Culture, Learning, and Adult Development
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Abstract

One of the main developmental tasks in young adulthood is identity formation. From a socio-cultural approach, we argue that identity formation and the learning processes involved are inextricably interwined with the prevailing cultural orientations of a given social group in a specific historic time. The same holds true for our theories on development. In line with other scholars of the field we suggest that identity in modern Western societies is mainly achieved through self-narratives. One approach to study identity in young adult’s self-narratives is to investigate how autonomy and relatedness – two dimensions that we consider basic human needs – are negotiated in individual’s autobiographical life-stories. In particular, we propose that studying narrative self-constructions allows us to gain insights on how broader cultural orientations have been mediated through early socialization and individual’s reflections on their early experiences.
Keywords: Culture, Identity, Emerging Adulthood, Autonomy, Relatedness, (Post)modernity, Individualization, Autobiographical Narratives, Germany
Introduction

Learning and development over the life span are processes that are genuinely intertwined: learning processes constitute development and development organizes and structures learning processes. Learning processes are fundamental in reorganizing knowledge and meaningful structures to more advanced ways of thinking (Granott). From a lifespan approach, learning and development are lifelong processes with the final goal to increase adaptation of the organism to its environment (P. B. Baltes, 1987; P. B. Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). Learning and development from this perspective involve active knowledge-building through meaning-making processes of lived experiences. It involves transformation “in human functioning and in ways of perceiving and interpreting oneself in the world and in one life narrative” (Hoare, 2009, p. 75). As such it can be considered closely linked to identity formation. Identity formation is based on learning processes in that a person engages in social exchanges and extracts from these experiences one’s understanding of self. In the following, we hence approach the topic of learning and development in adulthood in terms of meaning-making processes and identity formation.

Meaning-making processes involve, however, not only individual aspects but also social and cultural dimensions which are dialogically interwined with the individual (1996; J. Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; Pontecorvo, 2004; B. Rogoff, 2003; B. Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003). Learning, development and identity formation therefore must be understood within the cultural context in which these processes take place (Ligorio, 2010).

In what follows, we will give an outline of our understanding of identity formation from a socio-cultural perspective. A special focus is given on the role of narrative identity in
today’s Western post-industrial world and of the dimensions autonomy and relatedness as basic organizers of identity.

(h1) Learning and development in adolescence and young adulthood

Identity formation is the main learning and developmental task at the transition to adulthood. Newly developed abilities such as hypothetical and abstract thinking allow to reflect on prior experiences and to mentally construct what one might prospectively become. These self-reflective processes of integrating past experiences and projecting a future allow for self-definition and a sense of coherence.

The most prominent theory on identity formation is Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development (E. H. Erikson, 1968; E. H. Erikson, 1950). Erikson tied identity development closely to the environmental context and the broader culture, to evolution and history (C. Hoare, 2009; Carol H. Hoare, 1991). According to his theory, “developing an identity involves bringing together elements incorporated from one’s social and cultural context and integrating them into an individualized mosaic that is responsive to the specific life situations in which one functions” (Schwartz & Pantin, 2006) p.2).

Research based on his theory, however has for a long time ignored the dialogical interplay between human development and socio-cultural context (C. Hoare, 2009; Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Schwartz & Pantin, 2006). This is largely due to the predominant view within Western psychology, which conceives of human development as primarily an intrapsychic process. This view reflects a model of man with a stable inner world of mental structures like traits, attitudes, and personal preferences. However, this view has been increasingly criticized as reflecting an ethnocentric bias since this model of man applies mainly to individuals from white middle-class families in North-America and Europe (J. J. Arnett, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2009 in press). In the majority of the world, however, other models of men are prevalent that do not correspond to this
understanding, and that consequently entail a different understanding on identity formation as we will outline later.

It has meanwhile been stressed by a number of scholars that in order to understand human learning and development in terms of identity formation, we need to consider both the socio-cultural macro-level context and the subjective psychosocial micro-level experience of a person (C. Hoare, 2009; Côté & Levine, 2002; Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Kraus, 2007; Schwartz & Pantin, 2006).

Erikson conceptualizes development as successful solution of a series of conflicts between individual and society over the lifespan. Accordingly, he proposes eight life stages with specific developmental tasks or ‘crisis’ to be mastered at each stage. The central task to be mastered in the stage of adolescence is the formation of identity, in particular, ego-identity, i.e., a sense of temporal-spacial continuity. Erikson understands identity development as an interplay of two dynamics, identity synthesis and identity confusion. Identity synthesis “represents the ability to bring together the various elements of one’s sense of self into a workable and internally consistent whole” (Schwartz & Pantin, 2006), i.e. to achieve consistent and coherent self-understanding and to be responsible for one's decisions and life course. Identity confusion, on the other hand, “represents either the lack of a consistent and workable sense of self or the inability to integrate the various elements of one’s identity into a whole that is consistent across situations and over time” (ibid). The identity formation can be considered to be successful to the extent that identity synthesis predominates over confusion (E. H. Erikson, 1968). According to this theory, by the age of 21, about half of all adolescents are thought to have resolved their identity crises and are ready to move on to the adult challenges of love and work. Others, however, are unable to achieve an integrated adult identity, either because they have failed to resolve the identity crisis or because they have experienced no crisis.
Marcia (1966) built on Erikson’s theory and introduced different identity statuses defined by the degree to which one has explored and committed to an identity. Accordingly, he proposed four different identity statuses of psychological identity development: identity foreclosure – the status in which the person seems willing to commit to some relevant roles, values, or goals for the future (often conventional ones, identical or similar to those of their parents) without questioning them or investigating alternatives; identity diffusion – the status in which the person does not have a sense of having choices; he or she has not yet made (nor is attempting/willing to make) a commitment; identity moratorium – the status in which the person is currently in a crisis, exploring various commitments and is ready to make choices, but has not made a commitment to these choices struggling to do so and experiencing an ongoing though unresolved crisis still trying to "find oneself"; identity achievement - the status in which the person has gone through a identity crisis and has made a commitment to a sense of identity (i.e., certain role or value) that he or she has chosen.

As we will go on to explain in the following, we find it important to reflect the cultural embeddedness of these theories before prematurely assuming their claims as universal.

(h1) Identity development as socio-cultural adaptation to the environment

It is important to acknowledge at this point that our theories on human psychological functioning and development are always expressions of cultural worldviews within a specific historic time. This applies also to our understanding of identity formation. Thus it can be (and has been) argued that while Erikson’s model might have appropriately reflected the contextual embeddedness of identity formation in Western middle class societies during the 1950’s, it might not apply to the same extent to post-modern societies nor might it apply to many non-Western, especially traditional societies of the majority world (1371 Schwartz,Seth J. 20061349 Carol H. Hoare 1991).
The Western notion of ego-identity might in fact only apply to a minority of the world’s population. For sub-saharan Africa, for instance, Nsamenang (1992) has outlined an indigenous stage model of identity. This model is less focused on the individual person; instead the level of social integration is used as the marker of developmental stages. Accordingly developmental stages represent socio-ontogenetic stages defined by social roles rather than crises describing the life-course. Moreover, these stages follow a recurrent rather than a linear logic and include spiritual forms of self-hood before and after birth.

Similar models have been suggested for the traditional Indian Hindu worldview (e.g., Kakar, 1989, 1991 quoted in Hoare, 1991): the self is not conceived as discrete psychological entity; rather, each person is conceived as a small part of the entire natural, ancestral and supernatural universe.

Although Erikson himself emphasized the dialogical interplay between culture and identity, he did not explicitly elaborate culture in his theoretical model (Hoare, 1991; 2006). In his writings on the Yurok and Sioux native Indians, for instance, he tried to show that external societal values live inside the person and dominate the thoughts of every cultural group. With regard the United States to which he had immigrated, he argued that its national and geographical characteristics - “a land mass protected by vast oceans had created a sense of insular protection, feelings of freedom from the risk of invasions” within the inhabitants of this nation (Hoare, 2006, p. 87). The spirit of exploration, expansion, and independence that could develop under such circumstances gave way to its citizens’ psychologically grounded sense of self as independent and self-enhancing. Yet the very idea of development towards self-expression across various stages or crises as universal pathway was not questioned. In that sense, Erikson’s model reflects the cultural worldview of the given socio-historic time.

A central aspect which Erikson considered crucial for the process of identity formation, is to have a sense of self-direction or agency. An agentic self might, however, actually not be adaptive for identity formation in non-Western, especially traditional contexts
Agency allows the individual to examine aspects of the external context and to select specific aspects to incorporate into one’s sense of self. In cultural contexts dominated by values that emphasize well-being of and loyalty with the larger group such as the family or larger community, the exercise of agency is in fact not desirable. Nevertheless, individuals in such cultural contexts may well develop a healthy identity without exercising agency. Mechanisms such as imitation and identification that facilitate positive and productive transactions with the social environment may play a more important role for successful identity formation (Schachter, 2002 cf Schwartz & Pantin, 2006). 

A second central aspect in Erikson’s theory is the notion of “temporal-spatial continuity”. Identity accordingly is achieved through a sense of temporal continuity on the one hand – i.e., an understanding that I am the same person today as I was yesterday, and through a sense of spatial continuity, on the other hand – i.e., an understanding that I am the same person with stable inner attitudes and behavioral patterns across situational contexts. However, continuity across situations may not be desirable and actually not necessary for identity construction in many cultural contexts. For many non-Western individuals, identity tends to be fluid across situations, and the agentic self that synthesizes disparate elements and creates continuity across contexts is undesirable (Dwairy, 2002; Schwartz & Pantin, 2006). In cultural contexts where the group serves as primary reference for identity formation the situation, rather than the person, is assumed to mold individual behavior and psychology. Spatial continuity in such context might not necessarily be a prerequisite for identity development.

There is empirical evidence that both spatial continuity (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Suh, 2002) and agency (Dwairy, 2002) are more important in identity development in Western middle class families who subscribe to a independent self-construal (Markus &
Kitayama, 1991) than in families from non-Western cultural contexts who subscribe to a relational self-construal (cf. Schwartz & Pantin, 2006).

Recent comparative studies for instance revealed salient cultural differences in the experience of continuity across situations: Suh (2002, quoted in Cross et al., 2003) asked Korean and North American college students to describe themselves in several relationships (e.g., with a friend, a stranger, and a family member). Suh found that the Korean students' self-descriptions across their relationships were less consistent than the North American students' self-descriptions. Moreover, this index of consistency was less strongly related to well-being for the Korean students than for the North American students.

For Arabic cultures, Dwairy argues that to get along with others' attitudes, wishes, and expectations by concealing one's real feelings, thoughts, and attitudes is a reasonable social means to avoid confrontation and maintain good relationship and support. It is more than being “diplomatic”; it is a positive value and a lifestyle in which leads one to accommodate the expectations of others. Similarly, in many Asian cultural contexts, obedience is considered an extremely positive social value. It is a social norm not to say “no” to a request because it is considered rude rather than assertive. These non-assertive strategies do not cause any discomfort. On the contrary, it is the comfortable way to communicate without threatening the social approval and support that is vital for the people.

Likewise, with regard to Marcia’s identity status, commitment to traditional values and beliefs without extensive exploration (foreclosure) can be considered to be adaptive in more structured and normed communities that value connectedness, integration, or rootedness with others whereas conscious exploration (moratorium) can be considered to be adaptive in modern Western societies (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). The identity statuses defined by Marcia therefore do not reflect universal norms of healthy development.

In conclusion, we argue in line with others that identity formation is not the same process across cultural contexts and historical time, and needs to be understood as adaptive to

Adaptation here is not to be understood as passive acquisition of identity by individuals but as dialogical relationship between individual and the environment. It is primarily through interactions with social systems, first the family and later on with the broader social network that a sense of self and identity is developed. A society or group’s values and norms habitually become embodied in the person; culture is hence inseparable from the way individuals construe and perceive reality and individual identity (Hoare, 2009). Different socio-historical and cultural contexts bring about different forms of identity formation (Keller, 2007; Shweder et al., 2006).

Freeman & Brockmeier (2001) argue that the actual understanding of development as unfolding of the self toward the potential person one is to become is a rather new and Western conception. It can be traced back to Aristotle’s teleological idea of development as the emergence of actuality from potentiality and corresponds to our modern Western notion of identity achievement as self-realization. In contrast, in previous socio-historic contexts, individuals tended to understand their life through the lens of recurrent and eternal forms. In fact, the very idea of a “human being as distinct and specific individual identity, an unmistakable personal history and psychology” (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001, p. 77) is a relatively recent phenomenon limited to a specific historical time and cultural space. Drawing on Gusdorf (1980, pp. 28-29) the authors continue: “Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself [or herself] to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. Identity development as
unfolding processes also becomes evident in autobiographical understanding of self – a notion of identity formation that we will discuss in the following paragraph.

(h2) Identity formation in (post)modern information-based societies

Several approaches have been made in recent years to formulate theoretical concepts that capture forms of identity construction prevailing in modern or postmodern Western information-based societies. These approaches try to take into account socio-historical changes that have taken place since Erikson first formulated his theory on identity formation in the 1950s.

(h3) Prolonged adolescence and emerging adulthood

According to Erikson’s theory, identity formation takes place in adolescence. In recent years, however, it has been claimed that this phase of identity formation has shifted or been extended to young adulthood due to socio-historical developments within the past decades: Western societies and to a lesser extend the growing middle class of the majority world have experienced tremendous changes over the past half century. Economic changes from an industrial to an information-based world economy for instance have made it more desirable for young people to engage in a prolonged period of higher education and training beyond secondary school to qualify for jobs (J. J. Arnett, 2007). Moreover, birth control and an increasing secularization brought along a weakening of traditional life styles and later ages of marriage and parenthood as well as an increased freedom of self-determination. As a consequence of these societal changes, full adulthood is reached later than in the past which has led developmental psychologists to define a new period of the life course as “emerging adulthood” (J. J. Arnett, 2007; J. L. Tanner, J.J. Arnett & J.A. Leis, 2009) covering the age period from the late teens to the late twenties. Young adults are no longer dedicated to settling into traditional adult roles. Instead, the focus has shifted to pursuing higher education, self-
exploration, and shaping a future that best suits personal goals and desires. Identity issues can thus be said to be even more central to development in emerging adulthood than in adolescence as previously assumed by Erikson. Young adulthood in this cultural context is “the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in between, and the age of possibilities” (J. J. Arnett, 2007). Young adults experience the most freedom to decide for themselves how to live since parents no longer have as much power as they did in childhood, and obligations related to a spouse, long-term partner, children, and job career have not yet been entered.

Underlying is a cultural belief system that values individual development and self-enhancement over obligations and duties to others, especially the family. Such autonomy-oriented beliefs tend to develop mainly in societies that are industrialized enough that economic interdependence among kin is not necessary for daily survival (C. Kagitecibasi, 2005).

(h3) Increasing individualization and inward turn

Another societal change that has been pointed out by a number of sociologists, historians, and philosophers is an increasing individualization (Beck, 1986; Côté, 2000; Heinz, 2002). This phenomenon has been particularly proclaimed for Germany (Ulrich Beck & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, 1994). The decline of fixed traditions, and of the loss of power of societal institutions has lead to the ‘disembedding’ (Giddens, 1991) of the society's ways of life, i.e. individual patterns of life are dissociated from collective patterns of life. Life trajectories are no longer standardizes and people are no longer as constrained or supported by institutions as they were in the past and experience an increase in freedom in the way of conducting one’s life. As a consequence, identities can not to the same extend be defined by social group membership any more and a person is forced now to take a more active and
agentive role in the organization of one’s life and to take a much greater effort to construct one’s self.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, in his seminal book “Sources of the self” (Taylor, 1989) postulates that this has lead to an ‘inward’ turn with regard to defining one’s identity and to a modern Western notion of self that is constituted by self-reflexivity and self-control (agency). As a consequence, the modern concept of self is radically different from that of previous civilizations due to new understandings of social bonds and relations. As traditional ideologies and belief-systems relinquish their defining power, individual meaning making becomes more than ever a personal task (J. Bruner, 1990)

Individualization entails that socialization is something that is increasingly done by the individual rather than imposed by outside social or institutional forces (Heinz, 2002). Self-socialization becomes most pronounced in emerging adulthood (J. J. Arnett, 2007) as individuals have not yet made permanent choices about their family and professional life.

An increasing self-focus in identity formation is also supported by empirical findings: in a longitudinal study over 31 years, Roberts and Helson (1997 cf Hoare 2009) for example found that increasing individualism in the United States, particularly between 1960 and 1985, was associated with enhanced work-based identity development and with increases in self-focus, self-assertion, individuality, and narcissism.

This trend towards individuality and independence also becomes evident in the way adulthood is perceived. In post-industrialized societies, adulthood entails the goals of accepting responsibility for one’s self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent – criteria that clearly reflect the cultural values of independence and self-reliance (Arnett, 2007). A successful life accordingly is one in which a person has proven to be a successful creator of one’s life. In contrast, a comparative study with Euro-American and Chinese college students showed that both groups indicate “accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions”, and “become financially independent from your parents” as
criteria necessary for adulthood, however, almost all of the Chinese college students also
indicated “become capable of supporting parents financially” and “become less self-oriented
and develop greater concern for others” as necessary – criteria that reflect cultural values of
mutual social responsibility and obligation (Nelson et al. 2004 quoted in Tanner, Arentt &
Leis, 2009). The impact of globalization on identity formation and understanding of
adulthood, particularly with respect to pluralism and increasing individualization is, however,
also visible in non Western and more traditional regions of the world, especially amongst
emerging adults of middle-class urban contexts (J. J. Arnett, 2002). Globalization, especially
the availability of new media and technologies of communication expose individuals to new
ideas and lifestyles that may be radically at odds with the cultural and social mores of a
people.

(h3) Consequences for the understanding of identity formation

In light of the pluralization of our ways of life, identity cannot be understood as a
stable inner core any longer but should be conceived of as increasingly fluid and open to
change. Some postmodern approaches argue that the concept of “identity” or of a whole ‘self’
that is coherent and understandable to an outsider does not fit the post-modern way of living
any more. For instance, Gergen (Gergen, 1991/2000) and Bamberg (xxxx) see identity as
situated performance rather than a stable enduring unity.

Gergen (1991), argues that today’s transportation facilities, technologies and mass
media allow for a greater mobility and geographical flexibility as well as possibilities to
communicate across the globe. As a consequence of these societal changes, people engage in
a greater number of relationships, which become however more and more non-committal,
temporary, and superficial. This leads to what he calls a relational “saturation” of the self.
Being exposed to a plurality of relationships and worldviews will ultimately lead to a
fragmentation of the self that makes coherence and continuity impossible so that it might not
be meaningful any longer to talk about personal identity (cf. Straub, Zielke & Werbik, 2005).
Hermans & Kempten’s (1993) notion of the dialogical self conceives of the self as ‘multiplicity of positions’, which are in constant dialog with each other.

Both approaches have been critically discussed by Straub and colleagues (J. Straub, B. Zielke & H. Werbik, 2005) who suggest an alternative view of modern identity construction and argue that Erikson’s approach is still be applicable today, however, in a socio-culturally adaptive way. They argue that consistency and continuity - central structural aspects of Erikson’s model of identity – are achieved differently in today’s modern world, namely through self-narratives. Their notion of the ‘adaptive self’ accordingly conceives of identity not so much a fixed entity or structure but as process of structuring in which story-telling plays a crucial role (Straub, 2000; Straub, 2002). In light of the temporality and changeability of today’s modern world, identity is open to change. What constitutes and stabilizes personal continuity and thus identity is to situate oneself in the past, present, and future through self-narratives. Personal identity is drawn up dynamically and constantly revised by means of self-narrations. In this way it is not conceived as ‘entity’ but as ‘unity’ (J. Straub, B. Zielke & H. Werbik, 2005). Similarly, Taylor (1989) argues that with the changes of society, particularly, the loss of institutional power discussed earlier, individuals are now forced to ‘explore’ and ‘search’ for the self in order to find their identity, and this is primarily achieved through autobiographical memory and self-narratives.

It is interesting that the linguistic and psychological genre of autobiography and with it the notion of narrative identity, are a relative new phenomenon within the modern Western world. As Freeman & Brockmeier (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001) argue with Gusdorf (Gusdorf, 1980), autobiography “has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere”. The raise of a self-understanding and self-definition through autobiography is closely linked with the emergence of a historical consciousness of existence, which in turn is linked to the shift from oral to literal cultures. As Freeman & Brockmeier outline, this is because with the beginning of written records of history it was now “possible to think not only of time but also
of the life itself in terms of chronological sequence” (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001). A person’s own unique history has now become a means for understanding and coming to terms with the trajectories of life and with one’s existence for the modern self (Taylor, 1989). The genre of autobiography in which the focus is on the self as the meaning center of one’s life hence is itself a socio-cultural construct. Bruner and Weisser (1991) have argued that the more self-conscious, more agentic oriented self-accounting within Western societies goes along with the turn to narrative and autobiographical narration for identity construction. Narrative identity can thus be said to be a state of consciousness and self-awareness which has emerged as result of modernization.

One of the present challenges of psychology is to understand identity formation in young adulthood in today’s world. The formation of a narrative identity is the central psychological challenge of emerging adults in modern post-industrialized cultural contexts. The study of learning and development in young adulthood therefore requires a conceptual and methodological approach that captures ‘narrative identity’ appropriately (Mey, 2007).

(h1) Narrative identity as modus operandi of modern identity formation

The central role of narrativity for human psychological functioning has been acknowledged by psychologists within the past two decades. There is wide agreement that the human mode of organizing our experiences is narrative and that people living in modern societies give meaning to their lives and constitute identity by constructing and internalizing self-defining stories (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; J. Bruner, 1990; Crossley, 2000; D. P. McAdams, 2008). As McAdams (2008) states, personal narratives and the life story have now arrived in psychology (p. 242). It is through narratives that we make sense of our lives, provide reasons for our acts, as well as causes of experiences (Sarbin, 1986:9 quoted in Crossley, 2000). Autobiographical narratives or ‘life stories’ constitute the self in that they bring together various experiences and establish coherent connections among them. It is
through autobiographical narratives that we become conscious of ourselves: the “I” becomes objectified as the “me” (Charles W. Morris, 1934). The “me” then is a culturally mediated construction of my past experiences. In the course of life, people draw lessons from their life experience so far. In autobiographical narrations people resume these culturally mediated experiences and lessons from their life.

From a developmental perspective, it is interesting that the ability of narrating a life story develops in adolescence and young adulthood (T. Habermas & Bluck, 2000; T. Habermas & Paha, 2001) which parallels the age of identity formation according to Erikson. Whereas adolescents may not yet have developed the ability to integrate life experiences into a life story and learning lessons from them (Bluck & Glueck, 2004), it is in young adulthood that people are old enough to use “the life lived” as frame of reference and start to be very oriented toward making sense of their life in terms of the lessons to be learned from experience which will eventually lead to the development of wisdom (Bluck & Glueck, 2004). As McAdams and colleagues put it: “beginning in adolescence and young adulthood, our narrative identities become the stories we live by” (D. P. (. ). McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). This underlines once more the crucial function of autobiographical narrations for identity formation in Western post-industrialized societies.

The sociocultural underpinning of narrativity also becomes evident in early socialization practices. Demuth (2008) for instance found that narrativity in mother-infant interactions is a prominent pattern in North-German middle class families whereas it is basically absent in farming Cameroonian Nso families. In this study, North-German mothers typically stimulate play interactions with their 3-months old infants by prompting them to ‘narrate’ and by unfolding autobiographical narrations around the child’s recent experience. These children can thus be said to be socialized from early on towards autobiographical narrating and understanding themselves through self-narrations. The Cameroonian Nso, in contrast, predominantly used rhythmic chiming to stimulate the child. The only very few
instances in which mothers would use brief narrative elements were when they referred to the misbehavior of others in order to convey a moral lesson to the child. These findings confirm that in Western middle class contexts individuals are encouraged from early on to think about their own individual experiences and to tell stories about them.

McAdams (2008) postulates six common principles of the narrative study of lives:

1. **The self is storied**: stories are the vehicle to convey how (and why) a human agent enacts desires and strives for goals over time.

2. **Self-stories integrate lives**: they are no mere recording of life as lived but are highly selective and strategic. They “bring together into an understandable frame disparate ideas, characters, happenings, and other elements of life that were previously set apart” (p. 244). This function is especially important for “individuals living in modern societies who seek personal integration within and every-changing, contradictory, and multifaceted social world that offers no clear guidelines, no consensus on how to live and what life means” (Giddens, 1991 cf p. 244)

3. **Self-stories are told in social relationships**: people tell stories to other people; stories are hence told in accord with societal expectations and norms.

4. **Self-stories change over time**: although people typically remember the gist of an important life event, autobiographical remembering is unstable. The priority given to certain events and the way they are told reflect how the person comes to terms with the social world at the time the story is told.

5. **Self-stories are cultural texts**: stories are told in accordance with shared cultural knowledge of what biographies look like.

6. **Some self-stories are better than others**: for one, this means that stories are always constructed from a moral standpoint of what is “good” and what is “bad”. On the
other hand, this refers to the stories themselves in terms of narrative coherence and complexity which are associated with psychological maturity and mental health.

In particular the last two principles are of special interest here because they point to the dialogical relationship between cultural norms and values and the way we construct self-stories. We will explore this aspect further in the following section.

(h2) Cultural models in autobiographical narratives

Cultural ideologies, or as some authors refer to as ‘cultural models’ (D’Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Keller, 2007), become evident in the way we talk (Quinn, 2005). In constructing a meaning of the world, an individual always draws upon the languages, the words of others to which he or she has been previously exposed. Language thus is never neutral but “tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). Ideas, expressed in language then are always located outcomes of social and historical processes. They are the material production of a particular socio-historical context and have the world-view of the speaker embedded in it (Bakhtin, 1981). How we tell our life story and how we make meaning of our past is hence always interwoven with shared cultural knowledge of how to tell a life.

It could be shown that the way in which people construct their life stories follows cultural conventions on life scripts (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008; T. Habermas, 2007), i.e., a list of events that members of a given culture expect to happen in a certain order at certain points in time in the life of a typical person in their culture (e.g. start school at age 6; get married at age 27 etc.). Bohn and colleagues found stable cultural life scripts in Danish adults, and in a study with Danish children and adolescents, they found that children are more likely to tell a coherent life story if they have a cultural life script that is similar to adult life scripts (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008). In the course of socialization, children can thus be said to come to narrate
their personal experiences in ways that conform to their implicit understandings of how good stories should be structured and what they should include, Importantly, they gradually internalize their culture’s norms and expectations of what a life story should contain (McAdams, 2008).

This leads us to another important point: autobiographical narratives always correspond to some ethical rationale. The narrator of an autobiography always knows the outcome of his or her story and makes meaning of the past from the vantage point of the present. He or she will construct the story in such a way that coherence with how one perceives of oneself in the present is established. This coherence with a person’s present self-understanding always also implies striving for “narrative integrity” in terms of coherence with the ethical norms of a given culture and historical epoch. Autobiographical narrations require self-distancing and reflection of one’s past. In so doing, people evaluate their past by accounting for the life one has led in line with the normative ideas of what a life is, or is supposed to be, if it is lived well” (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001; Taylor, 1989). Since these normative ideas of what constitutes a “good life” are embedded in broader cultural socio-historical beliefs and ideologies, narrative identity is not only psychological but also cultural (J. Bruner, 1997). Autobiographical narratives can therefore be considered useful vehicles for exploring the ethical fabric of the social worlds in which they emerge.

Freeman & Brockmeier (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001) state that in those epochs or cultures in which there exist strong, agreed-upon standards pertaining to the good life, autobiographical reconstructions of the past “would be comparatively unambiguous, in the sense of having strong canonical constraints and a comparatively limited range of possible meanings. In those epochs or cultures, on the other hand, in which standards pertaining to the good life are not so clear or are in the midst of being contested or redefined, as in much of the modern West”, autobiographical reconstructions of the past would emerge “as decidedly more ambiguous and multivoiced” (p. 76).
(h3) Autonomy and Relatedness as organizers of the life course

In his life-story approach to identity, McAdams (2001; 1996; 2008) proposes that despite the uniqueness of individuals’ life stories, there are common themes that appear in each story of individuals who share the same cultural knowledge. In particular, McAdams makes a distinction between two types of themes observed in people’s life stories: people tend to portray what happens in their lives along two dimensions which Bakan (1966) labeled agency and communion. Agentic themes are found in stories that emphasize the importance of achievement, mastery, and having an impact on one’s environment – qualities that closely correspond to the dimension of autonomy. Communal themes are found in stories that emphasize the importance of intimacy, connections to others and caring for others - qualities that closely correspond to the dimension of relatedness.

This approach to culture and identity is in line with Kagitcibasi’s (1996; 2005) family change model which is now largely applied to cross-cultural research on self and identity. This does of course not mean that shared cultural orientations can be reduced to these two dimensions, however, in light of the discussion on an increasing individualization and self-centeredness in modern societies we think it is a fruitful approach. In line with Kagitcibasi, we conceive of autonomy and relatedness as two panhuman needs. The emphasis of the one over the other is to be understood as a consequence of the socio-cultural requirements of a specific society. This implies not only socio-historical changes due to urbanization and economic development but along with it the prevailing socialization practices and the function of the family. An emphasis on relatedness over autonomy, is considered to be functional in rural agrarian contexts with low levels of affluence but is also seen in urban low-socioeconomic status (SES) contexts, where intergenerational interdependence is necessary.
for family livelihood (p. 410). With urban lifestyles and increasing affluence, material interdependence between generations decreases, because elderly parents do not need any longer to depend on the economic support of their adult offspring. Particularly with greater affluence, higher level of education, and alternative sources of old-age support in Western middle class societies, dependence on adult offspring turns out to be unnecessary and even unacceptable; thus, children are brought up to be independent and self-sufficient. Autonomy of the growing child is not seen as a threat to family livelihood over the family life cycle but is highly valued (p. 411). Families in formerly traditional societies experiencing the influence of modernization do not materially depend on their children any more; nevertheless, psychological interdependence, as closely-knit selves, continues, because it is ingrained in the culture of relatedness and is not incompatible with changing lifestyles. According to Kagitcibasi’s model, what emerges in these societal contexts is the ‘autonomous-related self’.

The emphasis on agency or autonomy prevailing in Western middle class societies thus needs to be seen as socio-historical development. At the same time, we want to stress here that autonomy is not to be understood as exclusive alternative to relatedness (like in the common distinction between individualism and collectivism or independence and interdependence) but as standing in dialogical relationship to it (for a critical discussion see Straub, Zielke, & Werbick, 2005). They are two dimensions of the human existence, two basic human needs that co-exist in any person.

The dimensions autonomy and relatedness (or ‘agency’ and ‘communion’ as originally labeled by Bakan) have also been identified as two general contrasting tendencies in life stories by a number of researchers (e.g., McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). Life stories vary, for instance with regard to the importance given to achievement, self-enhancement, and self-determination (qualities that closely correspond to the need for autonomy) and the importance given to intimacy, connectedness and giving priority to the
wellbeing of the community over one’s own interests (qualities that closely correspond to the need for relatedness).

In a similar vein, although from a somewhat research tradition, various studies have provided evidence of culture-specific emphasis on autonomy and relatedness in adults’ autobiographical remembering as expression of culture-specific self-construals (Conway, Wang, Hanyu, et al., 2005; de la Mata et al., XXXX; Demuth, Abels & Keller, 2007; Wang, XXXX). In a study comparing earliest childhood memories among Euro-American and native Chinese college students Wang (2001) found elaborated, specific, emotionally charged and self-focused memories in the Euro-American middle class sample whereas in the Chinese sample the remembered narratives were brief, general, emotionally unexpressive, and relation-centered. She relates these differences to the culture-specific forms of self-construals.

Some researchers relate culture-specific forms of autobiographical self-construals to discursive practices that people participate in during the course of their socialization. Wang, & Spillane (Wang & Spillane, 2003), for instance, found that European American and East Asian families show different patterns and tendencies when conversing with their children about the shared past, reflecting different orientations that focus on either autonomy or relatedness. They further argue that such differences, in turn, appear to have long-term consequences on the development of autobiographical memory.

Although these studies did not assess entire life stories but brief episodic narratives, the findings suggest that the way in which people construct autobiographical narratives reflect broader cultural ideologies of how to talk about one’s past, especially with regard to how much emphasis is given to present a story of a very agentic, self-focused and individualistic self, or of a very relation and norm oriented self, respectively.

Concluding, we suggest that autobiographical narratives reflect prevailing cultural norms and values that can be understood in terms of the two basic human needs for autonomy and relatedness, and that people aim at constructing self-narratives that are coherent with
these cultural models. Since coherence is also an indicator for psychological health, it suggests itself that healthy identity achievement should imply the construction of a self-story that corresponds to the prevailing cultural model. In light of the recent socio-historical changes within modern post-industrialized societies this entails several challenges for young adults as we will go on to discuss in the next section.

(h2) Narrative identity and cultural models, and healthy psychological functioning

One lifelong learning task is to achieve life satisfaction and wellbeing. One may assume that life satisfaction and wellbeing are experienced to the degree to which one’s narrative identity corresponds to the prevailing cultural model, and thus to the panhuman needs of autonomy and relatedness.

In light of the increasing individualization in modern Western societies, the question arises how young adults face the challenge of meeting the needs for autonomy and relatedness today: on the one hand, a person is required to be flexible, independent, self-sufficient, and to strive for self-enhancement and self-actualization. Yet everybody needs relationships that go beyond superficial contacts. In fact, according to Erikson early adulthood is the time when the focus of development is also on the capacity for forming an intimate partnership and on resolving the crisis of intimacy (love) against “isolation”. We assume that life satisfaction expressed in biographical accounts can be understood in terms of how well autonomy and relatedness can be balanced in one’s individual life in the way it is desired by the person.

(h2) Young adult’s self-stories in Southern Germany

In a study with young adults in the southern part of Germany (Demuth & Keller, in prep.) we were interested in learning more about how young adults depict their identity in autobiographical narratives: in terms of personal strivings, self-maximization and agency or in
terms of close intimate relationships, subordinating their individual desires to the welfare of
the group? What are the lessons that these young adults draw in their self-stories and how
does this relate to the broader cultural model in terms of autonomy and relatedness?

For this purpose, we conducted open-ended narrative interviews with 24 participants
from a larger longitudinal study. All started out their life in highly educated middle-class
families in the same geographical area, growing up in the suburbs of a southern German city.
We met them again when they were between 27 and 28 years – the phase of life that can be
described as the end of emerging adulthood - in order to assess their life-stories at this stage
of life. The open ended narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983) lasted roughly between 1 and 3
hours and were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Following an inductive interpretative
Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approach (see Demuth & Keller, in prep. for a
detailed description of the study) analysis revealed the following pattern:

We suggest that how autonomy and relatedness are balanced and how this relates to
the individual’s well-being depends broadly on the following dimensions: (1) the values
mediated in the family of origin, (2) the strength that could be gained from the family of
origin (in the way it has been experienced as resource for emotional, social, and material
support), (3) the challenges of life in terms of turning points and how well they could be
handled.

Although space does not permit a presentation of the entire results of this study, we
would like to illustrate some core findings from two individual cases in the following.

(h3) Linda’s story

Linda grows up as the eldest of 3 children. She describes her family of origin in her
life story as a rich source of both emotional and material provision. The family is
characterized by stable relationships and strong cohesion. The father (a medical doctor)
combines family life and professional career by having his office in the family house. A
central part of early family life was the regular joint lunch with the whole family, including the grandmother who lives with them and a friend from the neighborhood who’s wife had died.

Linda mentions that she was born in B. because her father studied there. Later on, they move because of her father has the chance to open his own medical practice. At the same time the parents always ensure close family ties as well as a closely knitted social net with friends and relatives. The parents thus provide a traditional role model in which the father pursues a professional career and family life is organized in a way that supports him in his career and at the same time allows for close family relations and traditions. From early on, Linda is involved in taking care of her younger brothers and learns to take on social responsibility. At the same time, the parents also actively encourage autonomy already early in childhood.

In her life story a pattern emerges in which closely knitted social ties constitute the secure base from which challenges and transitions are successfully mastered “without problem”. This pattern already emerges when she talks about entering school:

„I still remember it was a bit unfamiliar because at school they all knew each other from kindergarten, from early on, and I was one of the few how had moved there from somewhere else. Well, actually, it wasn’t that much of a problem. There were a few kids from the street [where I lived], a few girls with whom I became friends. We shared the same way to school, so I quickly caught up with them, that was not a problem“.

The challenge of being in a foreign environment is mastered because she quickly finds friends with whom she can share walking to school. Later on, she describes the transition to high school as going smoothly because they were a mixed class consisting in part of people she already knew:
"I have to say that it really was not that difficult for me. Err, because we were again a mixed group [...]. and actually it was nice to catch up [with the group] there again because we were [put in] small groups again. Because, then we mixed again and got to know new people, that went actually quite well, so that we had a good time."

Linda continues her story by telling that she decides to take on the same professional career as her father and to study medicine. She stresses that her choice was her own choice based on her personal interest despite the general stereotype of families of medical doctors in which children will continue the professional tradition of their parents.

She is granted a place at a university several hundred kilometers away from where she lived with her family at the time. This transition to a completely new location is experienced as quite challenging in the beginning:

"I went there to O. and thought, 'oh my god – no one you know!' And then, err, we were so many [students] from the area around X., so many [students] from A. you really knew some of them already or quickly got acquainted with them, err, that really went just like that. And [studying in] A. as such then really was a great experience, because one – first, it is not far from here, I also went home quite often, that was not a problem. And my boyfriend then decided to follow me and move to A. [...] that was our first flat that we shared. Well, and we're still together today! <laughs>"

Several points are interesting in this excerpt: her main concern in the beginning is being socially isolated which she obviously experiences as threat. However, she quickly meets this challenge successfully by connecting with people who share the same geographical roots. Furthermore, she describes that the new challenges was actually a very positive
experience because a) she quickly found friends, b) she could often drive home, c) her boyfriend can combine his professional career with a move to the city where she studies.

The main challenge consisted in not having her family network as secure base any longer in the beginning:

„the ONLY THING was that now the whole family was not around any longer. We had always been – my granny still lived with us and we were always at least 6 people at the table, you see. And then there was also our neighbour who always was there, he too was always there for lunch. Yes, and on Wednesday, there was always this colleague from the village who came to have lunch with us <laughs> well, we always had a full house at home and when then you all of a sudden live on your own that is a bit strange somehow. But just happened that I really met someone who comes from M. and who actually drove home every weekend and was interested to take someone with him to reduce the cost for travelling. And so I always drove with him and then it really wasn’t that bad after all […] so I often drove home for the weekend and met my boyfriend and my family and so it wasn’t a big break really.“

In fact, she describes this episode and the challenge of being away from home and on her own for the first time as a „key experience“ in her life:

„a key experience was certainly that I went to A. […] really to a completely different place where you then of course make completely different experiences […] And then it actually wasn’t any problem at all to get in contact with the people, to find your place there, also regarding the classes, I mean all of that a completely new situation. And everything then somehow went very well. It probably was the first step where one moves out from home and really starts [live]. That really was somehow impressive.“
What sticks out in Linda’s life story is the role of social embeddedness. Connectedness with others is defined via geographical closeness, shared activities and traditions of a group of people. Relatedness in the sense of collectiveness serves as emotional and social resource which allows to master the challenges of life.

The dimension of autonomy is a theme that is less prominent in Linda’s self-story. She talks about having learned from early on to be responsible and help in the house so that living on one’s own and taking care of one’s home was not a problem. Here she refers to autonomy in the sense of mastering every day life on one’s own. Autonomy in the sense of self-realization and self-enhancement based on personal interests becomes relevant in her decisions related to a professional career such as choice of study course, but always is subordinated to social embeddedness as has already become clear on the passages discussed above. She also tells the interviewer that her boyfriend, after having followed her to A. for his undergraduate studies, changes to a university in another city that he considers to be of better reputation for his field of studies. After weighing the compatibility with her own professional career planning, they decide to both move to this city. Eventually, they both move back to her place of childhood where they get married. She describes her ideal future life by continuing her professional career, having children in her mid-thirties while still working part time and continuing to have close family relationships:

“ideally, that I still can work at least part-time [...] so that I don’t completely loose my professional experience but also still have time for family and children. That my parents continue to be in good shape so that we can do things with them [...] that this family life, like I grew up I mean, that we simply can continue to have that, that we go on a trip with the grandparents, whatever, or go on vacation together.“
Linda’s story thus aims at a continuation of the family model she experienced as a child, only in a more modern form. In contrast to her family of origin, she sees herself not merely as housewife but also as pursuing a professional career.

She clearly states that the values that are important to her are something that she has learned from her parent’s role model as becomes evident in her answer to the interviewer’s question what or who has had strong impact on her life:

„Well yes, I think it was the way I grew up [...] simply the way we functioned as family, I mean, the way we, well, we also have certain family traditions which I now continue in my own marriage practically [...] I think that is something where my family had a great impact on me. For instance, that we always had lunch together. Since my father had his medical practice in the basement he came up for lunch every day. [...] That means that we really saw each other every day at the table for lunch. [...] And err because also my granny still lived with us […], the parents basically were always there and I think that through that they conveyed certain values, and in situations, just when I, when I arrived in A. for instance, I felt somewhat insecure but somehow not REALLY completely lost. [...] From that I think that they provided me with a lot. “

Linda seems to have found her place in life. The story can be considered a “good story” in that she seems to be happy and content in the way she succeeded in life by finding a way to combine autonomy and relatedness issues.

(h3) Anna’s story

Anna’s life story is quite different from Linda’s. The theme of balancing autonomy and relatedness, however, also runs through the story she constructs. She reports that she grew
up as a single child in a multistory building in the suburbs of a city. She describes her childhood as very happy until she realized that her mother was an alcoholic. This is a turning point in her life that she describes as follows:

“well, everything very happy, in harmony and err, well up to puberty really great, then, err, my mother - I really became aware of this around the age of ten or eleven – started to have problems with alcohol, mhm, probably because my father was never around and she had to master everything on her own, and then it started to be not so nice any more. That really was quite a burden.”

Other than Linda, Anna describes family life as unbalanced and does not experience her family as source of emotional support. She had to take over the role of an adult who takes care of her mother and was forced to become very autonomous and self-reliant from early on. Although her aunt provides some emotional support to her, she experiences this burden as very heavy.

“the childhood which was so happy turned into a youth which was not happy at all really. That is always being left on my own and err, well had to take on responsibility for the mother, and that made me I think very adultlike and mature very early “

The responsibility for her mother continues into adulthood as her mother’s alcohol problems remain and after the divorce of her husband, her mother stayed alone. While the father lived a very self-enhancing, autonomous life pursuing a professional career that implied that he was often abroad and away from the family, the mother had set aside her own wishes for self-actualization took on the traditional role of a housewife. Anna sees both, the selfish self-actualization of her father at the cost of the marriage and the submissive behavior of her mother as reason for both the unhappy marriage and the mother’s later alcoholism. The lesson
that she draws from this experience is that she does not want to make the same mistakes as her parents, that is neither letting her autonomy and freedom be cut by someone else - like her mother did, nor striving for self-actualization at the cost of others - as her father did:

“this is a mistake that I would not like to make, that I, err, that I feel so hindered in my freedom by someone else. I mean, my father always took what he wanted. THIS is not how I would like to be. That is why I don’t want to impose my own way of living onto others or I also never would pursue a carrier if it implies to get rid of someone else or the like.”

From this constellation - being the only child, experiencing an unbalanced family life resulting in a strong responsibility for her mother – a pattern of individual close relationship between mother and daughter develops rather than close family group cohesion. Besides the previously mentioned aunt there is little to no contact to the broader family and with the divorce of her parents, they also loose contact to previous friends of the parents.

A theme that becomes evident as Anna continues her life story is her very strong desire for autonomy, independence, and self-actualization - a striving that is conflicting with her commitment to care for her mother. This conflict becomes the major problem in her life. The strong desire for self-actualization can be considered in part to have been fostered by the father’s way of life: She describes her father as someone who “made it” from a simple working class family to a cosmopolitan manager. His professional career allowed him to see much of the world. As a child she felt like a princess when he returned from one of his many business trips to exotic place and brought her gifts from these places. In describing her own life, it becomes clear that she too would like to break out from the “small” world and make a professional career in the media section that allows her to meet interesting people and places. She describes her father as a positive influence with regard to her desire for independence and autonomy whereas her mother served as a negative example.
On the other hand, her strong desire for autonomy and independence might also be a consequence from the inversed roles of caring for her mother and might reflect an attempt to escape the co-dependent pattern of this relationship:

“on the one hand I am very freedom-loving, on the other hand I am also very, mhm, well very bound to this region, err, also to my mother. That is a very difficult relationship - actually a quite good [relationship], we also often go on vacation together - but there is always this disease which is always in the back of my mind”

„and it also blocks me in my decisions. I mean there were already two occasions where I would have been able to go somewhere else but each time there was this reaction of my mother, that she drank and when I had to decide whether to move to M. or to move to H. or not, and err, it blocks me so much that I am not able to live my life the way I really want to. “

“Well it, err, I really think that this is the biggest problem that I have – that I cannot talk about of course because then it might happen again that if she feels guilty she will start to drink again. It is a viscous circle. But it certainly is the thing that had the biggest impact on me and that I am thinking about most in terms of worries of what might happen”

While she is not able to live out her strong desire for autonomy and independence in her relationship with her mother, it becomes even more important in other social relationships:

“[…] that I am very freedom-loving, as I said – what becomes evident most of all in that I always used to go by car a lot. And, err, even when I went from here to B. and other
people went there, too, to go to a party or – I always went on my own and alone because I said to myself, then I can go when I want and don’t have to think about others [...] that is, I try – without hurting anybody or trying to influence others – to gain the most possible freedom for myself”

Within relationships it seems to be crucial to Anna to be able to maintain her independence and autonomy. This also becomes clear when she talks about partnership and marriage:

“I don’t think I could, at least at the moment, live together with a man. Because I simply also like to be by myself some time, and live my life as I like to do. But I also would not – when living together in a partnership – impose my own rules and habits to the other. That is why I think it is better to live on your own and err, then one can see each other when one likes to but one does not need to tell the other person what to do. [...] That are simply some of those things that – because I don’t like to be bent towards someone nor that someone else is bent towards me. But of course there are people who can’t cope with that, who look for absolute and that is something that I cannot give and don’t want to give”

The model of social relatedness that Anna develops is one of distinct individuals who pursue their individual interests and try not to hinder each other in their self-actualization. Closeness is experiences as possible threat to one’s autonomy rather than a source of social and emotional support. Relationships are subordinated to autonomy, i.e. they function as long as individual freedom and independence is not threatened by the relationship. The social network that Anna develops is based on individual friendships with a variety of people spread out at different places:
“that I like to meet with various people. I also always like to get to know new people and I think I also have some tendency to, err, let go of friendships when they don’t seem to be so interesting any more. […] Not that I would not be able to maintain friendships over a longer period of time, but if I get to know new people and find it interesting, then I rather meet with one person three times then to meet with others more often […] I have only individual friends which makes it somewhat stressful, my personal life, because I actually always am on my way, because it’s often not possible to get the people together.

While Anna is content with the way relationships with friends are structured, her life-story is still marked by ambivalence and a struggle to balance autonomy and relatedness when it comes to her relationship with her mother. However, her story hints at another recent turning point in her life in that she is now learning to draw more healthy boundaries to other people’s needs and expectations and to become more sensitive to her own emotional needs:

„I have changed quite a bit during the past year […] I still try to be there for friends, family, and the like but I also don’t have a problem any more to say ”Listen, err, you told me a hundred times already that your boyfriend left you. I don’t care about it any more and have told you ten times what I think about it and now it’s o.k.!“ And before, I was not able to do that. I always listened to everybody and tried to give advice, and err, I have reduced that somewhat because you miss out yourself a bit.”

This passage of her story points to a possible solution to the unresolved plot in her story: a solution that allows to live out autonomy and self-realization without feeling obliged to help others.
(h3) Synopsis

Both life-stories are stories about autonomy and relatedness. The protagonists try to make sense of their past experiences by evaluating their parent’s way of living and impact on their own life. They draw lessons from the parents’ model of life and combine them with later experiences in their own life. Evaluation is based on how well strivings for self-determination, self-realization and independence on the one hand, and on interpersonal connectedness and intimacy on the other hand could be realized in a way that does justice to their personal strivings.

Whereas Linda experienced relatedness in form of social and emotional resource in her family of origin that allows for autonomy within relational connectedness, Anna experienced relatedness as co-dependency in her family of origin that did not allow for autonomy in the same respect. Whereas Linda does not seem to need autonomy within relationships but rather profits from group cohesion, Anna was forced to develop a strong sense of autonomy and experiences close relationships as threat of her independence.

Both women reflect on their experiences, try to make sense of them and draw a lesson from these experiences in terms of either taking over the model provided by their parents (exemplified in Linda’s story) or deciding for a counter-draft for their own life (exemplified in Anna’s story).

Both stories also reflect a shift towards autonomy in terms of women’s role in society. Linda pursues a professional career – something that was hardly possible in the generation of her parents as she states; Anna explicitly distances herself from the traditional role of housewife and mother.

(h1) Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that identity formation is the central learning task in emerging adulthood. We have outlined that how identity is conceived of is closely linked to
socio-historical developments such as the increasing individualization in modern post-industrialized contexts, which has lead to an inward turn of the self. Self-stories have thus become the modus operandi for identity formation. We have further argued that self-narratives and hence identity formation are always dialogically intertwined with shared cultural knowledge of what a “good” life should look like. Young adults reflect on their life and their life style, make sense of and draw lessons from their (culturally mediated) experiences through autobiographical narratives. We have approached the notion of shared cultural knowledge in terms of two basic human needs: the need for autonomy and the need for relatedness. This does not imply that cultural knowledge can be reduced to these two dimensions, however. Yet for the purpose of this chapter, we have put the focus on these two dimensions.

By discussing the life stories of two female young adults in South Germany, we have illustrated how narrative identity is achieved by struggling with and trying to find ways to meet both needs in a way that is conform with the broader cultural model of a good life. Life satisfaction in the cultural context presented here seems to depend on how well self-realization and autonomy on the one hand, and close intimate relationships on the other hand can be successfully be realized without hindering each other. As the two cases discusses have shown, this also crucially depends on a person’s individual experience within the family of origin.

Narrative identity formation is, however, not limited to young adulthood but remains a project to be worked on for much of the rest of the life course. Adults continue to refashion their narrative understandings of themselves as they integrate new experiences and lessons learned from those experiences (McAdams 2008). Autobiographical storytelling continues to be a means to make sense of one’s live. Recent studies suggest that adults use increasingly sophisticated forms of autobiographical reasoning over the life span and produce increasingly
coherent self-stories (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006 quoted in McAdams, 2008).

(h1) Future directions

The narrative approach to the study of identity development has arrived in academic psychology. We can expect the analysis of life narratives will become even more widespread in the future. Sense-making and learning processes, are however not limited to stories of an entire life. Narrativity as sense-making process is a feature that is a very common feature in all areas of life (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Some researchers have therefore turned from “big stories” towards the study of “small stories” (M. Bamberg, 2008a; M. Bamberg, 2008b). A fruitful avenue for future studies on adult learning and development might therefore also be to study mundane every-day conversations in which people jointly make sense of their experiences.

Acknowledging the socio-cultural nature of identity, and the prevalence of studies carried out in Western post-industrialized contexts, there is also a pressing need to study identity formation in the various other contexts of the majority world. How are the panhuman needs for autonomy and relatedness negotiated there?

The influence of modern communication practices and the impact of globalization and increasing urbanization within these contexts on identity formation is still not sufficiently understood. While there is an increasing awareness that selves (and hence identities) are socially co-constructed through every-day interactions, we still miss empirical evidence for these co-constructive processes, especially with regard to the rapidly increasing influence of modern ways of communication.

Since narrative identity is constructed and re-constructed throughout adulthood, another important aspect is to study how narrative identity construction changes over the
life span. Examining life stories of the same person at various stages of life allow insight on how people re-interpret past experiences in line with their present identity construction. Another interesting aspect would be whether and how the role of autonomy and relatedness changes over the life span.

Is identity formation an increasingly difficult task in light of these societal changes? Are the socio-cultural adaptations of identity formation always functional implying that a trend towards increasing individualization makes the need for close intimate relatedness less important? Or is the present socio-historical development actually counter-productive to the basic human needs of autonomy AND relatedness?

These are important issues that need to be addressed in the future. Studying life narratives and other forms of narrativity in various socio-cultural context promises to be fruitful avenue for prospective studies on adult learning and development.

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¹ All names and geographical places have been changed for the sake of anonymity