and that which comes from looking back.

that derives from looking forward.

between the looking forward in time.

is the intersection of knowledge.

What calls for the recourse

itself, is unanswerable, inevitable.
History, Narrative, and Life-Span Developmental Knowledge

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Abstract. The problem of finding continuity across the life course can be tied in part to a theoretical perspective which looks essentially forward in time. It can, however, be significantly minimized within a framework that is more genuinely historical, one that looks back over the flow of events in an attempt to understand and explain their possible connections. That this involves a necessary immersion of the researcher in the researched precludes the possibility of establishing any final objectivity, but need not detract from the validity of the knowledge which can derive from intersubjective consensus. It is through a dialectically informed narration that a new conceptualization of development, founded upon the approximation toward self-constructed ends, can emerge. The reading of this development will necessitate critical reflection as to what its optimal forms are and how they might be achieved.

In recent years, a number of writers [see especially Gergen, 1980] have set forth the idea that life-span developmental psychology is finding itself in the throes of turmoil. Despite the noble intentions of Bayley [1963], Neugarten [1969], and a wealth of others to extend the domain of developmental psychology to the entire life course, readily accessible, lawful propositions have not been forthcoming. Apparently, with both biological maturation and cognitive development becoming somewhat stabilized as adulthood draws near, the terrific complexity of variables entering into anything approaching a comprehensive specification of human change tends to preclude the possibility of high-level predictability. The sort of 'epistemic subject' isolated in the early movement of ontogeny can simply no longer be found. Moreover, metaphysical presuppositions aside for the moment, the sheer mechanics of systematization have been notoriously difficult. As such, there is some question as to whether we can, in fact, extract a science out of this morass or not. My contention is that we can, but that it will have to be conceptualized somewhat differently than it has. In order to bring the ideas behind this contention into clearer focus, I will draw primarily from epistemological issues in the philosophy of history, as it is from this domain of inquiry that many of our current problems can find their instantiations within a broader, more rigorously debated framework.

To begin, despite the aforementioned 'premonition' that life-span theory is rapidly
With regard to the first issue, aposteriori need not be 'vicious' or unsystematic, as numerous historians have amply demonstrated. Moreover, by virtue of the fact that we are dealing with somewhat more recurrent phenomena in the study of the life course than in history 'at large', there is reason to assume that the possibility of systematization or generalization may be even more forthcoming. Thus, the undertaking of the researcher interested in the life course is neither more nor less historical than that of the historian; the scopes of the phenomena are simply different. And while the interests in particularity and generality can be said to correspond, to a greater or lesser extent, to history and life-span psychology, respectively, there is clearly some uneasy ground between these two poles for both. How important is a given work of history if it does not embody some idea not just about how things were, but how they can be? Likewise, if life-span psychology is not meant to shed light on the particular, what can be its aim other than to simply catalogue abstractions? In short, the opposition tends to break down a bit - as perhaps it should.

In terms of the second issue mentioned, this problem of interpretation remains pretty much the same whether the methodological frame in question is prospective or retrospective. However, it is essential to note that the validity of a particular historical interpretation, in either the discipline of history or life-span developmental psychology, will not be addressed through testing or verification, but rather through critical assessment, public scrutiny. And lest we conclude that this enterprise is doomed owing to the caprices of 'mere' opinion or ideology, there is surely some comfort in the fact that there will inevitably be a finite realm of parameters for interpretation which are capable of being agreed upon due to the (more or less) common stock of knowledge present in a given research community. There is, as Ricoeur [1971] puts it, a 'specific plurality' inherent in a body of historical data, indicating that while no one particular appropriation can be said, ultimately, to be purely objective or correct, there exists the possibility of choosing from a hierarchy of plausible alternatives. Despite the fact that there can be no 'last word', intersubjective consensus minimizes the likelihood of arbitrariness or even outright falsity in interpretation. Historical science need not be deemed hopelessly idealistic or relativistic.

The necessary circularity of this process, which has been addressed by hermeneutic philosophy [e.g., Gadamer, 1966], amongst other disciplines, is a topic which I will return to later in this essay. For now, the important point to be made is that the study of the life course is, of necessity, not only a historical form of inquiry, but one which demands the acknowledgment of its narrative structure. More than a simple mapping of discrete and isolated events - whether they be particular or general - it is, in a distinct sense, an ongoing story to be told.

Historical Narration and Models of Development

From 'Verstehen' to the Covering Law

Acknowledging the significance of his many precursors, Dilthey's philosophy of history provides a suitable starting point for any discussion concerning the integrity of the human sciences as a body of knowledge. In a clear response to the reductive, atomistic scientific atmosphere of his time, Dilthey [1910] set forth the idea that the positivistic
historical connections, be they within the individual or in history at large, was always dependent upon an interrelation of mental acts and hence could not be justified logically or proven incontestably. History was seen as contingent upon our human understanding, as a reproduction or reliving of the experience of the historical subjects studied.

Not only could there be no detachment of the researcher from the object of research, there was an irreducible transposition, an affiliation made possible by the intrinsic comprehensibility of the expressions of the other. For Dilthey, there is the notion, then, that the historical narrative is not inherently 'there', readily manifest for us to observe and faithfully reproduce, but is a product of a lived, empathic immersion grounded by the necessary coincidence of psychologies and our historicality as human beings. By virtue of this recovery of the 'author's' intentions [see Hirsch, 1972, for an updated version of this thesis], it was contended that genuinely objective knowledge could be had. While Dilthey's calling attention to the contextuality of interpretation certainly presages much of modern hermeneutic theory, ultimately it appears that he succumbed to the very sort of objectivism he had tried to divest himself of [e.g., Palmer, 1969]. By referring in the end to psychology, albeit a somewhat 'mystical' one, rather than ontology as being at the root of our human understanding, Dilthey's attempt to arrive at a genuinely historical knowledge was undermined.

Following this line of reasoning, though moving away somewhat from Dilthey's psychologistic reliance on intuition, Collingwood [1946] saw history as the record of past thoughts achieved via reenactment within the historian's own mind. In adhering to a more dialectical perspective, there was the recognition that the historian's knowledge was 'not either knowledge of the past and therefore not knowledge of the present, or else knowledge of the present and therefore not knowledge of the past; it is knowledge of the past in the present, the self-knowledge of the historian's own mind as the present revival and reliving of past experiences' [p. 175]. Yet, of course, the writing of history involved not merely the repetition of the past, but, as Dilthey also recognized, a certain degree of interpolation as well, a filling-in of the historical gaps. History was a special science where events were, by and large, not accessible to observation — through the appropriation of the vestiges of the past, an account had to be constructed. In essence, there was a certain artfulness in the sort of understanding that took place in the making of history in that it represented an imaginative arrangement of discovered facts which were accessible by virtue of their according with life itself [Berlin, 1960]. Perhaps even more importantly, herein lies the most central reason why 'truth' was only to be had via criticism, as opposed to the verification frequently possible in the observational sciences. The historical narrative, as Mink [1981] indicates, is precisely not what is 'remembered', but what is constructed. The hard and fast line between the fictional and the real is, in a sense, erased [Ricoeur, 1981a].

In addition to the 'problem' alluded to above, this sort of position proved to be problematic not only due to its radical rejection of the necessity for observational detachment, but its universalistic assumption of the possibility of knowing the experiences or actions of others across time and space. Even though these thinkers were undoubtedly aware of the virtually inevitable coloring of the past with the notions of the present, particularly Collingwood, they seemed to believe it possible, at least in principle, to extricate themselves from their 'prescentific predicament' [Lovejoy, 1939] and actually immerse themselves in the otherness of the past. This is a matter of finding a path that is not really desirable if our aim is to understand — for to resurrect the past is to reproduce it with all its uncertainties [Walsh, 1974]. In other words, it is because of our vantage point as observers, where the knowledge of outcomes is available, that we are able to make historical connections, derive meaning. Patterns are not detectable except after the fact.

With these ideas in mind, then, it is not surprising to find that there were a number of critical responses to the 'Verstehen' (empathic understanding) position as formulated by Dilthey and subsequently modified by Collingwood and others. Perhaps most outspoken was Hempel [1942], who argued that history, while its explanations were often somewhat incomplete, more like 'sketches' than full-blown scientific explanations, could be conceptualized in exactly the same manner as any of the other sciences. Empathic understanding was no more than a heuristic; behind this were rationally perceivable empirical generalizations, in fact laws, which could be established and falsified in a fashion not intrinsically different from the 'hard' sciences.

Despite Hempel's [e.g., 1966] eventual expansion of his initial deductive/nomological position to include inductive/probabilistic hypotheses, he remained steadfast in his defense of the necessary logical symmetry of prediction and explanation and the methodological unity of all science. There is no good reason to invoke some mystical faculty just because of the coincidence of subject and object. History, for Hempel [1965, p. 449], is a form of genetic inquiry where 'each stage must be shown to "lead to" the next and thus be linked to its successor by virtue of some general principles which make the occurrence of the latter at least reasonably probable given the former'. We see, therefore, that Hempel's basic formulation, particularly the idea of the 'covering law', which refers to the empirical regularities implicit in any historical explanation, is clearly founded upon a prospectively oriented causal framework. Despite the relative unsensuous of the future, there is no reason to conclude that it is indeterminate. In sum, Hempel, with his natural scientific approach to history as well as genetic (including developmental) explanation overall, insists that historical narrative, despite the particularity of its form, embodies the very same fundamental principles as those which ground more systematic observational inquiry. It is a complex and difficult science, to be sure, but this need not frighten us into looking away from the universal tenets of the scientific method, delude us into thinking we must look elsewhere.

A good many philosophers of science and history, particularly Gardiner [1952] and M. White [1965], have followed in the direction outlined by Hempel. There have, in addition, been a number of covering law 'revisionists' who have sought to modify the Hempelian stance by pointing to a variety of reasons why the model, at least in its original formulation (deductive/nomological) is inadequate. First and foremost, the fact of the matter is that historians have yet to provide explanations which fully satisfy the covering law model in its stern demands for outlining both necessary and sufficient conditions [Donagan,
1964; Frankel, 1959; Nagel, 1960]. Not that this state of affairs precludes the necessity of maintaining the underlying supposition of a thoroughgoing determinism — indeed a number of revisionists would surely argue that it does not — but the multitude of factors at hand simply argue against the possibility of a complete and total specification. Moreover, the data of history do not, as mentioned earlier, 'nakedly' confront us to the extent that is true of the natural sciences [see Passmore, 1958], but we must constantly select and assess; facts are inevitably presented in the light of certain preconceptions [Walsh, 1966; Mommsen, 1978], these being founded perhaps upon former historical developments as well as commonly held canons of rational action and the like.

Essentially, even if we still wish to adhere to the idea that historical narratives embody instantiations of general laws, or more realistically 'truisms', as Svettnen [1959] has called them, it is ultimately impossible to deny the interpretive nature of dealing with historical data. Acknowledging that this fact is, to a large extent, part and parcel of scientific inquiry in general, there still remain distinct differences in the parameters of interpretation as a function of the particular object of investigation. Furthermore, the very fact that one undertakes a historical analysis at all is itself a product of prevailing metaphysical beliefs concerning the possibility — not to mention the value — of making sense of a succession of events over time. While some form of contextualization may well be universal, be it within myth, some notion of cosmic evolution, whatever, the sort of 'linear' history we have been considering here is ostensibly not. In short, the very process of synthesizing and interpreting, in addition to the particular form this takes, represents an important point of departure from the (relative) givenness of the facts of nonhuman nature. Hence, as Passmore [1958] eloquently puts it, it will not strike us as too unreasonable to entertain a Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution, but an interpretation of this sort for the Doppler effect just will not do.

Bringing these ideas a bit closer to life’s span psychology, while few contemporary developmentalists advocate the primacy of some form of empathic understanding (many ‘narrative’ psychoanalysts are a noteworthy exception to this — see, for example, Coher [1979]), those adhering to the fundamentally mechanistic model of development outlined by Reese and Overton [1971] can be seen as maintaining an epistemological position similar to many of the covering law theorists previously discussed. The primary concerns are with elements, antecedents and consequences which are sufficiently bounded to be separable. The forces at work are most often seen to be efficient or material causes and complete prediction is, at least in principle, possible. Stated simply, the most basic premise underlying this model is that, if we knew then what we do now, we could have foretold the outcome. Thus, problems in predictability are more a function of the limits of knowledge than any sort of uniqueness in the structure of historical understanding and explanation. The overarching theme of the model is, then, a markedly linear, sequential continuity which, even if it is realized after the fact, as it often is, implies a distinct ‘leading-to’ type of determination, where successive forms are reducible to prior ones. Consequently, the evidence utilized in mechanistic models tends to consist of isolable events, existing in and of themselves, which exert causal influence on other events which are logically distinct. It is these events — most often specific behaviors, actions, ‘circumstances’ — which are most readily identifiable, seen as discrete, and therefore amenable to quantification, the generating of laws.

Aside from the issue of units of analysis, the mechanistic model of development, as it is usually conceptualized, conceives of the human being more as a product than a producer. There are no intrinsic categories of willful existence — intentionality, intention, purpose — which need to be invoked in the study of lives. And this holds true, of course, not just for the objects of research, individuals who through the action of predominantly external forces are moved to “develop”, but the researcher himself. What transpires and what is rendered as having transpired has a status strictly its own; the observer too is a passive recipient, appropriating reality itself. Now again, I am not advocating idealism or pure phenomenalism by calling attention to this — for that also would preclude any idea of human structure being taken to reality —, but merely pointing to the ramifications of the model for the research undertaking. No ‘special’ understanding is required because the model just does not allow for it.

The Structure of Narrative

Returning to the philosophy of history, an important rejoinder to the Hempelian model set forth by a number of both covering law revisionists and dissenters alike, centers on the notion that explanatory success is frequently not, in historical explanation, equivalent to prediction ‘turned upside down’. Beginning with a graphic example provided by Svettnen [1959], it is when and only when a man has murdered his wife, for instance, that we know something especially significant about him. We may well have detected some instability, maybe even some proclivities toward aggressive action, but we surely would not necessarily claim we could have predicted it — even with the knowledge we have in retrospect. This is not to say, of course, that after all is said and done, we are left completely confused, with no sense of how the event may have occurred. If pressed, reasons may even be offered not just as to how it could have occurred, but why — his cruel upbring, the job he recently lost, etc. Mink [1965] also contends that even supposing all pertinent facts are well established, there still remains the necessity of comprehending them in an act of judgment. There are simply no detachable conclusions in history; the validity and meaning of what has transpired always refers backward to the ordering of evidence, with events deemed significant represented by the narrative order itself. Thus, the conclusions in question are not the independently existing consequences of easily identified antecedents (or if they are, these may not be of primary importance), but reminders of the landscape of events to which the narrative has imposed order. Historical narratives, for Mink, are not imperfect, ‘sketchy’ deductions, but cohesive renditions of constellations of events having undergone a process of translation into a whole configuration. Significance, meaning, come from looking backward. As Walsh [1951, 1974] puts it, the researcher concerned with genetic or historical explanation ‘colligates’ the material at hand, attempts to situate the events being examined within a whole pattern. Facts are not merely apprehended, then, but established through framing the intrinsic relations of events to others in their midst.

With these ideas in mind, Gallie [1964], as well as a number of others [see, for instance, Ricoeur, 1977, for a discussion of the narrative structure of psychoanalytic reconstruc-
tion], adheres to the criterion of acceptability or intelligibility rather than predictability, stating that to understand history is like following a story, where themes and patterns are retroactively detected across arrays of contingencies. As he puts it:

"... whereas for the scientist a revealed discontinuity usually suggests some failure on his part, or on the part of his principles and methods and theories, to account for that aspect of nature which he is studying, for the man who follows a story a discontinuity may mean, irrespective of any change or correction of his theoretical apparatus, the promise of additional insights into the stuff a particular character is made of, into the range of action and adaptation which that character can command" [p. 41].

This understanding, however, will arrive only after the flow of events has been "waited out", thereby allowing insight to mature as the continual process of re-informing progresses. For Gallie, then, the narrative does not represent a conjunction of singular explanatory statements as it does for many of the earlier mentioned covering law theorists [see especially M. White, 1965], but rather a thematic unity imposed on the given pieces of evidence.

Dray [1957] conveys a similar point with his 'continuous series' rendition of historical explanation. Noting that having a good reason for expecting an event to occur is not in any way tantamount to explaining why it does, he shows that the very process of 'singing out' historical connections requires examining their rational necessity within some situation or context, a sequence of related events delimiting the field of 'appropriate' action. With the idea that simple correlation need not lead to understanding and explanation at all, Dray seeks to fill in the all too conspicuous gaps between events. So that even if historians were to consistently establish empirical regularities – perhaps a necessary condition for explanation in science – they would still be falling sorely short of their professed aim of showing how things happened the way they did. The flip side of this contention, as Fain [1970] argues, is that one episode can indeed readily be shown to lead to another even though the second may actually be quite improbable given the first. This is because genetic relations, though they may well embody causal or probabilistic ones, are simply not inherently reducible to them. The integrity and coherence of the narrative can be maintained with even the grossest deviations from expectation.

Mandelbaum [1977] wants to do away with the Humean version of causation altogether. Causes in history are not bounded, isolable events, but conditions, parts of some ongoing process culminating in the 'effect' to be explained. And this state of affairs, he adds, is not deduced either, but experienced; the very perception of a patterned totality will, to the extent that the relations constituting it are free of opacity, bring causal 'power' along with it. There is, in short, a definite disjunction between the phenomenology of detecting a sense of causality and the feasibility of arriving at some ultimate differentiation of contributory conditions. This is because the complexity of variables as well as the multidirectionality of their influence simply militates against it. What is it, then, that permits the historian to explain? Nothing less than the process itself. The understanding and describing of what has transpired will, provided it is relatively complete and systematic, require nothing more to be deemed explanation. This does not of course, necessarily make it correct – for the problems of interpretation must inevitably enter in here – but an explanation nonetheless. Finally, with regard to where generalizations fit into this scheme of causation, they are seen not as the foundation, as they were in the covering law model, but rather the mortar, that which helps to hold an account together.

As Mandelbaum points out, whereas a deterministic thesis might posit that, given the initial state of the system in question, nothing but the particular observed outcome could have occurred, his own thesis states that, given the complete matrix of causal conditions that did, in fact, occur, it was necessary to arrive at the outcome. Again, what is at issue here is the problem of time: If science, in its quest for revealing what is inevitable, moves irrevocably forward, history moves back; understanding and explanation cannot take place until all is said and done. Reiterating an earlier point made, perhaps ironically, in connection with criticisms of Ditchey, Collingwood, and others of the 'Verstehen' school: To be alive to the historical significance of events as they happen, one must know to which later events these will be related – and these are descriptions which the actor himself cannot give at the time of experience [see especially Danto, 1965]. 'One might say', as Wyatt [1964, p. 308] concludes, 'that history, qua history, does not really exist when it occurs. It can be plotted only after the events have already been made; then and only then can the variety of plausible contexts be 'tried for fit'. And, as new data enter the picture, he adds, this may well call for a new, even more comprehensive and plausible context. If historical knowledge were founded solely upon the stable, predictive relations discovered between discrete events, this, of course, would not be necessary.

According to the view of narrative we have been discussing, 'narrativity' is the language structure having temporality as its ultimate referent. Reciprocally, temporality is the structure of human existence manifesting itself in narrativity [Ricoeur, 1981b]. More simply put, the fact that particular forms of knowledge derive from retrospection, from an essentially backward look over the terrain of experience, is an irreducible 'peculiarity' of the human being. It is perhaps for this very reason that we frequently see a marked disparity between the data of immediate experience and those of recollection.

The story is not, then, how one event is predicted or deduced from another, but how change from beginning to 'end' takes place. The common denominator entitling an account to be narrative is, as Fain [1970] states, if each episode describes an incident in the career of one and the same entity or set of entities. Drawing once more on the work of Ricoeur [1981a], the 'configurational' dimension (i.e., the 'mortal') is focused on some central subject which, in addition to the 'episodic' dimension (i.e., the events unfolding in time), eventuates in the narrative structure. The episodes need not, as I indicated earlier, be causal – but they can be. In either case, the relation under consideration is not antecedent to consequence, as it was in the covering law model, but part to whole [Hull, 1975; Mandelbaum, 1967], this whole being, in essence, the central subject the narrative considers.

Referring again to Reese and Overton [1970], the view of historical narrative we have been discussing can be conceptualized as being more closely related to an organismic model of development than a mechanistic one. The basic orientation is toward holism, structures, and functions, and, as I indicated in the earlier citing of Gallie, discontinuity. Inasmuch as this discontinuity is founded upon the vicissitudes of intentional
action – being conditioned, of course, by extant cultural and historical realities –, there is the denial of complete predictability. The emphasis on parts and their embeddedness within ongoing wholes or gestalts as opposed to elements in relation solely to one another clearly presents a radical metaphysical departure. The very placing of the category of purpose in the foreground rather than the epiphenomenal background of historical change leads to a vision of narrative which seems to more adequately allow a genuine story to be told, a history – or development – to be written. There is, in effect, a unifying or synthesizing component in the organismic model by virtue of the ‘simple’ recognition of the totality which is the subject of discourse.

Still, it is evident that there are some crucial distinctions to be made between the perspective on narrative offered in the work of Gallie and company and the sort of ‘cosmic’ organismic set forth, for instance, in Hegel’s philosophy of history as well as the developmental psychologies of Piaget and Kohlberg. Purpose is no longer ‘confined’, in this latter group, to the dimensions of immediacy, but has been extended to the movement of the whole itself. If direction is seen to emerge out of the dialectical flux of influences, there must be some formal or final cause, be it an absolute idea or the universality of immanent logic, pushing it along. Hence, while the notion of discontinuity is implicit from both the narrative perspective previously addressed as well as from the speculative/teleological one under consideration here, its meaning is quite different. Within the organismic model, as it has customarily been formulated, there is the positioning of emergence of structure, this being to a greater or lesser extent predictable on the basis of knowledge of previous structures. The Piagetian theory of development is perhaps ‘classically’ organismic in this sense, being unidirectional, irreversible, hierarchically integrated, as well as leading to fixed determinate end points. What is most important to recognize here is that this version of continuity in discontinuity, identity in difference, is still not predicated in relation to the observer. The logic of historical change is not a product of the interplay between the researcher and the researched; it is right there in the organism itself. While retroactive intelligibility and structuration may be necessary for the formulation of developmental propositions, ultimately the data can stand on their own. The movement posited is, in short, an irrevocably forward one.

Toulmin [1972] indicates that there seems to be a certain projection at work here. Out of narration, there arises the appearance of formal necessity, an inner rationality based on a supposition of inevitability. But against this lawlike evolutionary discontinuity, the structure of narrative can be conceptualized as representing the ‘imposition’ of a continuous account upon fundamentally discontinuous (in terms of logic, not meaning) data. As Louch [1969] neatly puts it, narration is a method of effecting continuity in the absence of the ideal of seeing the flux of events in their ongoing actuality. Now this is not to say that the cohesiveness and integrity of the narrative represents a vision of life that is only imaginary, as H. White [1981] might have it, but that we can make sense – real sense – out of change and time through our ability to extract patterns out of events that have no necessary teleological order of their own. Thus, according to this view of narrative, generalized hypotheses are regarded not as potential laws, but as guides which are suggestively rather than deductively fertile, regenerative rather than constitutive [Mink, 1965; see also Elder, 1979, and Gergen, 1973, for their ideas concerning ‘conditional generalization’ and ‘sensitization’, respectively]. As such, the past is not subsumed under the present, but simply leads to it, this leading to being a function of our own historical being, our capacity to perceive new dimensions of order retrospectively. The only end point, then, is now.

Dialectics and Narration

The relatively recent emphasis on dialectics in life-span developmental psychology [e.g., Riegel, 1976a, b] may be seen as an attempt to move beyond the aridity of the mechanistic model and the quasi-cosmic speculations of the organismic. While not being a full-blown theory or even embodying a particular method, dialectics is perhaps best viewed as a theoretical orientation, a ‘meta-context’ for the formulation of research questions and the organization of data interpretation [Baltes and Cornelius, 1977]. Perhaps most consistent with the contextualist world view, the dialectical orientation, with its emphasis on reciprocal interaction leading to the emergence and continuous change of inner and outer structures, is an apt reminder of the multiplicity of variables needed for anything approaching a thorough explication of human change. Through an adequate dimensionalization of the influences at work [Hulsch and Hickey, 1978], rather than the mere apprehension and hypoestimation of a skeleton of regular patterns or relations, that which can more genuinely be called developmental understanding might be acquired. But where does this recognition of the dialectical flux of contributory influences leave us? If Keniston [1971, p. 337] is accurate in his description of human development as a ‘very rough road, pitted with obstructions, interspersed with blind alleys, and dotted with seductive stopping places’, how are we to systematically generate bodies of useful knowledge?

There have been a wide variety of answers to these questions. Not only has the whole continuity assumption come under increased fire [Brim and Kagan, 1980; Kagan, 1980], but with non-normative life events becoming more salient as individuals move into the adult years, there has been some question as to the utility of developmental paradigms altogether [Baltes et al., 1980]. Still, of course, work continues to be done. Runyan [1978], for instance, well aware of the difficulties of effecting a suitable uniformitarian mapping of the life course, opts for examining sequences of person by situation by behavior interactions so as to more adequately capture the possible paths of (relatively) freely choosing individuals. While still recognizing the usefulness of other approaches to the study of the life course, including psychodynamic, trait, behavioral, and cognitive, among others, he maintains that it is through the thorough dimensionalization of temporal patterns of experience that an adequate foundation is laid for predictive efforts. To the extent that the appropriation of these sequences is based on retrospection – which it must be – this last point does not seem compelling. Yet, there is definitely an important sense in which the more thorough our understanding of the past is, the more it can tell us about the future. Without necessarily calling this prediction, a notion fraught with limitations we have already discussed, it is only genuine understanding which can cast into greater light the unsureness of what is to happen as time presses on.

Others have held to a similar stance in attempting to come to grips with the ubiqui-
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The Writing of a Life-Span Psychology

From a hermeneutical orientation, the concern is not – in fact, cannot be – solely with the 'properties' of development per se, but with its writing. As Gadamer [1979] indicates, there must be a certain suspension of speculations or hypotheses about the metaphysical structure of the relations that are the object of a given inquiry; it is the indissoluble unity of mine and other which allows interpretation to take place. This philosophy, according to Hoy [1978], seeks to articulate not only the understanding of a particular subject matter, but also the self-understanding of the inquiry, which influences the questions asked as well as the answers provided. The movement here is a decidedly circular one: While the anticipated meaning of the particular configuration at hand is derived from the parts which constitute it, it is through the horizon of the configuration that the parts can acquire meaning. This state of affairs is unquestionably problematic. For how are we to ever know what meaning lies in the text itself and what meaning we are foisting upon it? As I insisted earlier, this question can never be answered. But it can certainly be answered at least in part – without plunging us into an unreflecting relativism. As Gadamer [1979, p. 149] puts it: 'Every authentically interpretative must provide itself against the happenstance arbitration of baroque ideas and against the limitations caused by unconscious habits of thought.' Essentially, the task of interpretation necessitates critical self-reflection for there to be validity, a respect for the autonomy of the text. Now this does not in any way mean that the understanding brought to the task is necessarily counterproductive, that all our ideas have to be stripped away so that the subjects in our investigations can be seen 'in themselves'. For there is, as Gadamer indicates above, pre-understanding which is both 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' – and these can only be differentiated through radical questioning. The problem at hand is not, it should be noted, one just of the human sciences either. As Kuhn [1962] and others [see Glaser and Strauss, 1965, and Sanford, 1965, both of whom explicitly address the social sciences] have argued, the logic of all science is essentially circular; data are interpreted and corrected by coherence with theory while theory, of course, remains constrained (hopefully) by the data. We also should not neglect the tacit knowledge, the 'personal coefficient', as Polanyi [1958] calls it, that shapes all factual inquiry. But the point is that this need not be reason to fear failure in not being 'scientific enough' – for the critical consciousness and competence brought to the research endeavor is unquestionably of paramount importance for the justification of interpretation. Assuming that we are aware of the potential dangers of bias or distortion, the knowledge brought to our subject matter can certainly be as much an asset as a liability.

Despite the difficulties associated with the method of empathetic understanding discussed in connection with Dilthey and Collingwood, there is a distinct sense in which the researcher involved in attempting to know historical subjects must see the world through that person's eyes' [Neugarten, 1969]. A measure of insight, as Taylor [1971] argues, is simply indispensable in the human sciences. Because intersubjective meanings are rooted in social practice and communicated through language, not only can a complete extrication from common discourse never be fully achieved, but for the most part, it would be undesirable anyway. Along these lines, perhaps the more that is genuinely understood and known about the subject of research – provided this understanding is not fraught with inauthenticity, self-deception – the more valid interpretation will be. As Hesse [1972] points out, there can be a distinct middle ground between reductive, 'anachronistic' historiography and empathy, namely the 'sympathetic attempt to enter thought forms' without abandoning criteria provided by subsequent historical developments. If the problem of interpretation cuts across both the natural and human sciences, thereby attesting to the common structures of empirical inquiry, it is still imperative, though, to acknowledge a line of demarcation – however blurry it might be – between the two bodies of knowledge. Without becoming overly mystical about this, the mutuality – both ontological and, at least in part, psychological – of the interpreter and the 'object' of interpretation is simply and obviously qualitatively different from that which issues from outside humanity itself.

A corollary to a portion of this contention is that, while understanding in hermeneutics may well be more of a semantic category than a psychological one [von Wright, 1971], it seems difficult, if not outright impossible, to divest ourselves of the latter in the human sciences. If the understanding of both language and action, as von Wright maintains, presupposes a community of institutions, practices, and the like which one has been influenced by through socialization and enculturation, some form of generalization must inevitably enter the picture. These may perhaps be seen, however, as sociologically constituted rules rather than unconditional laws. We need not, in short, be firm allies with the mechanistic world view to suppose that narrative discourse involves at least tacit generalizations, for if everything was all 'new' and particular, it would, of course, be difficult to make sense of it at all. Just as explanation is, of necessity, prefigured by understanding, understanding rests on a
working knowledge of that which has satisfactorily been explained. Not that this is all that understanding is — there is imagination and creation here as well — but knowing how action seems to transpire will inevitably enter into an analysis of how it did.

**Interpretation and Ideology**

Returning to the aforementioned problems of life-span developmental psychology, the dialectic we are speaking of here represents more than a mere metatheoretical reflection on the inevitable boundaries of interpretation; for the ultimate reference is, of necessity, back to the data itself, its extreme complexity and seeming refusal to fit into tightly sealed categories or schematizations. In coming data, rather than serving to bring about changes in the paradigms employed, get assimilated and accommodated into existing structures, perhaps bringing a certain comfort with the idea that there are regularities in the world. Hence, for some theorists, particularly Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] and others of the Frankfurt school, the ‘enlightenment’, however much its followers believe they are gaining access to reality, can be seen as the embodiment of an attempt to dilute the uncertainty of existence within historical time, an almost mythic search for repetition, closure.

We need not be closely allied with the specific political philosophy of these writers to acknowledge the significance of this message. To the extent that human scientific inquiry is predicated primarily in terms of control — at the expense of understanding —, the comprehensiveness of resulting theories can only represent an ideology which seeks to ward off the indeterminateness of history. The positivist critique of ideology, the attempt to establish a final objectivity, can eventuate in nothing less than an ideology of its own. Reiss and Overton [1970] are not incorrect in claiming that at the root of chosen paradigms is a chosen view of metaphysics — thereby negating the possibility of true comparison —, but the vehemence with which these are maintained in the face of conflicting evidence necessitates criticism. And, with reality, however elusive it may be, as the common denominator, this must come not only from inside the paradigm but from without.

But how can the advocacy of a narrative perspective be said to be exempt from the problem of ideology? The position surely has its own ideological foundations, does it not? The only answer can be that it does, but seeks to minimize these difficulties through recognizing and utilizing ontological human structures as well as critical reflection. A narrative perspective has not been set forth here simply because the influences at work are just so complex that prediction is not possible — though this is apparently the case; nor has it been set forth out of some blind urge to bring romanticism back into psychology — though this is probably operating also. The belief in human freedom and purpose certainly enters in, but this has not been the main focus either. What calls for the recourse to narrative is the ineradicable asymmetry between the knowledge that derives from looking forward in time and that which comes from looking back. Even if the outlines of what is to happen in the future are given, meanings are clearly not. If this concern with meaning is ultimately seen as ideologically based, this is a criticism that can only be endured. Moreover, if the argument is made that retrospection is intrinsic not just to narration in the human sciences, but science in general, as I indicated earlier, the ontological (and psychological) coincidence that is part of humans understanding humans presents a crucial point of departure. While we may strive for some semblance of an isomorphism between the inner account of the experincer and the outer one of the observer [Cohler, 1981], this is not the goal at all if the objects of attention are those of the nonhuman world.

This does not, however, preclude the possibility of explanation and systematization. Though narration may well be more conducive to idiographic methods, particularly the utilization of biographical and experiential information, than nomothetic, it seems clear that the schism between these two will only be narrowed. As we saw earlier, if the attempt is to genuinely understand, the relation between the particular and the general will inevitably be a dialectical one. Groups can be ‘central subjects’ as well as individuals. And there will certainly be common structures in the paths traversed owing both to the facticity of cultural practices and individual potentialities as well as the degree of freedom which social relations allow [Held, 1980]. Narration does not necessarily lead us to a limitless array of life profiles; there will always be socially constituted boundaries of possibility.

It is also clear that the view of development that must emerge out of this perspective, particularly for cultures where individualism is valued and vocational options are provided, will be taxonomic; no singular path will emerge unless social relations are so constrained that there is only one option available. Needless to say, this is a bit unlikely. But what is crucial to recognize is that not only is diversity of life paths not the same as chaos [Runyan, 1980], but it is a virtual prerequisite for social organization in complex societies. Wallace [1961], for instance, in his work on culture and personality, claims that what is needed are approaches that emphasize the ‘organization of diversity’ as opposed to the ‘replication of uniformity’. Monolithic portraits of both personality and development mask the very relations of complementarity which are necessary for cultures to thrive. Furthermore, they negate the possibility of intergenerational change. By coming to terms with this diversity and analyzing its embeddedness within the fabric of social relations, we will likely obtain a more thorough understanding of the parameters of possibility that cultures allow. The comprehensive study of development must, therefore, involve the study of culture and society as well as individuals.

**Narration and the Idea of Development**

With these ideas in mind, there is some question as to whether ‘life-span developmental psychology’ is an appropriate term for the sort of data that would derive from narration. The interest is certainly, as we just saw, in more than just ‘psychology’; it is necessarily interdisciplinary. Perhaps ‘life course’ studies, as some have suggested, is more appropriate, or even ‘life-span developmental anthropology’. The term to be decided on is, to a certain extent, arbitrary. But can narration yield data that truly speaks to ‘development’ per se and not just history? If we’ve done away with some a priori conception of a universal telos, what is there left that can be called development?

What is left is the self-constructed and perhaps perpetually revised telos that emerges out of one’s ‘personal narrative’ [Cohler, 1981], the ‘life theme’ [Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie, 1979] or existential project that one sets and attempts to approximate throughout the duration of the life course. Because the data of narration derive from
experience, the idea of development can only be placed within the realm of subjectivity. As such, there is no singular, transpersonal criterion with which to judge progress toward the meeting of a universal end. Is it enough, then, to simply ask individuals whether they perceive themselves to have developed, to recollect and determine whether there has been movement toward their desired goals? What structure of consciousness could be more isomorphic with narrative than memory? Obviously none; yet that does not of course, close the issue, for the data of memory, however necessary they may be for pulling together the experienced events of a life, are just not to be completely trusted. As Bartlett [1932] informed us long ago, recollection frequently represents less the material reproduction of the lived past than an imaginative search for meaning, a thematicizing of the dimensions of existence. But the problem here is that there is distortion as well, wishful thinking, 'outcome interference,' and a host of other syndromes. The imaginativeness and creativity of memory becomes a double-edged sword.

If nothing can be said about the truth value of memories, then what can be done? The data of ongoing experience, though unquestionably important, will not suffice because we, the observers, would be making all the historical connections rather than those whose experience it actually was. One option is a 'depth hermeneutics' such as psychoanalysis which attempts to unmask self-deception through the systematic interpretation of the distorted communication laid bare in free association and recollection [Habermas, 1968]. In this case, there would, in effect, be a certain translation of the distorted manifest narrative into the emancipated, distortion-free latent one. But there are, of course, difficulties - both theoretical and practical - with this option. Not only is it still unclear to what extent 'accuracy' can be achieved, thereby revealing 'true' development, but it does not seem likely that all of those we wish to study would care to be in analysis for years either.

Another option is to juxtapose the data of immediate experience with those of recollection and 'read' the resultant text. This brings the problem of development back into the necessary dialectic between the researcher and the researched - to hermeneutics. The rationale for this is not just in the fact that it is the most we can have, but in the conviction that the disjunction we are likely to observe between the immediate and the remembered possesses a structure that is accessible to interpretation. This is because memory, unless it is an outright lie, still makes some sort of referential claim to the representation of a former reality, however capricious and deceptive it might be. If there is a significant element of imagination in memory - which there surely is - this is not to be equated with an imagination which projects itself into the future [Husserl, 1905]. Activity has simply not been established yet in this latter case; possibilities remain wide open.

It is through the 'witnessing' of ongoing experience that the truth claim of a memory that refers back to it can begin to be established. It is at the intersection, therefore, of immediate experience and recollection, that viable forms of developmental knowledge might be had. But there is no external criterion with which some 'final objectivity' could be established; all we can do is try to decipher the dialectic at hand - and then, narrate it. This is what calls for the necessity of adopting a hermeneutical orientation; the view of development set forth here can only emerge from the 'unity of mine and other' that is historical understanding.

The view is also a relativistic one in the sense that it does not seek universal criteria by which to ascertain levels of development, but this relativity is bounded by common meanings laid out in discourse. In other words, it is precisely because of the boundaries of meanings codified in language that judgment is made possible. Along these lines, what is apparent pathology, for instance, cannot be ignored simply because there is no last word to be had as to what constitutes normality; rather, it is the very fact that pathology represents a deviation from a socially constructed normality that necessitates its being attended to [see Hirst and Woolley, 1982]. This does not mean, of course, that conformity would necessarily be the solution: but neither would it be desirable to leave it all alone. Going back to development, then, it is clear that there must inevitably be certain limits through which to interpret and determine the level of realization of the self-constructed projects observed.

Although narration moves inescapably backward in its concern with the understanding of the past-in-the-present, the view of development that derives from it can retain a focus on the forward movement that is rendered in the texts provided. Thus, perhaps paradoxically, it is out of retrospection that a project, an approximation toward desired ends, can be revealed. The shape that emerges out of the past extends itself into the future. It is this temporal dialogue which can lay the foundation for a new conceptualization of life-span developmental knowledge.

Yet it is not only the conceptualization that is at stake; it is the knowledge itself. While the knowledge that issues from a dialectically informed narration can aid in the understanding of the future, its concern is not as much with foretelling it. The emphasis is less on instrumentality than insight - into what development can be and how optimal forms of it might be brought about. That there is an ethical dimension to the task is unavoidable; choices as to what these optimal forms are will have to be made. But these need not be dogmatic and nor do they have to be arbitrary. For it is the very fact that individuals will always be enmeshed within social relations which calls for a uniting of theory and practice. By reflecting on the possibilities of the life course, by attempting to trace the array of desires that moves people to find order in their lives, we will have thrown greater light on all that participates in the dialectic that constitutes human development. The projects of those we study can only refer back to our own.

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