Transformative Narratives: From Victimic to Agentic Life Plots

Donald E. Polkinghorne

Key Words: health • professional practice • quality of life

Basic to occupational engagement is a person’s personal power to author choices. Impairment in functioning moves some clients from an agentic identity of self to a victimic identity. The change in identity causes previously self-directed clients to adopt a passive and acquiescent stance toward their lives. The recovery of occupational functioning includes the restoration of the person’s sense of agency. Recent developments in self theory emphasize the self as a process rather than a substance or thing. Narrative is the discourse mode most able to express identity as a process. Victimic identity is manifest in a self-story in which protagonists have lost power to affect change in their lives; agentic identity is manifest in self-stories of active agency. A study of clients’ rehabilitation by Cochran and Laub found that clients’ change from victimic to agentic identity moves through four phases: incompleteness, positioning, actualizing, and completion.

As members of a health care discipline, occupational therapists intervene in persons’ lives to assist them in increasing their independent functioning, enhancing their development, and preventing disability (Hopkins, 1993a). Practitioners engage individual, whole persons with their unique histories and identities rather than simply working on impaired parts of the body that hinder their adaptation. Because people are systemically whole, injury or underdevelopment in an area of mental or physical function can affect meaningful change in a person’s entire identity; conversely, change in the person’s self-understanding can affect the level of dysfunction produced by the injury or the underdeveloped function.

The purpose of this article is to call attention to the changes in identity that clients can experience during rehabilitation. Clients’ achievements in recovery affect changes in their identity, and these changes affect desire and motivation to engage in therapeutic activities. By being aware of the changes in identity that clients experience during treatment, occupational therapists can adapt strategies and treatments to be responsive to the clients’ altering views of themselves. This article first introduces the idea that understanding a person’s identity requires knowledge of his or her self-narrative. Second, it distinguishes two kinds of life plots: victimic narrative and the agentic narrative. Finally, it describes phases of change in the self-narrative through which clients might move during the course of their treatment.

Narrative and Identity

Awareness of the changing identities that clients experience during treatment can be assisted by understanding current identity theory. Current theory holds that identity is “a complex mental edifice that one constructs by the use of a variety of mental processes” (Bruner, 1994, p. 41). Identity gives an overall unity and purpose to one’s life and defines how one is similar to and different from others (McAdams, 1990). Because a person’s life unfolds over time and is expressed through a series of changing thoughts, feelings, and actions, the self is best conceptualized as a process instead of as a thing or substance (Polkinghorne, 1991). Identity makes sense of one’s self-process by providing an interpretative scheme through which the succession of experiences and actions that have made up one’s life are understood and made meaningful. Identity is not an object but a system of understanding. To conceive of it as some object is to make a mistake similar to that of examining the substance of the ink on a piece of paper to

Donald E. Polkinghorne, PhD, is Professor of Counseling Psychology, Division of Counseling Psychology, School of Education, University of Southern California, Waite Phillips Hall #503, Los Angeles, California 90089-0031.

This article was accepted for publication October 19, 1995.

The American Journal of Occupational Therapy

The term victimic was coined by Bruner (1994). Its unusual grammatical form was developed to parallel the term agentic.
find the meaning of the word it prints.

The constructed meaning that provides identity for people incorporates understandings that give unity to their lives and provide purpose and direction for their actions. Narrative is the form of meaning that is particularly suited for expressing unity and purpose (Bruner, 1990; Helfrich & Kielhofner, 1994; Howard, 1991; Kerby, 1991; MacIntyre, 1981; Mattingly, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1991). Narrative is able to fulfill the need for personal unity because of its capacity to draw together disparate life actions and happenings into a coherent whole. Narrative is able to give purpose and direction by linking proposed actions to the accomplishment of life projects.

Narrative Form

The narrative form used to construct identity also underlies and makes comprehensible discourse that is presented as stories. Ricoeur (1984–1989), the philosopher who brought attention to the importance of narrative discourse, described the operations through which narrative produced meaningful stories. He outlined the general operations of narrative as (a) orienting actions and events toward an outcome; (b) organizing actions and events in a temporal sequence in which they provide a beginning, middle, and end of a project; and (c) exhibiting the meanings of actions and events according to their contribution to an outcome. These operations are accomplished in stories by a plot. The plot is the central theme of the story and includes the setting, protagonists, and goal toward which the actions and events are aimed. The plot line leads the story through the dramatic happenings and moves the action toward achievement of the goal or away from the hoped-for result. Thus, narrative can be defined as the cognitive structure that uses a plot to draw together temporal events into a coherent whole (Mattingly, 1991). The general narrative operations function in all kinds of stories, for example, fairy tales, fictional novels, television and motion picture dramas, and histories (Polkinghorne, 1988). People construct their own identities by using these narrative operations to produce stories about who they are.

Self-Stories

Self-stories provide unifying identities to people’s lives by gathering their past actions and happenings into a coherent and meaningful story. These life stories give context and importance to people’s past life events by identifying their contributions toward their overall life configuration. The narrative form allows the self-story to include full dimensions of experiences—bodily feelings, emotions, thoughts, and values, as well as directed activities, chance occurrences, and others’ actions. In self-stories the central protagonist is a person’s own self. Other characters, such as family members and friends, have supporting roles.

Although self-stories are interpretive constructions, people are not free to impose any story line on their lives. Unless they are overly grandiose or paranoid, the story needs to integrate and give meaning to all the critical events that have happened. People cannot simply alter or neglect life events that they are ashamed of or guilty about to create a fantasized identity. The time span of self-stories is from a person’s birth, through his or her present, and into the remainder of his or her existence.

At any particular time, people are, to some extent, in the middle of their life story. What has happened cannot be changed, although future events may change the importance of certain past events. Self-stories include imagined projections of how the rest of a person’s life drama will play out. But because people are unable to control all the circumstances that affect their lives, the future may not unfold according to their present expectations.

Although life stories are in the same narrative form as other types of stories, the construction of people’s self-stories differ considerably from that of literary authors. Self-stories are not usually the result of conscious and reflective effort. Instead, they are formed by deeper cognitive processes that incorporate sedimented early childhood experiences, emotional responses, and personality traits, as well as the holistic and dialectic thought of mature cognition (Epstein, 1993; White & Epston, 1990). Literary productions, including autobiographies, are produced by a more consciously directed process and often involve plot outlines and rewriting to eliminate extraneous noise or static. In a well-developed literary production, the reader is told only what is necessary to further the plot. The literary author selects out the events that are not essential to move the story along. But in life, the static remains. Carr (1985), a leading interpreter of narrative histories, wrote, “Perhaps our lives resemble novels, but bad ones, cluttered and undisciplined ones” (p. 115).

In life, people are engaged in many projects at once, not all of which interlock into a single integrated endeavor. Although, at times, our projects are synergistic, at other times, they interfere with one another. An event may be extraneous and irrelevant to one project but essential to another. For example, involvement in a tennis match is separate from writing an article (of course, unless one breaks a finger playing tennis, then that event will be configured into the story of one’s writing project). Narrative literary productions are usually organized around a single, central theme. People, however, are often
confronted with multiple and, sometimes, conflicting life themes that they are unable to unify into a single, unified life story (Gergen, 1991).

The temporality of life. One of the properties of narrative is that it retains the temporal and sequential relation among life events. The primary dimension of human existence is temporal (Heidegger, 1962); that is, from the present moment, a person's existence extends into the past, which is retained as memories and recollections (Casey, 1987), and into the future through the capacity for imagination. Life itself is experienced as movement from the past, through the present, and into the future. Life stories depict the self as a temporal process by maintaining the temporal order of life as it is lived. However, past events are now interpreted as contributors to future outcomes. Life stories synthesize a person's recollected past actions and happenings into a life history; that is, future outcomes are explained by appeal to previous actions and happenings. A life story represents a person's life as it has been up to the present. Narrative employment can also be used to construct an imaginative future self that provides a possible self-story of what a person seeks to become and actualize. That is, people can engage in story making (Mattingly, 1991). Plots of people's futures not only provide designs and guides for how they will act, but also express the expectations they have about their power to successfully direct actions that will bring about valued ends. Thus, Mattingly proposed that occupational therapists "need to structure therapy in a narrative way, as an unfolding story" (p. 1000).

Life plots. The narrative operation that organizes various events into a unified flow from beginning to end is plot. It is the plot that transfigures a simple chronological list of events into a dramatic progression of interconnected happenings producing a denouement. A life plot configures a person's actions and happenings into a life story. Narrative inquiry can extract life plots from particular life stories for purposes of categorizing and comparing persons' life stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). The next section examines two types of life plots that are useful for understanding the changes in life stories that clients may experience during the course of work with an occupational therapist.

Victim and Agentic Life Plots

Although plots can be categorized in various ways (Campbell, 1949; Frye, 1957), the dichotomous differentiation of plots into agentic or victimic (passivity) categories is widely used in the literature on personal development. McAdams (1993) held that during the first 2 years of life, people develop a prelinguistic sense about whether the world is trustworthy and responsive or unresponsive to their attempts of accomplishment. McAdams' view is based on Erikson's (1963) idea that the first developmental task is to establish the human and physical environment as trustworthy. McAdams stated that depending on the consequences of people's attempts to do things in the world, they develop a life tone that prevails in their life stories. The life tone of these stories either exudes optimism and hope (agentic) or mistrust and resignation (victinic). According to McAdams, "The infant emerges from the first two years of life with an unconscious, pervasive, and 'enduring belief' concerning the extent to which wishes, intentions, desires, and dreams are 'attainable'" (p. 47). Although it originates in early childhood, an underlying positive or negative belief in the possibilities of human intention and behavior can be altered. Maturation, major life events, and social interaction may have an impact on the extent to which the traces of a relatively hopeful or hopeless perspective on life is maintained.

In Frye's (1957) classification, the agentic plot is linked to the mythic archetypes of spring and summer. For the agentic protagonist, there is a sense that the world is starting afresh and that things will work (spring) and a sense of embarking on a perilous journey in which great obstacles are overcome and whose end is triumph (summer). In contrast, the victimic plot is linked to the archetypes of fall and winter. For the victim, there is a pessimistic sense of a time of decline and movement toward isolation and death (fall) and a sense of the triumph of chaos and a loss of opportunity to accomplish one's goals (winter).

In the agentic plot, the protagonist is persistent and shows purpose and commitment. Agentic protagonists are skilled and competent in practical problem solving and accomplishment, that is, they possess practical wisdom (Lave, 1988). In life stories based on an agentic plot, protagonists are clear on what they want to accomplish, understand how intended actions will contribute to their accomplishments, and are confident that they can complete the intended actions and attain their goals. The major psychological theorists of agency have identified eight core ingredients of personal agency: self-determination, self-regulation, meaningfulness, purposefulness, confidence, active striving, planfulness, and responsibility. In agentic life stories, persons identify their selves as an ensemble of these eight features (Cochran & Laub, 1994). The identity of an agentic self is constructed by assembling and conceptualizing instances of one's own agentic past acts (Bruner, 1994) and projecting that instances of agency will continue in the future.

In the victimic plot, the protagonist is passive and
receptive. Victimic protagonists depict their lives as out of their control. The protagonist is oriented more toward avoiding negative possibilities than to actualizing positive possibilities. Success in life is measured by what negative happenings did not occur or what one was able to prevent from occurring. In victimic life stories, the protagonist is shaped by conditions beyond his or her control. Other’s actions and chance determine life outcomes, and the accomplishment or failure to achieve life goals depends on factors that are unable to be changed. Persons construct a victimic self “by reference to memories of how [they]...responded to the agency of somebody else who had the power to impose his or her will upon [them]...directly, or indirectly by controlling the circumstances in which [they]...are compelled to live” (Bruner, 1994, p. 41).

Occupation science relates participation in occupation to the development of an agentic self. Yerxa and colleagues (1990) noted that the term occupation is derived from the Latin root occupatio, which means to seize or take possession. Thus, they linked occupation with self-possession and control of one’s life. Yerxa et al. proposed, “The study of occupation requires the study of the person as the author of his or her work, rest, play, leisure, and self-maintenance” (p. 5). Thus, to engage in occupation is to take control of one’s life. A person who is occupationally engaged is one who is “active, capable, and free, and the agent of purposeful activity” (Clark & Larson, 1993, p. 48); that is, an adaptive person whose purposive performance “promotes survival and self-actualization” (Hopkins, 1993b, p. 58). Such persons can be understood to be living an agentic plot in which they actively set goals, strive to achieve those goals, overcome obstacles, and actualize ideals. In contrast, persons who are living a victimic plot understand themselves as victims or pawns of circumstance (Burke, 1977) who have given up or lost the power to control and direct their lives.

As people strengthen their sense of agency, they are more able to engage in occupation, and as they engage in occupation, they are more able to conceive of themselves as agentic. As people move toward understanding themselves as empowered agents, their willingness and motivation to become actively involved in the learning and practice of adaptive responses and skills (Kleinman & Bulkley, 1982) is enhanced. At the same time, as people regain their adaptive responses and skills, they gain confidence in their agentic possibilities. The recovery of an agentic identity and occupational health is a recursive process in which the experience of renewed capabilities of action and skill affect self-understanding and identity. With the growing recognition of their selves as once again a purposive agent, clients’ motivation is strengthened to engage in the practice and completion of the tasks encouraged by the occupational therapist.

Occupational science values the agentic life as more fulfilling for human beings than the victimic life. It also holds that there is a syncretic relation between engaging in occupation and constructing an agentic identity.

Changes in Life Stories

Developing a life story is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment. People’s life stories change throughout their life time. McAdams (1993) proposed that stories that provide identity at one developmental stage need to be revised and changed as people move to the next developmental stage. Life stories constructed during adolescence may not be functional during young adulthood; life stories that serve as a fitting design for midlife may have to be discarded and replaced at retirement by a self-story more consistent with the biological, economic, and communal factors of old age.

May (1967) believed that major life events, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, procreation, and death, often tear apart previously meaningful life stories. This rendering leaves the person to “experience the profound insecurity, self-doubt and inner conflict which we associate with anxiety” (p. 1). Occupational therapists often work with persons who have experienced physical or mental debilitation, or both, that can seriously affect their previous life stories, rendering them no longer workable as life designs. The effect of a physical or mental wound or deterioration can be the decomposition of a person’s previously developed agentic life design and its replacement with a victimic life design of acquiescence and submissive acceptance. In response to the experience of dependency and loss of personal power resulting from an impairment, clients may discard all or much of their agentic identity that previously gave meaning to their life and empowered their actions (Cochran & Laub, 1994). Construction of a victimic identity may help make sense of a clients’ feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Occupational therapists also work with children and adults whose life events or developmental challenges, or both, may not have supported the construction of an agentic identity.

Because of the interaction between identity and active engagement in occupation, the treatment process of occupational therapy should be conceptualized as more than attention to the performance of prescribed tasks related to areas of dysfunction and maladaptation. Treatment also involves attention to the maintenance or development of clients’ life stories to encourage and motivate them to reengage in occupation. For those clients who
enter treatment with victimic life stories, I have observed that the recovery process most often requires the transformation of their identity from dependent victim to purposeful agent. Although construction of identity is an endeavor clients themselves must carry out, occupational therapists can assist them in their maintenance or development of agentic identity by involving them in intrinsically meaningful activities (Clark & Larson, 1993).

The view that occupational therapy involves attention to the whole person is consistent with Pörn’s (1984) conception that “health is the state of a person which obtains exactly when his repertoire is adequate relative to his profile of goals” (p. 5). Agentic engagement in occupation does not refer simply to the absence of biomedical injury but to the kind of relationship in which persons carry out activities. Agentic relationship holds when there is a balance among a person’s abilities and knowledge, the demands and opportunities in the environment, and his or her goals (Pörn, in press). Thus, recovery is achieved when clients come to understand themselves as having the autonomy and power necessary to achieve their chosen goals.

Transformation From a Victimic to an Agentic Life Plot

If the goal of the occupational therapist can be understood as the return of clients to a life that is occupied with adaptive actions designed to facilitate their life goals and purposes, and if such a return entails an agentic life story, then an understanding of the transformative process will be helpful in designing treatment strategies. A useful model of the transformative process that occurs during the recovery from serious injury was developed by Cochran and Laub (1994). Their model was developed from a study of the course of rehabilitation of persons who were severely injured. Their study focused on clients victimic sense of themselves to an understanding of their story, then an understanding of the transformative process. Beneath these cycles, the construction of a new agentic identity generally moves through four phases.

The first phase is dominated by clients’ feelings of entrapment or a sense of incompleteness. The impairment, if sudden, separates the old life from the present. The clients become aware of the losses and their effect on their lives. What used to be a sense of control, competence, usefulness, and freedom is now a sense of being controlled, helplessness, uselessness, and confinement. Clients experience being “trapped in a world in which most of what makes life worthwhile is gone, and threatened by the possibility that this bleak existence might extend indefinitely” (Cochran & Laub, 1994, p. 90). “Overwhelmed, a person might retreat to fantasy, false hopes, and distractions, or try to numb oneself to living” (p. 90) through drugs or alcohol. The study participants did not get stuck in this first phase and moved on to the second phase.

In the second phase, clients begin to prepare or position themselves for a return to a life of active engagement in occupation. They become involved in practices that will assist in actually carrying out an agentic life. Escape from the first phase begins with the formation of a goal that is worthwhile to the client and is attainable. Clients see that attaining this goal will mark an improvement of their condition and be a sign that they are no longer completely dependent. In this phase, clients monitor their progress and establish standards for success in achieving progressively more difficult goals. It is important that clients take ownership of their goals and that they see that their efforts make a difference and affect the outcomes. Experiences of success in achieving their goals are crucial during this phase and validate clients’ capacity to make a difference. Success in these well-fitting goals validate clients’ hope for a better future and produce feelings of freedom, independence, and control. As they complete these tasks, clients experience encouragement and confidence that they can complete future tasks. Although clients’ first efforts can be faltering and filled with obstacles and setbacks, over time, with successes, their confidence grows (Cochran & Laub, 1994).

In the third phase, clients engage in activities more closely related to the life occupation that will make up their lives after treatment. Although clients continue involvement in tasks designed to increase movement and dexterity, they begin to focus on the life skills needed to live as independent and self-directed persons. Cochran...
and Laub (1994) described phase three as actually playing the game, whereas phase two was practicing in the game. As clients participate in working to achieve real-life goals, they become aware that the remaining major barriers to fuller and more agentic participation in life activities reside as much in their own beliefs and attitudes as in the life skills.

In the fourth phase, clients experience a liberating sense of completing their treatment goals: "Now one lives with a sense of being on course, full, open to possibilities or unrestricted" (Cochran & Laub, 1994, p. 94). Within the bounds of their limitations, clients have achieved a sense of wholeness that is no longer threatened by recollections of what and who they were before the impairment. Clients have become authors of their lives and have taken control of their existence. They are directing the activities of work and play in which they are occupied.

Cochran and Laub (1994) did not claim that all clients will move through these four phases of transformation. However, their study participants followed this structure. These four phases of transformation are descriptive of the growth process in the enhancement of clients' sense of agency.

Cochran and Laub (1994) found that the participants engaged in a corollary process of destroying the victimic life story. In order for the agentic story to develop and reign, it was necessary for the participants to actively disengage themselves from their victimic story. As long as the victimic self remained intact, it vied with the emerging agentic story for control of participants' identities. The victimic plot does not simply fade away; it must be purposely confronted. In detaching from their victimic self-stories, participants described various strategies they used. One strategy involved temporarily stepping out of their life flow and reflecting critically on how they had become helpless and dependent victims. What was seen from the reflective perspective was perceived as offensive; that is, participants did not like the kind of persons they appeared to be. Another strategy called for making changes in the participants' settings and situations, such as leaving the hospital for visits home. In previous settings, recollections of past agentic actions, which had been deselected from their life story because they did not fit into the controlling victimic life story, began to leak into awareness. These recollections (e.g., recalling a previous decision to start one's own business) erode the victimic plot and act to break its hold on the client's identity (White & Epston, 1990). These strategies serve to develop resistance to the power of the victimic self-story. At times, this resistance to being a victim is expressed impetuously through "talking back [to therapists], [and] refusing to obey orders or expectations" (Cochran & Laub, 1994, p. 150). The culmination of clients' attempts to destroy their victimic self-story comes when their agentic self-story dominates their identity to the extent that the victimic story loses all of its authority.

Cochran and Laub's (1994) study revealed that the participants understood their transformation to consist of two developments: (a) the positive development of the agentic self, which occurs through a four-phase process, and (b) the progressive destruction of the victimic self. As an exemplar of the transformative process, Cochran and Laub told the story of Ray, a young man whose agentic identity was overturned by his experience of debilitation after a severe injury. Ray was a promising athlete who loved sports and outdoor recreation and was secure in his abilities to pursue and achieve his life goals. At age 15, he was in a car accident that left him paralyzed in both legs.

The accident became a turning point separating his old life from the present. Before the accident he was high on life, a potent agent with a lot to look forward to. After the accident, he was depressed, helpless, and uncertain....He felt totally dependent and unable to take care of himself....He could no longer become the person he had anticipated becoming, nor live the life he anticipated living. (p. 62)

Ray was dislodged from his previous agentic life plot and turned toward a passive life plot of enduring a life of dependency. Cochran and Laub (1994) described Ray's struggles and setbacks as he moved through the phases of transformation to the restoration of his agentic identity. The story ends with Ray's living independently, engaging in occupation that included participation in wheelchair sports (as well as serving as a coach of wheelchair sports), and having been accepted into a university physical education program to prepare for a position as a coach of high school students with disabilities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the close relationship that exists between occupation and agentic identity. Although not all clients assume a victimic identity when confronted with the effects of a severe injury, stroke, or developmental deficiency, the pattern occurs in many. Awareness of clients' transformative struggles to return to an agentic identity serves to point out the importance of recognizing all clients' self-stories and the type of identity bestowed by these stories. The reciprocal relation between identity and engagement in occupation means that occupational therapists treat clients within the context of the clients' understanding of their own life designs. Often, occupational therapy interventions require that therapists be aware of the effect of
their work on changing clients’ self-stories.

The occupational therapist’s interventions are themselves practices that engage clients “in purposeful, motivating and constructive occupation” (Hopkins, 1993b, p. 58) that contributes to clients’ transformation toward a more agentic identity. Contributing to clients’ transformation requires occupational therapists to encourage clients to commit to occupation and to use a style of interactive relating that is sensitive and empathetic (Fleming, 1993). The work of occupational therapists is directed toward achieving the goal of clients’ engagement in a life in which they are “active, capable, and free, and the agent of purposeful activity” (Clark & Larson, 1993, p. 48). In order for clients to engage in this kind of life, they require not only dexterity and life skills, but also an agentic identity. ▲

Acknowledgment
Preparation of this manuscript was supported by the American Occupational Therapy Foundation Center for Research, Department of Occupational Therapy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

References


