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How Stories Make Sense of Personal Experiences: Motives That Shape Autobiographical Narratives

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People's efforts to understand their experiences often take the form of constructing narratives (stories) out of them, and this article offers a framework for the motivations that may guide the construction of stories. Evidence about the nature, importance, and pervasiveness of narrative thinking is reviewed. Next, motivations are considered that may guide narrative thought, both in terms of interpersonal manipulation and in terms of wanting to make sense of experiences. Regarding the latter, four needs for meaning are proposed as guiding narrative thought. First, people interpret experiences relative to purposes, which may be either objective goals or subjective fulfillment states. Second, people seek value and justification by constructing stories that depict their actions and intentions as right and good. Third, people seek a sense of efficacy by making stories that contain information about how to exert control. Fourth, people seek a sense of self-worth by making stories that portray themselves as attractive and competent. Within this framework, narratives are effective means of making sense of experiences.

Some years ago, a prominent researcher undertook to study successful businessmen in the hope of ascertaining the keys to their success. The businessmen proved highly uncooperative, however, to the point that the researcher was nearly ready to give up the project in frustration. Each time the interviewer asked a subject to explain how he had achieved success, the subject responded by telling a story rather than furnishing the abstract generalizations and principles that the researcher wanted. The researcher thought that the storytelling was a device the businessmen were using to avoid revealing their secrets. One day, however, he began to realize that the stories were meant to communicate, not to conceal, the information he sought. In fact, he came to understand that these successful individuals were actually trying their best to cooperate with him and to answer his questions

as fully and directly as they could (R. Hogan, personal communication, 1987).

The researcher, as one might expect, formulated his conclusion from the foregoing story in terms of abstract generalizations: Successful businessmen do not, by and large, express the reasons for their accomplishments in terms of abstract, general principles, but instead they tend simply to keep all the relevant information in their memory in narrative terms. The story, rather than the generalization, was the medium for preserving and communicating information.

In recent years, a growing body of research has noted that much of the thinking of ordinary people does not follow the patterns of inference, abstraction, and generalization that science itself favors. But people do learn and store a great deal of information about their lives. To understand these patterns of thought and interpretation, some researchers have begun to study people's construction of narrative accounts (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harvey, Orbach, & Weber, 1992; Harvey, Weber, & Orbach, 1990; McAdams, 1985; Ross & Holmberg, 1990). Some theorists have even begun to assert that all thought is narrative (Howard, 1991), although others argue that such a position stretches the concept too far and therefore trivializes it or argue simply that it is wrong (Russell & Lucariello, 1992). In our view, propositional thinking is an important mode of thought, even if it is not the only one, and social cognition's study of how people make inferences and draw propositional generalizations needs to be aug-

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mented with the study of how people make narratives. (We use the terms *narratives*, *accounts*, and *stories* interchangeably.) In a recent comprehensive review of the social cognition literature, Fiske (1993) has also called for more emphasis on narratives and stories in meaning making and social understanding.

Interest in narratives has also arisen in the context of research on how people think about other people. Although it is clear that people store summary representations of behavior in terms of abstract traits (Klein, Loftus, Trafton, & Furman, 1992; Winter & Uleman, 1984), one study came to the unexpected conclusion that personality trait adjectives are rarely used in everyday, nonlaboratory conversations about people (De Raad, 1984). Instead, such conversations tend to feature narrations and discussions of specific behaviors. So although people can and do think about their experiences in context-free propositional terms, more often than not specific incidents (i.e., stories) may be what come to mind when people think about themselves and about others.

Constructing stories can thus be understood as one mode of, or one phase in, the process of making sense of one's experiences. It is a familiar observation that describing an incident as a detailed story is closer to the experience itself, and therefore requires less complex information processing, than providing an abstract summary of the principles and causal relations involved in the event. Drawing conclusions or generalizing requires an extra and occasionally difficult or strenuous step of cognitive processing, and so narrating the story is easier as well as being closer to the experience itself. Moreover, many events may be capable of supporting multiple interpretations and meanings, and a story can manage to preserve this richness, whereas offering a set of abstract, propositional conclusions must inevitably narrow the interpretive field and remove these ambiguities. Researchers who study narratives frequently mention the comparative richness of the stories people tell, and one aspect of this richness is the multiplicity of implications and potential interpretations, a richness that is removed once the event is reduced to a specific set of inferences (e.g., Harvey, Flanary, & Morgan, 1988; see also Baumeister & Wotman, 1992).

One explanation for the tendency to interpret events in narrative form is that people make stories in order to make sense of their experiences. Although that answer has some accuracy, we regard it as incomplete in at least two respects. First, the answer is too vague, because "making sense" or "finding meaning" is a rather broad and vague motivation: What determines whether one has made sense of events? Second, even the most cursory examination of the stories people make indicates that they are guided by motives beyond simply organizing

information. Some more detailed and specific conception of what is involved in finding meaning is therefore desirable if we are to pursue this alleged function of stories.

Recently, one of us concluded that the drive to make sense of experience and find meaning in life can be elaborated into four *needs for meaning* (Baumeister, 1991). The present article undertakes to examine whether using this set of four needs for meaning might be usefully applied to the ways that people make stories, as a way of clarifying the interpretive function of narratives. In other words, if the four needs for meaning do indeed delineate the quest to make sense of one's experiences, then the stories people make out of their experiences should in fact conform broadly to these four needs.

NATURE OF NARRATIVE THOUGHT

First it is necessary to summarize what is meant by thinking in narrative or story terms. Bruner (1986) and Zukier (1986) have distinguished between two different ways of structuring and processing information, the *paradigmatic* and *narrative* modes of thought. The paradigmatic mode involves context-free abstractions. It is based on general laws (often involving causal relationships) and typically concerns the relationship between an individual case and more inclusive conceptual categories. The paradigmatic mode (also known as the propositional mode) is essentially the sphere of science, logic, and mathematics; it transcends the particular in favor of abstraction. Abstract moral rules and inferences about personality traits also involve paradigmatic thinking, insofar as they consist in setting up generalizations that subsume the individual events.

In contrast, the narrative mode involves coherent stories about particular experiences, which are temporally structured and context sensitive. Narrative is the mode of thought that best captures the experiential particularity of human action and intentionality, and it involves reasons, intentions, beliefs, and goals. In Zukier's words, "Many everyday judgments and beliefs cannot be justified in formal deductive-inductive terms" (1986, p. 474). But those same beliefs and judgments can be justified by people if they are part of a coherent narrative, because the criteria that define a good, viable story may be quite different from the criteria that define a sound logical argument.

Zukier and Pepitone (1984) provided evidence that different thinking rules and criteria operate in the two modes. They hypothesized that previous experimental demonstrations of the underuse of base rate information were due to subjects' use of the narrative mode in judgment tasks when the correct answer required the

paradigmatic mode. Following the familiar procedure in which subjects are asked to guess (after receiving both base rate and characterological information) which occupational group some stimulus persons belong to, Zukier and Pepitone found that the typical neglect of base rate information was significantly attenuated when subjects were urged to make judgments as if they were scientists analyzing data. These subjects engaged in formal deductive (paradigmatic) reasoning, and they made good use of the base rate information. Subjects not given these instructions dealt with the problem in a very different way, however. They seemed more likely to try to make up stories about the individuals that tied together the facts known about them to their choice of a profession. Base rates are in principle irrelevant to this kind of narrative thought, and these subjects' judgments were, in fact, apparently unaffected by the base rates.

Narrative thinking sacrifices the generality of the paradigmatic mode in favor of comprehensiveness. Rich accounts can encompass many features, and so narratives are more flexible and can accommodate more inconsistencies than paradigmatic thinking. Internal coherence is the important criterion, rather than how falsifiable the stories are. Therefore, the narrative mode is well suited for reinterpreting and accommodating inconsistent information, as well as for helping people think about situations that involve conflicts or contradictions. In Bruner's (1990) words, "Narrative, unlike logic, is not stopped dead by contradiction. Indeed, it thrives on it" (p. 350).

Narrative thinking does not lead one to simply ignore contradictions, but it provides a way for the inevitable inconsistencies that one observes in human behavior to be more easily interpreted and retained in memory. For example, it is well known that when people are confronted with information about a person that is incongruent with a trait expectancy, they will try to account for the discrepancy. When told that an intelligent person "was 20 minutes late for his flight because he couldn't find the departure gate," they may suggest that this happened "because a porter directed him to the wrong part of the terminal" (Crocker, Hannah, & Weber, 1983; Hastie, 1984). Although this phenomenon is typically described in terms of "situational explanations," it also suggests a shift to a narrative mode of thought: When confronted with a confusing and contradictory array of social information, people will try to make up plausible stories to tie it all together. Narrative thinking may also underlie people's beliefs that they can simultaneously possess opposing pairs of traits (e.g., serious and carefree; see Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). It is difficult to see how this would be possible if people interpreted and stored information about their personality characteristics exclusively in terms of points in some dimen-

sional trait space (e.g., Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972). In fact, Asch and Zukier (1984) found that when their subjects were asked to reconcile the existence of contradictory personality traits within a single person, they used narrative thinking to make up stories that linked the traits together.

Although the narrative mode is said to be no less rigorous than paradigmatic thought, a different set of constraints is involved. These constraints remain unspecified, however. Zukier has remarked that the full logic of narrative thought "cannot be articulated yet" (1986, p. 474). Ultimately, the rigorous study of narratives and stories will require some specification of their structure and logic (see Russell & Lucariello, 1992). Psychologists are far from any consensus on this issue, and there are multiple definitions of what constitutes a story (Stein & Policastro, 1984). But the structure of narrative thought has been illuminated by some recent lines of research.

Research by cognitive psychologists on the structure of story schemata is one line of work that has shed light on narrative thinking. There are a number of such accounts, and although the details emphasized by various theorists differ to some extent, Pennington and Hastie's (1986, 1988) model is fairly representative and will be briefly described here (cf. Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Mandler, 1984; Rummelhart, 1977; Trabasso & van den Broek, 1985). According to the model, stories consist of interrelated episodes that describe human action sequences. In a typical episode, some kind of event initiates physical or psychological states; these states activate goals; the goals provide reasons for actions; and outcomes result from the actions. A simple yet typical example of such an episode might be "Mary heard the ice cream man coming down the street. She remembered her birthday money and rushed into the house" (Rummelhart, 1977). Complex stories can consist of a hierarchy of embedded episodes of this kind. Pennington and Hastie (1986) have described methods for analyzing and graphing subjects' narrative responses to reveal the story structure underlying them.¹

People want such stories to be coherent, and so they will make inferences to fill in details to make complete episodes. Information may also be deleted (and forgotten) for this purpose. For example, although the story episode presented above does not explicitly state that Mary wants to buy ice cream, most people will spontaneously assume this to be the case. These inferences will be based on their theories of psychological and physical causality (Trabasso & van den Broek, 1985). Thus propositional thought (general knowledge about why people behave the way they do) plays an important role in determining how information is integrated when it is to be structured as a narrative.

The point that propositional knowledge is useful for making stories brings up the issue of how distinct these two modes are. In terms of prototypes, they are quite distinct; anyone can readily distinguish an abstract principle or generalization from a story. In practice, however, each individual's accumulation of knowledge probably uses both modes in an interactive fashion. Each event must presumably be understood in narrative form, in order to grasp what is actually happening, before abstract inferences or generalizations can be made from it.² It is also possible to stop with the narrative, thus not making any propositional inferences. In that sense, narrative understanding is a preliminary stage of interpretation, and the person may or may not proceed to do the additional cognitive work of drawing the abstract and general conclusions. As the person does make such generalizations, however, these become a useful resource for interpreting subsequent events, because (as noted in the preceding paragraph) general principles and broad assumptions provide useful frameworks for making future stories. Generalizations and other propositional knowledge may therefore enter into and shape stories.

Regarding narratives as precursors of abstract, propositional knowledge helps resolve one further conceptual difficulty with the analysis of separate modes—namely, the fact that there is substantial overlap between them. It is clear that many narratives convey propositional information. Often people may choose to tell a story rather than simply to give a trait description about someone, thereby enhancing credibility by allowing the listener to make the presumably obvious inference, and such cases make it implausible to argue that narratives and abstract propositions are two entirely separate, distinct forms of knowledge. But if narratives are understood as an initial, interpreted recounting of the events, from which propositional inferences can be made and which also rely on previously learned principles and inferences to lend coherence and plausibility, then the overlap becomes readily understandable and even inevitable. Rather than question why people use either narrative or propositional forms of interpretation to deal with their experiences, one can instead begin to ask when people are content to make stories and when they proceed with the next step of articulating propositional conclusions.

Another line of research that has shed light on narratives is the work on the organization and retrieval of autobiographical memories (see Rubin, 1986). This research converges with the work on story structure in its emphasis on the intrinsic relationship between autobiographical memories and goals, motives, and intentions. Thus, narratives may be sorted and stored in memory according to the goals that guided the behavior. Reiser,

Black, and Kalamarides (1986), using a think-aloud procedure, found that when people search for autobiographical memories, one of the most common strategies is to generate possible goals associated with the activity or place they are trying to remember something about (i.e., "Why would I have performed that activity?"). For example, when asked to recall a time that they went to the public library, subjects narrowed their searches by focusing on reasons they might have had for going to the library. As noted by Reiser et al., this was an effective strategy because most experiences involve deliberate behavior performed to pursue a goal of some sort.

Conway's (1990) work likewise suggests that autobiographical memories are intimately associated with goal-derived categories (see Barsalou, 1985). Conway found that subjects were quicker to recall specific experiences in response to cue words when the cue was preceded by a goal-derived rather than a taxonomic prime. For example, when subjects were asked to retrieve an autobiographical memory associated with the cue word *lettuce*, they did so more quickly when that cue was preceded by the prime *food to eat on a diet* (a goal-derived category) than when it was preceded by *vegetables* (a taxonomic category). Subjects also rated memories primed by goal-derived categories as more specific in nature. Conway concluded that although taxonomic categories are associated with a more heterogeneous knowledge base, categories structured around needs, goals, and desires are more specifically related to autobiographical memories than decontextualized conceptual knowledge.

In sum, a variety of research and theorizing supports the assumptions that the construction of narratives is central to how people think about their social worlds and that the structure of such narratives can be systematically studied. Furthermore, the lines of work on modes of thought, story structure, and autobiographical memories have come to share a central assumption: that personal narratives and stories are intimately related to needs, wants, and goals. The present article, then, focuses on what motivating factors are central to and drive the construction of the stories people tell about themselves.

INTERPRETIVE VERSUS INTERPERSONAL MOTIVES

Stories can serve both as ways of interpreting experience and as means of communicating to others. Language is essentially social, insofar as it originates as a medium of communication and therefore presupposes two or more persons who share a common understanding of words and meanings (Gadamer, 1960; Habermas, 1971; Palmer, 1969). In that sense, all stories are fundamentally social phenomena. Nonetheless, one can distinguish broadly between stories that are con-

structed and told primarily as instrumental devices for achieving some effect on other people and stories that are constructed in response to the narrator's needs to make sense of his or her experiences. Although most research with stories has focused on the latter pattern, and indeed our own discussion will similarly emphasize the narrator's own needs for meaning, it is useful to consider briefly how some purely interpersonal motives and patterns can also shape the stories people tell.

One set of motives is constituted by people's desire to obtain rewards for themselves. Stories can manipulate other people's perceptions, emotions, and inferences, and so describing events in particular ways can increase an individual's chances of obtaining desired rewards. Thus Jones and Pittman (1982) identified self-presentational goals such as *supplication*, in which one presents oneself as a helpless victim to induce others to provide support, succorance, and material aid. Jones and Pittman also proposed the self-presentational pattern of *intimidation*, in which one presents oneself as dangerous and threatening in order to induce others to desist from thwarting one's goal-directed pursuits. Narratives can clearly serve such goals; by telling a story that casts oneself in a particular light, one can generate sympathy, fear, respect, or other reactions in the listeners, who may therefore be motivated to change their behavior in ways that improve the narrator's chances of obtaining desired rewards.

A second relevant set of interpersonal motives is found in people's desire to have others validate their identity claims. Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) showed that although people may desire to regard themselves in certain ways, they do not feel that they completely hold these identities until their claims attain *social reality* by virtue of being recognized and accepted by other people. Telling stories about oneself to others may be a vital means of causing these other people to recognize and validate one's identity claims. Thus, if someone wishes to be recognized as a good mother, for example, it may not be enough simply to tell herself that she is a good mother or even to announce to various other people that she considers herself a good mother. Instead, she may narrate several events (such as exceptional feats of self-sacrificing nurturance on her part or extraordinary accomplishments by her children) that will lead the listener to recognize that she must indeed be a good mother.³

Undoubtedly a third interpersonal use of stories is to pass along information. For example, Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, and Mintz (1990; see also Nelson, 1993) review research suggesting that exposure to narratives of personal experience and participation in such storytelling play an important role in young children's socialization. The businesspersons described in the first

paragraph of this article sought to inform the researcher of the secrets to their success not by voicing general principles but by describing particular events. Spiritual leaders, ranging from the Buddha and Jesus to Billy Graham, have apparently found that phrasing their lessons in parables and other stories makes them more accessible and comprehensible to many listeners. Likewise, college lecturers are occasionally pleased and frequently chagrined to discover that the average student will recall their illustrative anecdotes much longer and better than the abstract principles being illustrated. Again, we note that the narrative seems inefficient as a medium for storing and transmitting information, but the widespread use of narratives belies this apparent deficiency. Stories are accepted as effective means for teaching others.

A fourth interpersonal motive arises from the desire to attract other people. Stories can serve to entertain others, and this entertainment value helps increase their attraction to the narrator. It is clear that narratives have a large advantage over abstract, propositional information in terms of entertainment value; indeed, most people prefer to be exposed to false stories than to accurate but propositional knowledge (which may be why novels outsell textbooks in popular bookstores). An individual who is frequently able to tell a funny, suspenseful, or emotionally moving story is likely to attract other people.

In these interpersonal patterns, the story becomes a means, a tool, for achieving a particular effect on the listener. Undoubtedly variations in these interpersonal motives will alter the way stories are constructed and told. In addition to such motives, however, we assert that stories are shaped by people's needs to make sense of their experiences. These needs for meaning will guide story construction (i.e., narrative interpretation) in a way less dependent on the particular social context or particular audience. The person may construct the story for a generalized other, or for general consumption by all interested parties or the entire social network, or even conceivably for his or her own private understanding with no audience in mind. The present article is concerned with these needs for meaning.

NEEDS FOR MEANING

A useful framework for understanding what guides the way people make stories is the notion of multiple needs for meaning. In a previous work, one of us has proposed that people's efforts to find meaning in life can be analyzed into four such needs—namely, for purposiveness, justification by values, efficacy, and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991). If that framework is suitable for analyzing the search for meaningfulness in life as a whole, it should also apply to the attempt to make sense

of single experiences, and so it should be useful for understanding the construction of narratives.

Briefly, the four needs can be explained as follows. First, the need for purpose is satisfied by interpreting present events and strivings in relation to future events or states. Thus, events draw meaning (teleologically) by connection to events that might follow them. Purposes may be analyzed into two categories—namely, goals (i.e., desired objective circumstances) and fulfillments (i.e., desirable subjective states). Second, the need for value and justification is satisfied by finding firm criteria of right and wrong that can be used to justify one's actions and to furnish a sense of being a good, moral person. Third, the need for efficacy is satisfied by recognizing that one has made a palpable difference in the world in some way or simply by achieving a sense of exerting control in order to achieve positive outcomes within a stable, predictable environment. Lastly, the need for self-worth is satisfied by proving oneself superior to others or in some other way affirming one's personal good qualities.

There is clearly some overlap among the four needs as thus stated. Many stories undoubtedly fill more than one need, sometimes because of the overlap, but also because stories can easily serve multiple needs by having multiple implications. What is most important about these four needs, however, is the total conceptual space that they occupy, and so it is the nonoverlapping aspects that are crucial. Thus efficacy and self-worth have some common aspects, insofar as many experiences that furnish a sense of efficacy may also build a sense of self-worth, but the concept of efficacy does not encompass all aspects of self-worth, and vice versa. For example, many people throughout history have drawn their sense of self-worth from a presumptive superiority of their family, race, gender, religion, or ethnic group, but such facts do not reflect efficacy; indeed, one is simply born with these memberships and can do little to control or change them.

The term *need* may have controversial implications. We use it as a synonym for *motivation*, rather than in the sense of something that is indispensable for life. Baumeister (1991) contended that people have needs for meaning in the sense that they are strongly motivated to interpret their events in contexts and ways that satisfy these needs and that people who are unable to satisfy these needs for meaning will exhibit various signs of dissatisfaction and distress, as well as actively trying to find ways to satisfy the frustrated needs. Failure to satisfy a need for meaning in life does not, however, mean that the person will be unable to go on living or that all other functioning will be suspended. When one deals with more circumscribed stories (such as will be the focus of the present article), the term *need* must be understood

in an even more limited sense, for it seems likely that people will periodically find themselves simply unable to make sense of something that happens to them. Although such failures to find meaning may lead to continued rumination and inner questioning (e.g., Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; see also Martin & Tesser, 1989), they do not necessarily disrupt the person's general functioning, and quite possibly people can dismiss isolated events of this kind with a mere shrug.

In the following sections, we shall describe how stories are constructed to satisfy the needs for meaning. A second purpose of this article, as our participation in this symposium issue, is to furnish an integrative overview of our own research with autobiographical narratives, and so we shall use our own work to provide the most detailed examples. Although this article is set up to provide examples of the operation of each of the four needs, it is important to note that they are not mutually exclusive or contradictory, and indeed stories may typically satisfy more than one of them.

Purpose: Goals and Fulfillments

The first need for meaning is the most obvious in its application to the construction of stories. The need for purposiveness can be defined as a motivation to interpret events as intentionally and causally linked to (actual or possible) subsequent events. The future purposes themselves can be sorted into two types: goals and fulfillments. Goals are objective circumstances, whereas fulfillments are desirable subjective states.

The ordering of a series of events and activities as leading up to a goal is one prototype of story formation. Working toward and reaching a goal is already, inherently, a narrative structure (as we have already described), and so little or no effort is required to make a story. That is, with goal attainments the experience itself is constructed with a narrative structure, and so one can make a story simply by describing the sequence of events culminating in achievement of the goal. These would be easy stories to make, because little post hoc interpretive activity is required.

It should be emphasized that not every narration of a cause-and-effect sequence will satisfy the definition of a goal-based story. People do tell stories about unintended consequences and unforeseen outcomes, and such stories may emphasize the causal relationship even though the outcome was never a goal. Presumably a story will satisfy the need for purposiveness only if the person intentionally pursues the goal. This motive might shape and distort stories by inducing people to exaggerate retroactively the degree to which they intended, anticipated, desired, and actively sought the eventual outcome.

One form of purpose is goals; that is, one can make sense of events by connecting them to future objective

circumstances that they presumably serve. Taylor (1983) proposed that this form of reinterpretation is often a powerful and beneficial feature of cognitive coping; specifically, people interpret their cancer or trauma as serving to bring about positive, desirable outcomes in the long run. Graham (1987) provided several examples of this kind of coping within religious contexts. In these examples, the death of a child caused the bereaved parents to undertake work that would benefit others, thereby increasing the greater good. In an extreme example, Graham reported an instance in which no beneficial purpose could be identified for a child's death, but he and the family comforted themselves by assuring each other that God had a purpose for allowing the child to die, even if they could not ascertain it.

The second form of purpose is fulfillment. Fulfillments themselves are often idealized or mythologized notions (see Baumeister, 1991), and the modes of achieving fulfillment are far less clear and uniform than is the case with reaching goals. For this reason, people may be motivated to exert themselves to construct narrative accounts about important fulfillment experiences.

An illustration of the construction of stories around a fulfillment theme is provided in research on sexual masochism. Baumeister (1988a, 1988b, 1989) investigated masochism by assembling a collection of first-person accounts of masochistic experiences from magazines that solicit and publish letters from their readership that describe such experiences. It appears that the letters are indeed actually contributed by readers of the magazine, but there is reason to doubt that they are all thoroughly factual reports, and it seems likely that many of the accounts have been embellished or even entirely fabricated by various private citizens around the country. It is not important, however, to establish the relative proportions of fact and fantasy in those accounts, because the embellishments presumably derive from the author's wish to describe a more perfect, ideal experience of fulfillment, and so regardless of whether the author was simply choosing a favorite experience or was describing a favorite fantasy, the result is a revealing portrayal of a masochistic desire. In either case, the narrative captures and expresses the motivation in a way that abstract, paradigmatic formulations may not.

Masochists' letters, presumably like all sexual fantasies, provide a good example of stories that are constructed around the theme of fulfillment. The fact that people write many of them and send them to these magazines without receiving any payment or compensation suggests that they derive some form of satisfaction from the narrative activity itself. (Part of this satisfaction, presumably, is in seeing one's story printed in a national publication.) The stories typically culminate in some form of sexual fulfillment, usually orgasm, and fulfill-

ment is further attested in the frequent allusions to how good the person felt at the conclusion of the episode. For example, one letter concluded with the following assertion of fulfillment: "I derive tremendous pleasure from being totally subjugated by my beautiful wife. Every day brings with it the promise of some new and exciting humiliation for me to endure. I wouldn't exchange my life for anyone's." The fulfillment is also attested by the apparent eagerness to repeat the experience: more than 95% of the stories coded by Baumeister (1989) suggested that the person desired (and usually expected) further experiences.

Several points need to be made about fulfillment narratives. First, they describe the entire sequence of events leading up to fulfillment, rather than simply describing the fulfillment itself. Masochistic narratives, for example, end with orgasm, but undoubtedly there are easier ways to achieve an orgasm than by first being tied up and whipped, and it seems clear that masochists would not be interested in reading accounts that described only the orgasm, omitting the events leading up to it. Likewise, accounts of religious or spiritual enlightenment typically emphasize the seeker's struggles and efforts leading up to the supreme experience rather than simply reporting on the ecstasy itself (e.g., Kapleau, 1980). Thus the positive outcome helps transform the less desirable affective states such as deprivation, frustration, and anticipation into positive steps toward fulfillment.

Second, the degree to which the story itself is fulfilling (as opposed to merely being a representation of a fulfilling experience) is difficult to ascertain. This dilemma, indeed, was faced by Freud (e.g., 1933/1965) in his discussion of dreams as wish fulfillments. Dreams do not actually fulfill wishes, he said, but then again they manage to provide sufficient satisfaction that the person is able to continue sleeping, instead of waking with frustration as Freud assumed would happen if the wish arose and were not handled by dreaming. The extensive popular consumption of entertainments that provide fictional wish fulfillments, such as movies and novels depicting sexual and aggressive satisfactions, indicates that the stories themselves must provide some degree of satisfaction to the viewers and readers, because if they merely stimulated the desires without satisfying them, viewers and readers would all come away frustrated, and it seems unlikely that the entertainment industry would survive.

Third, it seems likely that the stories are altered in ways that increase or exaggerate the subjective fulfillment associated with them. If the stories in Baumeister's (1989) sample were really average, typical representations of all masochistic experiences, then one wonders why anyone would ever do anything else except engage in masochistic sex. The intensity of pleasure and

satisfaction in those stories can be contrasted with observational studies (e.g., Scott, 1983), which portray a broader range of fulfilling and nonfulfilling episodes. Baumeister (1988b, 1989) suggested that the letters most likely represent specially chosen and frequently embellished experiences, and the selection and embellishment both may serve to maximize the depiction of fulfillment.

To conclude, stories do apparently serve needs for meaningful purposiveness. Some narratives preserve the goal-oriented structure of actual experience, and they may aid affect regulation by reinterpreting prior, unpleasant events as steps toward desired goals. Other narratives capture important experiences of fulfillment. These stories, in which both the process of pursuit and the fulfilling ending are crucially important, seem able to encode and communicate the affective, experiential dimension of fulfillment so that it can be retrieved by the author and even empathically enjoyed by other people.

Justification and Value

A second need for meaning is the need to have some firm sense of right and wrong (or other values) that can offer a basis for justifying one's actions and for believing that what one does is right and good. This need is probably an important reason for constructing stories, because the story must do more than narrate events: It must interpret them in a way that is consistent with certain values and standards. When one's actions are morally questionable, one may feel impelled to describe those events in a way that will answer, or at least silence, those questions. To accomplish this, it may be necessary to shade or alter the events in various ways or to include explanation of one's reasons, intentions, and motives.

One clear instance of a moral challenge arises when another person becomes angry at one's actions. The disapproval implicit in anger often implies a condemnation of wrong or unacceptable actions. For that reason, Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman (1990) reasoned that narratives about having angered someone would be a useful medium for examining people's processes of self-justification. Subjects in that study were asked to describe one incident in which they had angered someone, as well as one incident in which someone had angered them (in counterbalanced order), and the resulting stories were subjected to a lengthy content coding.

Transgressors' accounts showed a variety of patterns of self-justification, many of which emerged by comparison with the victim accounts (i.e., stories about having been angered by someone else; we shall return to the victim accounts in a later section). Thus transgressors tended to minimize or downplay any bad consequences of their actions, and a significant minority of their stories contained explicit denials that their misdeed had had any lasting bad consequences.

Transgressors generally presented their own reasons for their actions, in contrast to the victim accounts, which often seemed to insist that transgressors had no valid or comprehensible reasons for what they did. Indeed, some transgressors asserted that they had a perfect right to act the way they did and suggested that the victim's anger or reproaches were wholly unjustified. Even among those who did not insist on their rights, however, it seems that explaining one's good intentions (even if these were never realized) was felt to mitigate their blameworthiness. The victim accounts seemed almost to refuse to consider what acceptable reasons or intentions might have guided the transgressors' actions. The transgressors, however, featured their reasons and intentions prominently in their own stories. Underlying this discrepancy is presumably a sense that to understand is to forgive; if bad ends are achieved despite good intentions, the transgressor may be less to blame than if the bad ends followed from malicious, evil intentions.

Another pattern of self-justification was to shift responsibility away from the self. Many transgressors referred in their accounts to external, mitigating circumstances that contributed to their misdeed. (Such references were largely absent from the victims' accounts, which dwelled instead on the inconsistency, immorality, and apparent inexcusability of the transgression.)

A last strategy was to distance oneself from the transgression. Some transgressors portrayed what they did as wrong, but they reported that they had apologized or sought to make amends. Victim accounts almost never referred to apologies or reparations. Codings pertaining to the temporal structure of these stories suggested that transgressors tended to portray the incident as contained entirely in the past, unrelated to the present or even standing in contrast to their present patterns of action and self-definition. This pattern of *temporal bracketing* allowed transgressors to admit that they had indeed done something wrong without conceding that they should now be considered bad people. Victim accounts, in contrast, tended to depict the incident as unresolved or as having continuing implications for the present and future.

Thus the study of accounts of anger yielded a variety of patterns of self-justification. It appears that the construction of narratives by transgressors was driven at least in part by the need to present one's actions in a positive, desirable, or at least acceptable light or (if that should prove impossible) to minimize the harmful consequences of one's actions and distance one's present self from the misdeed. Similar patterns have recently been found by Newman and Baumeister (1993), who asked undergraduates to write stories about either themselves or other people behaving in a variety of socially undesirable ways (e.g., incidents of selfish, dishonest, or rude

behavior). They found that their subjects were more likely to downplay the negative implications of their own actions, either by making excuses for the behavior or by noting how it was eventually reversed in some way. Other people did not get off so easily; in fact, subjects were more likely to note explicitly that other people's undesirable behavior stemmed from a stable disposition.

Another study that also found considerable evidence of self-justifying activity was concerned with inflicting emotional pain on someone (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). This investigation used narratives to explore unrequited love, which resists laboratory study (because it would be pragmatically unfeasible and ethically unacceptable to get subjects to fall in love as part of a laboratory experiment) as well as the new methodologies for studying couples (because the two persons involved in unrequited love do not usually form a unit and would probably not want to participate in research together). This investigation again followed the procedure of obtaining samples of stories for each situational role—namely, would-be lovers and rejectors. Apparently, to inflict significant emotional pain on another person is widely recognized as morally wrong. Rejectors seemed to be acutely aware of this, often to their intense discomfort and distress.

A frequent justification strategy used by rejectors was to deny any personal responsibility for the predicament. They commonly insisted that they had never done anything to encourage the others' affections, that they were surprised that the other became attracted to them, and so forth. They recounted their scrupulous efforts to tell the would-be lover clearly, consistently, and explicitly that there was no chance of a romantic relationship between them. Thus, although they did end up having to hurt someone, the hurt came to be portrayed as a result of the other person's wholly unsolicited affection rather than a result of anything the rejector had done (presumably other than to be such a wonderful person as to inspire love and affection without even trying).

In an important sense, then, rejectors often sought to depict themselves as innocent bystanders, to whom the unpleasant duty of inflicting heartbreak had accidentally fallen. This scenario was supported by depicting the other as unreasonable and prone to self-deception. The seemingly paradoxical result was a tendency for rejectors' stories to portray themselves as morally innocent but feeling guilty. They felt bad about hurting someone else, even though they often seemed quite certain that it was not their fault and that they had done nothing wrong.

Some rejectors were not content to portray themselves as bystanders, and their stories went a significant step further and portrayed themselves as victims. Typically, these stories described how the rejector had firmly expressed the impossibility of romance but the would-be

lover had persisted in trying to win the rejector's heart. This persistent pursuit was often described as increasingly intrusive and disruptive, and these rejectors often dwelled on their helpless desperation to get rid of the romantic pursuer and on how this pursuit interfered with their work, studies, other relationships, and emotional tranquility.

The narrative transformation of transgressor into victim may be one of the most important (and theoretically interesting) forms of self-justification in ordinary life. During a transgression, the victim normally suffers while the transgressor may enjoy some benefits or advantages, but afterward the transgressor is vulnerable to guilt, reproach, and punishment while the victim is regarded as deserving support, sympathy, and possibly restitution (see Baumeister et al., 1990); indeed, social norms and common decency seem to militate against reproaching or blaming victims, as if to do so would be to compound their victimization. The role of former victim may therefore confer a kind of moral immunity that would be extremely appealing to transgressors seeking escape from their own guilt (and from possible punishment). In this connection, it is noteworthy that Sichrovsky's (1988) interviews with the children of Nazi war criminals revealed that many of the children had grown up perceiving their parents as victims rather than as transgressors. A controversial recent work by Peele (1989) has suggested that addicts and alcoholics may embrace the view of themselves as victims of uncontrollable urges and dependencies in order to free themselves from the moral onus of being weak-willed, self-indulgent pleasure seekers.

A taxonomy of categories of moral account making has been provided by Schönbach (e.g., 1990). *Concessions* accept blame and possibly express regret, apologize, or offer to make amends. *Excuses* deny or minimize responsibility by pointing to external and mitigating factors. *Justifications* redefine the action as less wrong than initial appearance might suggest, and *refusals* blame others or deny that one has participated in a transgression. (Our use of the term *justification* is thus broader than Schönbach's.) Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, and Wetter (1990) used this taxonomy to classify the accounts that subjects offered after thinking that they had caused a mishap during a laboratory experiment. Gonzales et al. found that the number of concessions far exceeded any other category, suggesting that people will simply accept blame and pronounce themselves in the wrong rather than trying to justify their actions. This conclusion seems to be limited, however, to transgressions that do not impugn the person's moral integrity. When intentional action is involved, people may be more reluctant to admit to wrongdoing (see McGraw, 1987). Gonzales, Manning, and Haugen (1992) found more concessions in stories about negligence-related offenses than in ac-

counts of intentional transgressions (or stories about totally accidental mishaps). Apologizing involves accepting blame, and writers of stories about intentional transgressions were reluctant to concede that they might not always be moral or honorable people. Instead, they were more likely to explain why they were really not all that blameworthy. Gonzales, Haugen, and Manning (this issue) have also shown that different account types elicit different responses and rejoinders: the more militant types (i.e., ones that deny wrongdoing or deny responsibility) elicit less favorable reactions from others. In a similar vein, Orbuch, Harvey, Russell, and Sorenson (1992) found that people reading accounts of relationship breakups liked the person telling the story more when she had felt distress as a result of the breakup.

Thus the need for justification can be a powerful impetus for story construction. People carefully tailor their narratives to furnish a comprehensible, justifiable basis for their actions. Indeed, in this connection it is not surprising that our legal system is based on exchanging, comparing, and corroborating narratives of crucial events. Discrepancies between accounts are often decisive as to whether the perpetrator's actions were justifiable, and the task of jurors in such trials often becomes one of attempting to construct their own narrative, which integrates the facts and events they have been told (Pennington & Hastie, 1992).

Efficacy and Control

A third need is for a sense of efficacy—that is a sense of being able to make a difference and to control the environment. Many stories that recount how a person achieved some desired result or goal probably have the quality of furnishing this sense of efficacy. It is also clear that stories about how some goal was accomplished can preserve valuable, useful information about how to achieve such goals. Indeed, the anecdote that began this article suggests that many successful businesspersons preserve their knowledge about how to succeed in business in narrative form rather than in a set of well-articulated, abstract, general principles.

The core question is whether people shape the stories they make out of their experiences in such a way as to increase or maximize their sense of efficacy. Several lines of evidence suggest that the answer is yes, although further research on this point would be desirable. One line of work has investigated people's accounts of romantic and marital breakup. Although people tend to deny responsibility for the problems in the relationship, they tend to overestimate their own degree of control in initiating the breakup (Gray & Silver, 1990). Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976, 1979) interviewed both members of romantic relationships that had dissolved, and they found that 49% of the respondents claimed to be the one

to have initiated the breakup whereas only 37.5% said their partner had initiated it. (The remainder said it was a mutual decision.) Hill et al. (1979) describe this as "a general tendency for respondents to say that they themselves, rather than their partners, were the ones who wanted to break up" (p. 75).

The goal of control is to achieve a stable, predictable, benevolent environment in which one can expect and obtain positive outcomes. Narratives that portray oneself sustaining such an environment would therefore presumably be the ones most likely to furnish, and most important for furnishing, a sense of efficacy. Construction and maintenance of a good intimate relationship may be one of the best examples of such an achievement, because a good relationship constitutes an achievement that attests to one's interpersonal skills and other forms of efficacy as well as constituting a stable, secure environment that promises a steady supply of positive outcomes. In an important study of people's stories about their close relationships, Murray and Holmes (this issue) found that people construct narratives that depict themselves as having precisely such stable, secure, good relationships. When subjects were told that good relationships were marked by the absence of conflict and disagreement, they described their relationships as fitting that picture, but when other subjects were led to believe that conflicts tended to strengthen relationships, they described their relationships as marked by just such healthy conflicts (and as having benefited from them). Thus their relationship accounts seem designed to foster a sense that they were effectively creating a strong, secure relationship.

More generally, biographies and autobiographies typically appear to portray their subjects as highly efficacious, rather than as benefiting from luck, even though undoubtedly luck plays a significant role in many successful lives. Although it may often be difficult to document such distortions, occasionally it is possible to do so. Pipes (1990) recently presented convincing evidence that the many biographies of Lenin (particularly those produced under the Soviet regime) have egregiously overestimated his efficacy with respect to the Brest-Litovsk treaty. To summarize briefly, Lenin took charge of Russia during the war and quickly sued for peace with the invading Germans. The price for peace was substantial territorial and trade concessions, which were widely opposed as disadvantageous to Russia. Lenin, however, was looking ahead toward world revolution and cared little for the interests of Russia per se, whereas he needed peace at once in order to consolidate his hold on power, and so he pushed the treaty through. A year later, the Allies (whom Russia had deserted) defeated the Germans and, in making their peace, restored to Russia all that had been lost through the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Thus, in the long

run, Lenin lost almost nothing but gained substantially through the treaty. Many biographers have credited him with extraordinary foresight in making this treaty, but the recent evidence reviewed by Pipes has shown that this is highly implausible; all the evidence, and Lenin's own views, suggests that the German victory appeared to be final and that even in the (then) improbable eventuality of a future Allied victory, the Western powers could not be expected to be so benevolent toward Russia, who had abandoned them when they needed her and who was now committed to sweeping their regimes away in world revolution.

There are, of course, cases when people want to make stories that reduce or deny their control over events, as Burger (1989) has demonstrated. An example was suggested in the preceding section: Transgressors may often retrospectively downplay their degree of control, presenting their misdeed as something that could not be helped or something that was caused by external factors. These cases do not so much indicate that people have a motivation to relinquish control and efficacy as indicating instead that other motives can take precedence. Thus, the need to justify one's actions may induce one to deny responsibility for wrongdoing. Similarly, the desire to maintain one's self-worth may induce people to deny their degree of control over a performance that ended in failure. Interpersonal motives may also foster the construction of stories that deny one's control for misfortune. For example, victims of misfortune often tell their stories in ways that maximize their suffering and minimize their responsibility for the problem (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990), presumably because those stories improve their chances of receiving help, restitution, and support from others (e.g., Gruder, Romer, & Korth, 1978; see also Renzetti, 1992, pp. 88-197, on legitimizing one's claim to victim status).

Stories about failure may also be useful for purposes of efficacy. To be sure, the recollection of the failure itself may be useless for generating a sense of efficacy, but by recalling what one did that led to the failure, one may gain a sense of knowing how to avoid future failures. Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982) defined *interpretive control* as a vital form of secondary control; specifically, they proposed that understanding something gives people a sense of having control over it, even if there is nothing they can actually do to alter it. A story about a significant failure or trauma (or an embarrassing experience; see Miller, 1992) may therefore help to restore a sense of control merely by seeming to offer understanding. In this connection, it is noteworthy that Heatherton and Nichols's (this issue) sample of accounts of failed efforts at life change found that subjects seemed to pay considerable attention to explaining why they had been unable to change. Generally, narratives of

failure may furnish a sense of understanding the causes of failure, and this understanding may increase the sense of personal efficacy.

In sum, the evidence is consistent with a broad conclusion that people shape their stories so as to maximize their own sense of control and efficacy. As acts of interpretation, stories themselves may contribute to a sense of control. More to the point, people construct stories in ways that seem designed to maintain and increase their sense of being in control over their lives: They exaggerate their degree of control over events in the story itself, capsule information that may be useful for exerting control in the future, or even externalize their own control for certain setbacks and calamities, in ways that allow them to retain their faith in future controllability.

Self-Worth

The fourth of the needs for meaning is for self-worth. People may be driven to construct stories that bolster their sense of self-worth or, perhaps even more important, defuse potential threats to their self-worth.

One may question whether self-worth and justification (value) are genuinely different. This distinction is indeed the most problematic one among the four needs in the present context. The difference between these motives has received increasing attention from theorists in recent years. For example, Jones and Pittman (1982) proposed that presenting oneself as morally good and virtuous involves a very different set of self-presentational strategies and techniques than presenting oneself as competent and likable. The divergence between the two needs is also apparent in modern culture as a whole, which has broad consensual agreement about standards for affirming self-worth but which suffers from a "value gap"—a lack of consensually accepted bases for resolving questions of value and morality (Baumeister, 1991). Furthermore, justification tends to concern specific actions, whereas self-worth issues often affect the whole person and sometimes do not involve any specific actions at all (as in our earlier example of deriving self-worth from belonging to a particular social group or category). Lastly, the interpersonal uses of stories also involve a substantial divergence between value and self-worth issues, particularly insofar as many stories, such as biblical parables, have been told and retold over many centuries because they help communicate and clarify such values.

For these reasons, it seems essential to maintain the distinction between justification and self-worth in terms of the individual's interpretive motives. Still, it must be acknowledged that most of these broad differences cease to be relevant when one is dealing with how people construct stories about specific events in their own lives. Both justification and self-worth are served by constructing a story in ways that make the self look good. The

differences may be confined largely to the types of standards invoked and to which aspects of the narrative are most relevant (e.g., self-worth is affirmed by emphasizing quality of performance or invoking positive recognition by others, whereas justifications depend on manipulating perceived freedom of choice, intention, and responsibility). In view of the important differences between the two needs recognized in other contexts, and in view of the strategic and technical differences between them with regard to how stories are shaped, we have maintained this distinction in our analysis, even though the most important nonoverlapping aspects of the two needs are only minimally relevant.

To illustrate how the need for self-worth guides story construction, we return to the data on unrequited love (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Baumeister et al., 1993), focusing this time on the would-be lovers. Many of them appear to have received the romantic rejection as a blow to their self-worth, presumably because people have implicit theories of equity and matching to explain coupling processes, and so a rejection seemingly implies that one was not considered good enough to be a suitable match for one's chosen partner. The humiliation was sometimes exacerbated by the would-be lover's persistence past the initial refusal, in effect begging fruitlessly for the other to have a change of heart. References to loss of self-esteem were significantly (and far) more common in the accounts of would-be lovers than in the rejectors' accounts, as were statements that asserted or bolstered self-esteem. To put it another way, the accounts of would-be lovers seemed centrally concerned with issues of self-worth, often acknowledging the threat or damage to it and also containing efforts to restore or rebuild it.

A favorite means of restoring self-worth that has been damaged by romantic rejection is to affirm that a new, highly desirable partner has been found to reciprocate one's affection. The implication that one was not good enough for one partner is nullified if one has been judged as good enough for another partner who is even more desirable than the rejecting one. As one woman wrote, after being jilted by a man named Peter, "I have a boyfriend whom I have been seeing for one year and he treats me so much better than Peter ever did, and he adores me to death." Such assertions effectively contradict any implication that one is not a desirable romantic partner.

References to subsequent events, such as mentioning that one has a new boyfriend much better than Peter, are particularly revealing about story construction. The subject had been instructed to tell her story about a failed romantic attraction, and she told the story about Peter. The new boyfriend was not really part of that sequence of events, and the Peter episode could well have been described without mentioning him. For her, however,

the new boyfriend *was* part of the story about Peter, because the new boyfriend's treatment of her was necessary to refute the notion that Peter's rejection of her signified a lack of attractiveness on her part. From her perspective, the story did not have a proper or satisfactory ending without the restoration of her self-worth through the new boyfriend. In other words, it was only because of her need for self-worth that the new boyfriend became part of the story about Peter. The meaningful link between the new boyfriend and the Peter episode was provided by her need to maintain self-worth.

Some theorists might have expected that subjects would use a strategy of derogating the person they loved, as if to assert their own superiority (and thereby contradict the implication of inferiority), but relatively few people used this strategy, possibly because to have been rejected by an undesirable partner is an even more devastating blow to self-worth than to be rejected by a highly desirable one. Subjects did, however, feel free to derogate the rival who had defeated them, suggesting that the person they loved had irrationally and inexplicably chosen an inferior partner instead of them. In the words of one rejected lover about her rival, "Every time I see them together I keep on asking myself what he sees in her," and as if that were not enough, she added, "I am not even jealous of her because I know that I am much better than she is." To buttress her point, she insisted that her appraisal of her own superiority had been corroborated by others: "This is not just me being vain, but other people also didn't understand why he ended everything with me and started going out with her."

Stories about meaningful successes and failures may also have substantial relevance for self-worth. People may describe successes, even ones from long ago, because these stories rekindle the sense of self-worth that they created at the time. Similarly, they may construct stories about significant failures in ways that minimize or defuse the damage to self-worth.

One approach to studying self-worth is to examine individual differences in self-esteem. Steele (1988) has analyzed self-esteem as a limited resource, suggesting that people need to maintain a certain quantity of it. People with low self-esteem are therefore particularly vulnerable to threats, whereas people with high self-esteem can accept some failures and setbacks without feeling that their entire worth as a person is nullified. Baumeister and Ilko (in press) obtained results consistent with Steele's analysis. Subjects in this study were asked to describe the greatest success and the greatest failure experience they had had in the past 2 years. The results suggested that people with low self-esteem employ a form of temporal bracketing in narrating significant personal failures, in order to escape the esteem-threatening implications. Their accounts of failure were

significantly more likely than the accounts furnished by people with high self-esteem to describe the incident in the past (as indicated by an elevated proportion of sentences in the past tense) and omit reference to implications for the present and future.

Another finding of Baumeister and Ilko is relevant to the function of accounts for supporting self-worth. Some subjects were told that they would read their stories aloud to a group of peers at the end of the session, and their accounts of success contained frequent acknowledgments of help and support from other people, consistent with norms that prescribe sharing the credit and being modest. Other subjects, however, did not expect to read their stories to others, and in that condition there were relatively few acknowledgments of help or support from others. The implication is that people's acknowledgment of others' assistance may often be a superficial concession to self-presentational norms, and the stories they construct for themselves may reserve all the credit for themselves, thereby deriving maximum benefit for their sense of self-worth.

Self-worth is defined in practice by one's superiority over others, but it is important to acknowledge that the basis for individual self-worth can be either individual or collective (Baumeister, 1991; see also Triandis, 1989). People may construct interpretive stories so as to underscore their individual, personal worth, as we have already described, but people may also make stories to glorify the groups or relationships to which they belong. As already noted, Murray and Holmes (this issue) showed that people construct stories about their relationships in ways that reflect favorably on the relationship, and part of their motive for making such stories may be a boost in self-worth that comes from belonging to a good, enviable relationship.

Thus the need for self-worth is apparent in the construction of stories. People make and tell stories to portray themselves as competent and attractive individuals. When events carry unflattering implications about the self, people construct narratives to control the damage, often adding extraneous material to assert their positive self-worth.

CONCLUSION

People actively interpret their experiences and store these interpretations in memory. When subsequently recalled, these interpretations can be important mediators of social behavior. Often, what is recalled is a narrative account of a particular experience. In fact, despite the apparent informational superiority of abstract propositions and generalizations, people seem often to prefer narratives. Constructing a narrative account may be a vital first step toward understanding an event. It may

or may not be followed by making inferences or deducing abstract, propositional generalizations and causal or moral principles. Understanding the construction of narratives should therefore be one goal of social cognition.

Stories can therefore be understood as exercises in self-interpretation, by which people make sense of their experiences. In this article, we have proposed that the interpretive effort to make sense of personal experiences can be elaborated into four needs for meaning, which guide the construction of stories (sometimes along with interpersonal motives such as teaching, entertaining, or impressing listeners). Some stories satisfy a need for purposiveness by depicting the attainment of significant goals or fulfillment states. Others satisfy a need for justification by portraying one's actions as consistent with values, norms, and expectations and by explaining intentions in a comprehensible, acceptable fashion. Other stories help satisfy a need for efficacy by encoding useful information about how to control the environment. Lastly, many stories support the narrator's claims to self-worth by portraying him or her as a competent and attractive person.

People also make stories for instrumental, interpersonal reasons, such as to attract or instruct others, but the four needs for meaning seem useful for understanding the narrative process as a means of self-interpretation. These needs give direction to people's efforts to impose meaning on their experiences. Essentially, stories do more than simply organize events; they impose an interpretive structure on events that is designed to satisfy these criteria—namely, elucidating a structure of purposiveness, justifying one's questionable actions, maintaining a belief in one's efficacy, and bolstering self-worth. This structure should apply to the majority of stories that people make out of their life experiences. Further research with narratives may benefit by attending to how these needs shape and guide the stories people make out of the events of their lives.

NOTES

1. As noted by McAdams (1985), some theorists (e.g., Prince, 1973) assert that all a series of statements needs to be called a story is a state/event/state-change structure. "The weather was warm; a cold front arrived; the weather turned cooler" would qualify as a story with this definition. Research by Stein and Policastro (1984), however, indicates that most people do not consider simple cause-effect statements without animate protagonists to be stories. In light of the other models mentioned here, such event sequences are best viewed as components of the kinds of narrative structures that people use to represent goal-directed behavior and action sequences.

2. But clearly certain abstract categorization processes, such as simple good/bad classifications and even the interpretation of behavior in trait terms, may occur as an event is being experienced and so can co-occur with narrative understanding (see Uleman & Bargh, 1989, for a review).

3. These cases also fit our suggestion that narratives may often serve as precursors to propositional information.

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