex and layered whole.

The process that configures events into a plot is interactive or dialectical, moving between a temporal meaning that might explain or show a connection among the events and the events' resistance to fitting the construction. Experiments by Michotte (1946/1963), designed to explore the perception of causality, serendipitously showed the deeply ingrained process of narrative structuring at work. Observers could see two or more small, colored rectangles in motion. When asked to describe what they saw, they imposed elaborate cause-and-effect stories on the moving rectangles, using plots to assign meaning to their motions. Similarly, the Thematic Apperception Test presents a set of pictures to subjects, who are asked to tell a story about each picture. The
subjects are usually able without difficulty to develop plots relating the various items in the pictures (Murray, 1938). These examples show the operation of narrative structuring in the imaginatively created plots in which items are configured into a theme, even when the items are simply moving rectangles or still pictures.

More than one plot can provide a meaningful constellation and integration for the same set of events, and different plot organizations change the meaning of the individual events as their roles are reinterpreted according to their functions in a particular plot. Literary examples of multiple plots configuring the same set of facts include Kurosawa’s (Minoura & Kurosawa, 1950) motion picture of the play *Rashomon* and Durrell’s (1962) tetralogy *The Alexandria Quartet*. In the four novels, Durrell emplots the actions of a British diplomat in Alexandria not only from the points of view of three different characters but also from a perspective of several years after the events. Thus, the meaning and identity of an event are not isolated phenomena located within the single event itself. Rather, the meaning of the events in stories is produced by a recognition of how an event and the plot interact, each providing form for the other.

Not every plot can order a set of events. An appropriate configuration emerges only after a to-and-fro procedure compares proposed plot structures with the events and then revises the plot structure according to the principle of “best fit.” Thus, emplotment is not the imposition of a ready-made plot structure on an independent set of events; instead, it is a dialectical process that takes place between the events themselves and a theme that discloses their significance and allows them to be grasped together as parts of one story. In addition, the construction of plots is not a completely rule-governed activity. It can generate unique and novel configurations.

Narrative structuring is a characteristic of human consciousness that draws the sequence of experienced events and proposed actions into unified episodes. By being included in a plot, events take on significance and meaning. When stories (whether factual or fictional) are told or written, they are but a recapitulation of the structure of everyday experience and action. Narrative form is not a dress that covers something else but a structure inherent in human experience and action (Carr, 1986). Storytelling and story comprehension are ultimately grounded in the general human capacity to conceptualize—that is, to structure experiential elements into wholes. This capacity, according to Lakoff’s (1987) theory, moves us to recognize the patterned bodily experience of going from an initial state, through a sequence of events, to a final state. This source–path–goal schematic pattern serves as the metaphoric origin for the type of temporal organization that makes the elements of episodes and stories understandable as parts of a temporal whole.

The competence to understand a narrative discourse is gradually mastered by children between ages 2 and 10 years. Children learn “to produce and comprehend causally and temporally structured plots that are organized
Narrative and Self-Concept

Around a variety of themes and involve a myriad of characters” (Kemper, 1984). They develop the capacity to tell whether a plot coheres and makes sense, much as one can identify ill-formed sentences that do not conform to syntactic rules. It is generally agreed in the literature of cognitive development (see Mancuso, 1986) that narrative competence emerges at an early age and is universal, appearing in all cultures.

Narrative is the framework that gives coherence to imaginatively created stories about fictional characters and events, as well as to stories about actual human events. It is the narrative structure that produces storied accounts of short episodes, such as going to the market; longer episodes, such as a life history; and progressions of events spanning centuries. Narrative structuring functions to make stories meaningful through the various formats in which they are expressed. Thus, whether stories are presented as written accounts (e.g., fictional novels or factual written histories), as theatre works, motion pictures, or television productions, or as oral presentations, they draw on the cognitive operation of narrative structure.

Self-Concept as a Narrative Configuration

Our experience and memories include a vast aggregation of narratively structured episodes and stories. Narrative structure is used to make meaningful the actions of friends and acquaintances, public individuals and groups, and governments and institutions. It is also used to interpret and give coherence to past episodes in our own lives and to configure future activities that we expect to lead to desired outcomes. In addition, narrative is used to give form and meaning to our lives as a whole. Like each episode singly, my life as a whole—that is, my self—is something temporal that unfolds in time and whose phases I survey prospectively and retrospectively from within an ever-changing present. As such, the self calls for the same sort of structuring and similar principles of unity and coherence as other storied orderings of temporal events. It is the narratively structured unity of my life as a whole that provides me with a personal identity and displays the answer to “Who am I?” My self-story gives a unified context in which it becomes clear how I am living my life and what is the nature of my individual existence, character, and identity. Within the life narrative, episodes of practical activity are integrated with moral and ethical motives.

The Structure of the Self-Concept

The self-concept has traditionally been structured as a substance or thing—that is, its meaning has been derived from a categorical structure (Mandler, 1984). The self-concept was held to consist of a collection of properties. Berg-
son (1903/1912) pointed out that the traditional approaches to the problem of self tend to fall into two extreme and antithetical positions. On the one hand, there are “empiricists” who “reconstruct personality with psychical states” (p. 30); that is, they see the self as a series of temporally separate, empirical egos that never come together into a single unity. On the other hand are the “rationalists,” who posit the unity of self in a transcendental identity that does not account for the fragmentation and diversity of the self over time. Both these views are derived from the notion that time is a series of moments passing through the plane of the present. The existential conception of the self is opposed to the idea of the self as a substance or thing; instead, the self is understood as becoming, which is a temporal process (Allport, 1955; May, 1983, pp. 133–142). From this perspective the self-concept requires a structure that can integrate temporal events into a unity. A self understood as proceeding through time necessitates a narrative structure.

Crites (1986) supported the notion that the self-concept requires a narrative structure. He wrote: “The self is a kind of aesthetic construct, recollected in and with the life of experience in narrative fashion” (p. 162). Crites held that the self-concept consists of a narratively structured recollected self, and he understood that the more complete the story, the more integrated the self. Self-knowledge is an appropriation of the past. When this appropriation is not recollective, integrative, and self-discovering, then the person experiences unhappiness or a form of despair. Although everyone has a past, one can let it be forgotten or suppress it, or one can be so intent on a future project that one lets one’s roots grow weak. Disconnectedness with the past results in the loss of identity, with experience becoming no more than the mere sequence of events passing one after the other, a bare chronicle. Identity, recollected out of the past, is the depth dimension of the self that contains a person’s character. “A self without a story contracts into the thinness of its personal pronoun” (Crites, 1986, p. 172).

Scheibe (1986) also linked the self-concept with narrative configuration. He understood that narrative human identities are not static, but continually evolving. The revisions are required to incorporate the progressive layers of understanding that result from additional social interactions occurring throughout one’s life history. Scheibe also held that the developed stories of narrative self-identity must be embedded in and constructed out of a person’s particular cultural environment—that is, the specific vocabulary and grammar of its language, its “stock of working historical conventions,” and the pattern of its belief and value system. He recognized that narratives of self-identity are based on fundamental, universal narrative forms, yet the manner in which people style and fill them with content depends on the particular historical conventions of their time and place.

Human existence consists not in overcoming time, not in escaping it or arresting its flow, but in shaping and forming it. The primary process of
narrative configuration is identification of beginning and ending events. Noting the end of an episode brings closure to a temporal Gestalt. In Heidegger’s (1927/1962) view, my life story begins with birth and will be completed with death. I cannot experience death, the closure of my story, in advance, but I can take a prospectively retrospective view of my whole life. Although I am always in the middle of my story, my identity is configured from the perspective of its ending. Heidegger maintained that I have two possibilities—to author my story or to drift along living out a script composed by others. He emphasized the notion of self-authorship, in which I assume responsibility for my life plot and for undertaking those decisions and actions that further this plot. MacIntyre (1981) suggested that the idea of complete self-authorship is an exaggeration typical of modern individualism and narcissism. He suggested that I am but the narrator, not the author, of my life story. As I take stock of or reflect on the events of my life and configure them into a coherent and interconnected whole, I create the particular content of my self-concept. For MacIntyre, the question of personal identity is resolvable into that of the “unity of life,” which is really that of the coherence of a life story.

Achieving narrative coherence of events and actions in our life stories is not a once-and-for-all feat. Rather, it is an ongoing task, sometimes a struggle, and success is a real accomplishment. Our adversary in the struggle is everything that opposes narrative integration: temporal disorder, confusion, incoherence, chaos. Sheer sequentiality, in the absence of inner unity, contributes no more to coherence than does randomness or happenstance. Our lives can be full of activity and talk, yet empty of meaning—that is, without coherence. Our various activities can become detached from one another and fail to configure into a whole. If we fail to construct a unified self, life is experienced as fragmented, dispersed, and disconnected (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 129). To experience life as a meaningful whole, one must maintain and preserve the self against internal dissolution into its component parts.

The story that serves to configure a person’s life into a self and to provide personal identity is the self-narrative. May used the term personal myth to mean what I have called the self-narrative. May (1975) defined myth as a particular group of symbols that are configured into a pattern that captures a “more or less” universal form of human experience. He held that myths serve to make sense of life by providing an orientation to the cosmos, recognizing that they function to give meaning to the experience of our selves, to our understanding of others, and to our interpersonal relationships. Myths are also seen as carriers of cultural and personal values. May (1969) believed that the process of constructing a personal myth is essential to mental health. For him (May, 1968), myths not only provide our sense of self-identity, but also serve as interpretative and evaluative schemes for our encounters with others and the world. A myth, for May, is a story having the power to provide life with meaning—that is, a self-narrative.
The Construction of a Self-Concept

Narrative, I have argued, is the cognitive structure that draws together temporal events into a coherent whole. Among the various types of stories, both factual and fictional, created by narrative structuring, the story of a person's own self is central in providing meaning and identity to individuals. The process of constructing one's own self-story differs in significant ways from the process by which literary authors construct novels that use imaginative settings, characters, and events.

Good literary productions produced by storytellers cut out all the extraneous noise, or static. In a well-developed literary production we are told only what is necessary to "further the plot." The storyteller selects out the events not necessary to move the story along. But in life all the static remains. Carr (1985) said, "Perhaps our lives resemble novels, but bad ones, cluttered and undisciplined ones" (p. 115).

In life we are engaged in many projects at once, not all of which interlock into large projects. These often interfere with one another. An event may be extraneous and irrelevant to one project but belong to another. For example, my involvement in a tennis match is separate from my writing of an article. (Of course, if I break a finger playing tennis, then that event will be configured into the story of my attempt to type the article.) Narrative literary productions, in contrast to life, usually follow a single plot, incorporating only the events that are part of that plot and selecting out the irrelevant happenings.

Unlike historians and novelists, we are not configuring events that are already completed or those over which we have imaginative control. We are in the middle of our own stories, and we do not control all the circumstances that affect the outcome of those stories. We have to revise our plots when events impose themselves in such a way that we cannot complete the story as planned. We are not authors of our self-stories, having the power to alter or neglect those life events of which we are ashamed or about which we are guilty. Rather, we are narrators of our self-stories, constructing plots or story lines that integrate and give meaning to all the critical events that have been part of our existence.

Life stories need not be simply self-centered and narcissistic. Our individual stories can, and perhaps need to, expand the protagonist from an I to a we. The I in the "Who am I?" can be extended to include other individuals and communities. My spouse, children, and other loved ones become indispensable partners within my story. Events affecting my family, or perhaps my country, become part of my self-narrative. The importance of events is no longer determined only by their effect on me, but now also by their impact on the others who have been taken in as part of my own identity. By
incorporating others and communities into my self-identity, the self that I am expands its temporality beyond my birth and death. My past is extended to include their past, and my future to include their future. My temporal horizons are extended to include the “future prospects and the past background” (Carr, 1986, p. 165) of my amplified self, and the place in which I stand at any moment is enlarged to embrace that in which my community stands.

Selection of a Plot for One’s Self-Narrative

There is a common narrative pattern that underlies and configures people’s temporally structured self-concept. There are, however, differences in the plot lines used by individuals to organize their life events into a temporal unity. Plot lines used in the construction of self-narratives are not usually created from scratch. Most often they are adaptations of plots from the literary and oral stories produced by one’s culture. Cultures collect narrative productions that distill the historical experiences of their members. These stories provide people with exemplar plots that can be used to configure the events in their own lives. Cultures hold up honored plots for emulation by their members. For example, the story of George Washington’s telling the truth about cutting down the cherry tree is to be used by children in deciding whether or not to tell their parents about unacceptable acts of their own.

May (1975) provided examples of four sources that supply our cultural stock of narrative plots: (a) traditionally defined myths—that is, the traditional stories “originating in a preliterate society, dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes” (p. 703; e.g., Adam and Eve, Prometheus); (b) classical drama (e.g., Aeschylus’s, 1989, Orestes; Sophocles’s, 1977, Oedipus); (c) masterworks of European culture (e.g., Dante’s, 1902, Divine Comedy; Goethe’s, 1970, Faust; Ibsen’s, 1983, Peer Gynt); and (d) contemporary drama (Miller’s, 1949, Death of a Salesman), films (Coppola & Coppola’s, 1979, Apocalypse Now), and novels (Fitzgerald’s, 1925, The Great Gatsby). More recently, Campbell (1988) emphasized the importance of motion pictures in providing contemporary versions of classical plots. For example, Lucas’s (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977) film Star Wars incorporates contemporary versions of the classical plot in which good and evil clash.

May believed that the foundation of our cultural stock of plots is the first source—the traditional myth. The later narratives return to these stories, reworking and dramatizing them to glean a fresh understanding of their meaning. Contemporary German philosopher Blumenberg (1979/1985) offered an account of why these ancient stories have such power to continue to inform us about the meaning of human existence. He reminds us that the mature
mythology that we know from such sources as Homer, Hesiod, and the
_Ramayana_, and from our informants in "primitive" cultures, must be imag-
ined as the product of thousands of years of storytelling. During the course
of their development, vastly greater quantities of stories, figures, and variations
on earlier stories and figures were tested on audiences on whose active approval
the storyteller's success—perhaps even his livelihood—depended. As a result
of such testing, most of the plots were discarded as ineffective. In other words,
the surviving stock of mythical plots is the product not of a reverent process
of handing down (as is the case with written texts, and above all with scrip-
tures), but rather of an unsparing process of natural selection, which Blumen-
berg termed the "Darwinism of words." In this process the compelling power
of mythical plots was brought out and optimized by the combined work
(productive and destructive) of storytellers and their audiences. It is this
process, rather than any innate and original human endowment, that explains
the richness and durability of the ancient mythical plots that have come down
to us.

May (1967) believed that major life events—such as birth, adolescence,
maintenance, procreation, death—often tear apart previously meaning-giving life
narratives. This rendering leaves the person to "experience the profound in-
security, self-doubt and inner conflict which we associate with anxiety" (p. 1).
During certain historical periods, however, the culture supplies a stock of
narratives that give meaning to these personal disruptions and provide an
uninterpreted, lifelong self-identity. During these times, individual purpose
and community purpose are smoothly woven together.

For May (1969), the myths and symbols that become the core plots of our
self-narrative are not individually constructed from scratch, but are adapta-
tions from the cultural repertoire. These sources are not sought after but
appear as part of our experience. They often function unconsciously, carrying
the character of the culture. Although these sources are discovered by us in
the form of the values and goals of the culture, each person must take a stand
in regard to them, "attacking them, affirming them, molding them, or lament-
ing their absence" (May, 1969, p. 193). The individual and culture are melded
at this point—the person shaped by the cultural stock, and the stock reshaped
by the person's adaptation.

We are constantly listening to or watching stories. We watch television
stories and motion pictures, read novels, and go to plays. We serve as the
audience for stories friends and acquaintances tell about their adventures. We
make up and repeat stories—for example, we repeat to our children the fairy
tales our parents told us. Relatively few of the stories we experience are
adopted as plots for providing coherence and meaning to our own lives. Most
function as entertainment and/or provide insight into a particular aspect of
our lives. Out of all these stories, we occasionally experience one that is
particularly meaningful for our own lives. The plots of these stories make sense
out of what had been an incoherent series of disconnected events in our lives and are incorporated into our self-concept.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Human existence is temporal. We do not come to self-understanding by seeking to know what kind of thing we are. Rather, we come to know ourselves by discerning a plot that unifies the actions and events of our past with future actions and the events we anticipate. Relating separate events that occur over time involves the cognitive operation of narrative structuring. Narrative structuring gives sense to events by identifying them as contributing parts of an emplotted drama. Self-concept is a storied concept, and our identity is the drama we are unfolding.

**Disintegration of Self-Identity**

At times, the plots we have employed to identify ourselves and give meaning to our lives seem unable to integrate previously forgotten or new events. For example, a plot based on the idea that hard work and moral behavior result in personal and financial success is unable to integrate and make sense of a business failure that follows much hard work; or a plot based on the idea that one is worthy and deserving of love is unable to integrate the recollection that a parent was abusive. When the operating plot begins to disintegrate, one's identity loses its unity. Plots that have functioned to configure the events of one's life often become strained at times of severe life stresses as well as on the occasion of major developmental events (e.g., passage into adolescence, adulthood, or old age). Old age, with its loss of physical strength, removal from productive work, and death of lifelong friends, poses a special threat to the plot that has served one's self-concept through early and middle adulthood. Staude (1990) related in his investigations of life stories of the elderly that “the elderly tend to mythicise their pasts and the goal of their recollection is justification rather than insight and responsibility” (p. 25). He reported a study by Revere, whose findings were that aged persons, when asked to write their life stories, tended to recast their memories to make the uniqueness of themselves vivid rather than to make sense of their lives in a way that involves acceptance of the “way it was.”

When this revising occurs, the narrative structuring of the self-concept is unable to bring closure to the temporal self-Gestalt. The failure of this cognitive thrust to produce a unified configuration of one's life is experienced as despair (Crites, 1986). Macbeth, on hearing of Lady Macbeth's death, expresses this despair: “[Life] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, 1623/1975, p. 1068).
Psychotherapy and Self-Concept

One of the reasons people seek psychotherapeutic assistance is the feeling of despair that accompanies the dissolution of the narrative unity of their self-concept. The reconstruction of a coherent self-narrative has been held as a therapeutic goal since Freud's inauguration of psychoanalysis. Hillman (1983) depicted Freud as vacillating between two traditions, science and the humanities, struggling to find a suitable form for telling the story of the human psyche—a struggle that resulted in the creation of the psychological case study. Spence (1982) noted that Freud and the early generations of his students accepted the close kinship between psychoanalysis and narrative understanding and that Freud placed particular importance on his patient's personal narratives.

Spence (1982) described Freud as a master at intertwining into a coherent story the disordered pieces of information gathered from a patient's memories, dreams, and associations. Spence understood Freud as being particularly adept at producing an innovative synthesis whereby what had previously been random events in his patients' lives became understandable as interacting parts of their life stories.

Spence (1982) credited Freud with making us aware of the "persuasive power of a coherent narrative" (p. 21). The therapist, through a felicitously chosen reconstruction of a client's fragmentary story, can show a relationship between two apparently unconnected events and, thereby, make understandable what was previously incomprehensible. Spence held that a well-constructed and coherent story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is "real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change" (p. 21).

Schafer (1983) described psychoanalysts as "people who listen to the narrations of analysands and help them to transform these narrations into others that are more complete, coherent, convincing, and adaptively useful than those they have been accustomed to constructing" (p. 240). Schafer argued that, in general, Freudian theory makes narrative the preferred mode of explanation. He said that psychoanalytic understanding involves reconstructing a story, tracing a phenomenon to its origins, and seeing how one thing leads to another.

People come to psychotherapists in need of reconstructing a life story that integrates and reconciles the antitheses and complexities of their existence. Several leading therapists have recently written about the importance of working with the self-stories clients use to give meaning to their life events (Coles, 1989; Polster, 1987; Sarbin, 1986; Yalom, 1989). The therapist works with and assists the client in creating a personal narrative that positively coheres the client's past and future. The therapist is engaged in helping clients clear the decks of dysfunctional plots so that they can then cultivate a plot that integrates their own life events. May (1975), however, warned against clients'
simply adopting the therapist's plot as their model. Rather, he believed that for therapy to be effective, the therapist must assist the client in creating his or her own life story instead of merely copying one.

Understanding one's self as a substance, consisting of a list of properties, fails to express the unfolding and storied nature of human existence. Viewing one's self as a narrative, in which life events are configured and made meaningful by personal plots or story lines, emphasizes the constructive and interpretative nature of the self. When the self is viewed in terms of narrative, the experience of angst and despair is understood to be symptomatic of the fact that one's personal plot can no longer hold together one's life events nor produce a unified and integrated experience of self. Overcoming these feelings of personal incoherence and disconnectedness requires a new or revised personal plot that makes new sense of the events that have become disconnected. A plot that links together previously disparate events into a new whole provides for the reintegration and renewal of self.

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REFERENCES


