

# Narrating the Generative Life

Dan P. McAdams and Jen Guo

Northwestern University

Psychological Science

1–9

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0956797614568318

pss.sagepub.com



## Abstract

Generativity is an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations. Analyzing lengthy life-narrative interviews of late-midlife adults, we examined the extent to which a particular kind of life story is empirically linked to self-report measures of generativity and other indices of psychosocial adaptation in midlife. The results showed that highly generative adults are significantly more likely than their less-generative counterparts to construe their lives as variations on a prototypical redemption narrative, wherein the story's protagonist (a) enjoys an early advantage in life, (b) exhibits sensitivity to the suffering of other people, (c) develops a clear moral framework, (d) repeatedly transforms negative scenes into positive outcomes, and (e) pursues prosocial goals for the future. The psychological and cultural features of redemptive life stories are considered, as are the problems and potentialities of life-narrative research in psychological science.

## Keywords

adult development, autobiographical memory, personality, well-being

Received 8/4/14; Revision accepted 12/23/14

In his famous stage model of human development, Erikson (1963) identified *generativity* as the central psychosocial challenge of middle adulthood. Generativity is an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the growth and well-being of future generations through parenting, teaching, mentoring, institutional involvement, and a range of other social behaviors (McAdams, 2013a). Those midlife adults, Erikson argued, who make a positive contribution to the next generation are likely to experience positive mental health. By contrast, men and women who repeatedly fail to be generative, or for whom generative inclinations never rise to the psychological fore, are likely to experience stagnation, self-preoccupation, and relatively poor psychosocial adjustment in the midlife years.

Consistent with Erikson's claims, a growing body of empirical research shows that in midlife adults, high levels of generativity are significantly associated with positive parenting styles (Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997), the inculcation of moral values and prosocial tendencies in children (Peterson, 2006; Pratt, Norris, Arnold, & Filyer, 1999), political participation and community volunteerism (Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001), leadership (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, & Frese, 2011), and a broad and positive sense of societal engagement (Cox,

Wilt, Olson, & McAdams, 2010; Rossi, 2001). Empirical support for a positive link between generativity and mental health in the adult years is also strong (McAdams, 2013a; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992).

A noteworthy line of research has examined the ways in which highly generative adults narrate their lives (McAdams, 2013b). Studies suggest that adults who score high on self-report measures of generativity are more likely than their less-generative counterparts to recall and narrate important life events that follow a *redemption sequence*—a negative scene turns positive, and experiences of adversity or suffering eventually lead to positive, growth-inducing outcomes (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; Walker & Frimer, 2007). Recalling the past in redemptive terms may reinforce generative commitments by sustaining the adult's morale and perseverance in the face of the difficult challenges that generative involvements often present. Indeed, studies of redemption sequences in life narratives dovetail

## Corresponding Author:

Dan P. McAdams, Northwestern University, Department of Psychology, 2120 Campus Dr., Evanston, IL 60208  
 E-mail: dmca@northwestern.edu

with research on benefit finding (Affleck & Tennen, 1996) and meaning making for stressful events (Park, 2010), converging on the idea that finding positive meanings in negative experiences may yield dividends for psychosocial development, psychological well-being, and health.

We propose that the simple theme of redemption may be part of a larger and diverse suite of psychological motifs that, taken together, form a narrative prototype for the generative life, especially as construed in American society (McAdams, 2013b). Qualitative case studies (Andrews, 1991; Colby & Damon, 1992), analyses of historical and cultural texts (McAdams, 2013b), and scattered but incomplete empirical findings (e.g., McAdams et al., 1997) suggest that highly generative American adults tend to understand their own lives as heroic tales of mission and transformation, wherein a gifted and morally steadfast protagonist journeys forth into a dangerous world, turning bad into good and giving back to society for early blessings received. From the Massachusetts Bay Puritans to Oprah, Americans have historically conveyed this kind of narrative through Horatio Alger (“rags to riches”) stories, tales of the American dream, and canonical American stories of religious conversion, emancipation, and recovery (McAdams, 2013b). Identifying this broad narrative prototype as *the redemptive self*, McAdams (2013b) delineated five independent psychological themes that, taken together, characterize this quintessentially American story about how to live a good life: (a) *early advantage* (the protagonist is singled out for positive distinction), (b) *sensitivity to suffering* (the protagonist is moved by the suffering of other people or by oppression, inequality, or some other social ill), (c) *moral steadfastness* (a strong moral framework guides the protagonist’s actions), (d) *redemption sequences* (negative events turn positive), and (e) *prosocial goals* (the protagonist expressly aims to improve the lives of other people or society more generally).

The current study is the first rigorously designed empirical assessment of the extent to which this narrative prototype characterizes the life stories told by highly generative American adults. With respect to its conceptual contribution, the study goes well beyond the focus on the single theme of redemption (e.g., McAdams et al., 2001) to encompass the broad, five-theme narrative prototype outlined above. With respect to methodology, the inquiry is virtually unique in psychological science for its application of rigorous, content-analytic procedures to such a rich and extended corpus of life-narrative data, with each of the 157 research participants providing the kind of lengthy life-narrative account typically found in an intensive case study. Aggregating scores for each of the five independent themes across 12 discrete segments of each life-story interview, we examined the extent to which varying degrees of correspondence to the broad

redemptive-self prototype relate to independent assessments of generativity and related constructs indicative of psychological health and societal engagement at midlife.

With its focus on the stories people construct to make meaning of their lives, the current study reflects the recent upsurge of research interest in the concept of *narrative identity* (Adler, 2012; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). A person’s narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story that the person has constructed regarding how he or she has become the person that he or she is becoming. As such, the story is a subjective, psychosocial construction rather than a veridical rendering of the past—the person’s idiosyncratic way of making narrative meaning out of life. In narrative identity, the person reconstructs the past and imagines the future as an ongoing story with setting, scenes, characters, plots, and themes. The content and structure of the story are strongly shaped by personal experience (Josselson, 2009) and culture (Hammack, 2008). While providing the person’s life with a sense of coherence and temporal continuity, narrative identity also serves as a psychological resource in daily life. There are many different kinds of narrative identities. We hypothesize that the five-theme prototype examined here—identified as the redemptive self—should be especially prevalent in the life stories told by American adults who score high on measures of generativity and display the consonant tendencies of good mental health and positive societal engagement.

## Method

The data for the present study came from 157 intensive case studies of late-midlife adults collected as part of a longitudinal study of adult personality development (see Manczak, Zapata-Gietl, & McAdams, 2014). Each participant was individually interviewed for 2 to 3 hr according to a standardized life-story protocol adapted from previous studies of narrative identity. Participants also completed a series of online self-report measures prior to their interviews, including a demographic questionnaire and four scales designed to assess individual differences in generativity and overall psychosocial adaptation. The four scales tapped into the extent to which the adult was positively involved in prosocial family and societal activities, as well as overall self-reported mental health and well-being.

## Participants

A total of 157 individuals (63.6% female, 36.4% male) ranging in age from 55 to 57 years in 2009 to 2010 were recruited from the greater Chicago, Illinois, area by a social-science research firm aiming to generate a

nonclinical sample of community adults with a roughly equal split between White and African American individuals. Accordingly, 55% of participants described themselves as White, 43% as African American, 1% as interracial, and 1% as “other.” Annual household incomes ranged from under \$25,000 to more than \$300,000, with a median income of \$75,000 to \$100,000 in 2009 to 2010. Arranging family income figures on a linear 10-point scale, we found that White participants had significantly higher incomes than African Americans,  $t(155) = 6.021$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.96$ . The majority of the sample was college educated: 5% received a high school diploma only, 27% attended some college, 24% graduated college, and 44% had some graduate education. Though Whites had slightly higher education levels than African Americans, the difference was not statistically significant.

### **Self-report measures**

**Generativity.** To measure generativity, we used the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), a 20-item self-report scale designed to assess the extent to which an adult is concerned about and actively involved in promoting the well-being of future generations. The participant rates each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*never applies to me*) to 3 (*always applies to me*). Representative items include “I try to pass along knowledge I have gained through my experiences,” and “I feel as though my contributions will exist after I die.” An extensive body of research attests to the sound psychometric properties and construct validity of the LGS, showing that high levels of generativity predict positive parenting behaviors, social-support and friendship networks, volunteerism, civic engagement, and self-reported psychological well-being (McAdams, 2013a).

**Public-service motivation.** The extent to which each participant was attracted to the public interest, committed to the common good of society, and willing to subordinate personal concerns for the well-being of society was measured by the 24-item Public Service Motivation Scale (PSMS-24; Perry, 1996). Responses are made on a scale from 1 to 5; the possible range of scores is 24 to 120, with higher numbers indicating greater motivation. Evidence for the reliability and construct validity of the PSMS-24 is reviewed by Coursey, Perry, Brudney, and Littlepage (2008).

**Psychological well-being.** Participants’ psychological well-being was measured using the 42-item, multidimensional Psychological Well-Being scale developed by Ryff and Keyes (1995). This measure assesses overall well-being with six subscales: Self-Acceptance, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, Positive Relations With Others,

Personal Growth, and Autonomy. Each item is rated on a scale from 1 to 6, with greater well-being indexed by higher scores; the possible range is 42 to 252.

**Depression.** The second edition of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) was used to assess depressive symptoms that occurred in the 2 weeks prior to the study. The BDI-II is widely used in studies of both psychiatric and nonpsychiatric populations (Roelofs et al., 2013).

### **Life-story interviews**

Each participant was individually interviewed by a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow trained to administer the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008). The interviewer asks the participant to think about his or her life as if it were a book or novel, complete with chapters, key scenes, characters, and themes. In the current study, we considered lengthy narrative responses for 12 discrete segments of the interview (approximately 70% of the total interview content), in which the participant described features of his or her remembered past (9 segments) and imagined future (3 segments). The 12 interview segments, in sequence, asked the participant (a) to give a brief plot summary of the main chapters in the life story, and then to provide detailed narrative accounts of (b) a high-point scene (happiest episode in life), (c) a low-point scene, (d) a turning-point scene, (e) a positive early memory, (f) a negative early memory, (g) a vivid adult memory, (h) an experience of wisdom, (i) a religious or spiritual scene, (j) the next chapter in life (future), (k) dreams and hopes for the future, and (l) an anticipated project or avocation for the future.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. The typed transcripts of the 12 segments ranged in total length from 5,050 to 26,176 words ( $M = 11,647.9$ ,  $SD = 4,028.2$ ). Each of the 12 segments was subsequently analyzed for the five main themes composing the redemptive-self prototype. For comparison’s sake, the 12 segments were also coded for two well-validated constructs—contamination sequences (Adler, Kissel, & McAdams, 2006) and instances of meaning making (McLean & Pratt, 2006)—derived from the empirical literature on narrative identity, both of which were presumed to be unrelated to generativity. For each thematic coding category, at least two independent coders, blind to identifying information for all participants, determined the presence (a score of 1) or absence (a score of 0) of the corresponding theme in each of the 12 segments. Ultimately, theme scores were aggregated across the 12 segments to arrive at a total estimate (ranging hypothetically from 0 to 12) of the strength and salience of the given theme in the life story. For each

thematic category, the means of the coders' corresponding total scores were ultimately used for subsequent data analysis.

The five main themes of the redemptive self were defined as follows:

1. **Early advantage:** The narrator indicates that he or she has experienced an advantage or distinction (physical, material, psychological, relational, or social) that singles him or her out for special positive attention. The narrator suggests that the advantage was experienced early in life or reflects an inherent, long-term quality or position. For individual coding decisions (the presence vs. absence of theme per episode), the reliability was  $\kappa = .61$ ; the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) between coders was .63 across all 12 segments.
2. **Sensitivity to suffering:** The narrator expresses awareness of or sympathy for the pain or problems that other people experience, or shows a sensitivity to social injustice, inequality, or other perils, dangers, or broad problems in society (coding reliability:  $\kappa = .82$ , ICC = .80).
3. **Moral steadfastness:** The narrator indicates that religious, ethical, or political values, beliefs, and principles are especially strong and motivating factors in his or her life. The narrator may emphasize the importance of these values, their clarity and coherence, or their long duration (coding reliability:  $\kappa = .84$ , ICC = .78).
4. **Redemption sequences:** The narrator describes a movement from a demonstrably negative situation to a positive outcome. The redemptive move may either occur in the real-time sequence described in the original episode or represent a positive interpretation of the original negative scene that the narrator formulated after the scene occurred (coding reliability:  $\kappa = .71$ , ICC = .78).
5. **Prosocial goals:** The narrator describes the pursuit of goals in an effort to benefit other people (beyond his or her own family members) or contribute to the advancement of society (coding reliability:  $\kappa = .83$ , ICC = .83).

For comparison's sake, the two additional categories were coded as follows:

6. **Contamination sequences:** Following McAdams et al. (1997), coders examined each scene for a movement from a demonstrably positive situation to a negative outcome. The initial positive experience was subsequently ruined by a negative turn of events. Previous life-narrative studies have shown that contamination sequences tend to be

associated with depression and low life satisfaction (Adler et al., 2006; coding reliability:  $\kappa = .72$ , ICC = .65).

7. **Meaning making:** Adapting a system from McLean and Pratt (2006), we asked coders to examine each scene for whether or not the participant derived a general meaning about the self or about life from the specific scene described. In meaning making, the narrator draws a concrete lesson or a more abstract insight from an autobiographical memory (coding reliability:  $\kappa = .87$ , ICC = .75).

It should be noted that life-story interviews like the current version invariably suggest to the participant a particular form for life—one in which life may be seen as dividing into chapters and as punctuated by key individual scenes that stand out in memory. The extent to which such a construction is indeed a “natural” form for autobiographical memory has been thoroughly debated in the narrative literature for three decades (Josselson, 2009; McAdams, 2013b), with the consensus strongly favoring the idea that most people in Western societies find such an organizational format for their own lives to be highly congenial and at least somewhat reflective of how they naturally think about who they are and how their life has unfolded over time (Hammack, 2008).

## Results

Three of the four self-report measures of psychosocial adaptation—generativity, public-service motivation, and psychological well-being—were strongly positively intercorrelated ( $r_s = .42-.56$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ). Not surprisingly, depression was negatively associated with the other three: The strongest correlation was found for the relation between depression and psychological well-being ( $r = -.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the weakest correlation, which was nonsignificant, was found for the relation between depression and public-service motivation ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p = .11$ ).

As in other studies (e.g., Hart et al., 2001), African American adults ( $M = 45.6$ ,  $SD = 8.6$ ) scored significantly higher than White adults ( $M = 41.2$ ,  $SD = 8.5$ ) on generativity,  $t(155) = 3.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.51$ . Also, African Americans ( $M = 211.7$ ,  $SD = 24.2$ ) scored significantly higher than Whites ( $M = 195.5$ ,  $SD = 26.4$ ) on psychological well-being,  $t(155) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.64$ . In addition, African Americans ( $M = 91.9$ ,  $SD = 10.4$ ) scored significantly higher than Whites ( $M = 84.6$ ,  $SD = 12.3$ ) on public-service motivation,  $t(155) = 3.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.64$ .

For the entire sample (Whites and African Americans combined), education level and family income were unrelated to the four self-report measures of psychosocial adaptation, with the exception of a negative association between income and depression ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

However, income was positively and significantly associated with psychological well-being within each of the two race subsamples, which reveals a suppressing effect of race (Whites:  $r = .31, p < .01$ ; African Americans:  $r = .30, p < .01$ ). In other words, whereas African Americans had significantly lower family incomes, they had significantly higher levels of psychological well-being compared with Whites, which ended up statistically suppressing the positive effect of income on well-being when the entire sample was taken as a whole. Among African Americans (but not among Whites), moreover, income was positively associated with generativity ( $r = .25, p < .05$ ). Education was unrelated to the four self-report indices of psychosocial adaptation, though among African Americans, higher levels of education were positively associated with both greater generativity ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ) and higher public-service motivation ( $r = .24, p < .05$ ). Gender was significantly related to psychological well-being only, with women ( $M = 207.3, SD = 24.9$ ) scoring significantly higher on psychological well-being than men ( $M = 195.7, SD = 26.1$ ),  $t(155) = 2.76, p < .01, d = 0.39$ .

Total scores (summing across 12 interview segments) for the five themes of the redemptive-self prototype showed generally modest positive intercorrelations (mean  $r = .23$  for the 10 correlation coefficients), with the exception of a very low association ( $r = .01$ ) between the themes of early advantage and redemption sequences and a high association ( $r = .51, p < .001$ ) between sensitivity to suffering and prosocial goals. Most of the five themes were not statistically related to the two additional narrative indices employed in the study: contamination sequences and meaning making. Length of interview protocol (number of words) was significantly associated with the narrative indices of early advantage ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ), contamination sequences ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ), and meaning making ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ).

With respect to gender differences in life stories, women ( $M = 1.93, SD = 1.10$ ) expressed more instances of early advantage in their interviews than did men ( $M = 1.54, SD = 1.16$ ),  $t(155) = 2.12, p < .05, d = 0.35$ . Women's interviews ( $M = 1.52, SD = 1.16$ ) also revealed higher levels of prosocial goals than men's did ( $M = 1.11, SD = 1.34$ ),  $t(155) = 1.99, p < .05, d = 0.33$ . For race/ethnicity, African Americans, on average, showed twice as many instances of moral steadfastness ( $M = 2.44, SD = 1.51$ ) as did White adults ( $M = 1.22, SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(152) = 5.71, p < .001, d = 0.92$ . African Americans' scores on the narrative theme of prosocial goals were also significantly higher ( $M = 1.83, SD = 1.46$ ) than those of Whites ( $M = 0.99, SD = 0.90$ ),  $t(152) = 4.39, p < .001, d = .71$ .

Table 1 displays correlations between self-report indices of psychosocial adaptation and narrative themes as well as results from a series of multiple regression analyses wherein education, income, gender, race, interview

length, and one of the seven narrative themes were entered each time to predict one of the four self-report indices. Results are also displayed for a total psychosocial-adaptation index (summing the standard scores for each of the four self-report variables, with depression scores reverse-scored) and a total thematic index for the redemptive-self prototype (summing the standard scores for the five main narrative themes of the redemptive self).

In strong support of the study's hypothesis, all five themes composing the redemptive-self prototype, as well as the summary composite, were positively and significantly associated with self-reported generativity. The regression results for these five themes mirrored the correlations, with the strongest associations with generativity emerging for the theme of prosocial goals. The composite of all five themes showed a highly robust relationship with generativity ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ). Moreover, a multiple regression analysis in which the aforementioned demographic variables, interview length, and all five of the redemptive-self themes were entered simultaneously in the statistical prediction of generativity yielded a multiple  $R$  of .525, with statistically significant individual  $b$  values for the themes of early advantage, redemption sequences, and prosocial goals. By contrast, generativity was unrelated to the narrative themes of contamination sequences and meaning making.

Table 1 also shows that the five narrative themes composing the redemptive-self prototype were positively and significantly associated with psychological well-being, and three of them (sensitivity to suffering, moral steadfastness, and prosocial goals) were related positively to public-service motivation. However, the five themes were weakly and inconsistently related to depression. The narrative indices of contamination sequences and meaning making were unrelated to psychological well-being, public-service motivation, and depression, with one exception: The regression analysis showed that the number of contamination sequences in the life-story interview was significantly associated ( $p < .05$ ) with increased levels of self-reported depression. Previous research has also documented an association between contamination themes and depression (Adler et al., 2006).

## Discussion

This is the first large-scale empirical study to demonstrate that constructing a particular kind of story about one's life in full has a robust statistical linkage with independent indices of psychosocial adaptation. Previous research on narrative identity has demonstrated associations between individual themes or tendencies in life stories (such as the single theme of a redemption sequence) and self-report measures of well-being, mental health, and the like (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005;

**Table 1.** Correlational and Multiple Regression Results for Relations Between Self-Report Indices of Psychosocial Adaptation and Narrative Themes in Life-Story Interviews

Category and theme	Self-report index of psychosocial adaptation															
	Generativity			Public-service motivation			Psychological well-being			Depression			Composite			
	<i>r</i>	<i>b</i>		<i>r</i>	<i>b</i>		<i>r</i>	<i>b</i>		<i>r</i>	<i>b</i>		<i>r</i>	<i>b</i>		
Redemptive-self themes																
Early advantage	.28*** [.14, .43]	2.152 [0.9, 3.4]	.11 [-.04, .26]	1.270 [-0.4, 3.0]	.25** [.10, .39]	5.223 [1.8, 8.7]	-.19* [-.32, -.05]	-0.942 [-1.8, -0.1]	.28*** [.13, .42]	0.666 [0.3, 1.1]						
Sensitivity to suffering	.34*** [.18, .47]	2.389 [1.1, 3.6]	.35*** [.20, .50]	3.559 [1.9, 5.2]	.24** [.09, .39]	3.595 [-0.1, 7.2]	-.04 [-.20, .13]	0.006 [-0.9, 0.9]	.33*** [.19, .46]	0.687 [0.3, 1.1]						
Moral steadfastness	.25** [.11, .38]	1.327 [0.3, 2.3]	.32*** [.17, .46]	2.495 [1.1, 3.9]	.23** [.09, .37]	3.984 [1.1, 6.8]	-.04 [-.18, .12]	-0.360 [-1.1, 0.4]	.29*** [.15, .41]	0.546 [0.2, 0.9]						
Redemption sequences	.26** [.11, .39]	1.488 [0.5, 2.4]	.04 [-.10, .19]	0.312 [-1.0, 1.6]	.22** [.07, .37]	2.973 [0.3, 5.7]	-.14 [-.28, .01]	-0.559 [-1.2, 0.1]	.22** [.06, .36]	0.374 [0.1, 0.7]						
Prosocial goals	.40*** [.29, .52]	2.610 [1.5, 3.7]	.34*** [.20, .47]	3.024 [1.5, 4.6]	.31*** [.19, .44]	5.154 [1.9, 8.4]	-.06 [-.23, .11]	-0.144 [-1.0, 0.7]	.38*** [.26, .51]	0.761 [0.4, 1.1]						
Composite	.49*** [.37, .60]	6.956 [4.8, 9.1]	.37*** [.23, .51]	7.278 [4.1, 10.4]	.40*** [.27, .52]	14.667 [8.2, 21.1]	-.15 [-.29, .02]	-1.462 [-3.2, 0.2]	.48*** [.36, .59]	2.118 [1.4, 2.8]						
Other narrative themes																
Contamination sequences	.03 [-.11, .18]	0.220 [-1.1, 1.5]	-.04 [-.16, .09]	-0.227 [-2.0, 1.5]	-.08 [-.24, .08]	-2.420 [-6.0, 1.2]	.14 [-.02, .29]	0.918 [0.1, 1.8]	-.07 [-.23, .07]	-0.224 [-0.6, 0.2]						
Meaning making	.10 [-.06, .26]	0.548 [-0.2, 1.3]	.01 [-.15, .17]	0.372 [-0.06, 1.4]	.01 [-.15, .18]	0.253 [-1.8, 2.3]	.02 [-.13, .18]	0.135 [-0.04, 0.6]	.04 [-.11, .20]	0.069 [-0.2, 0.3]						

Note: In each regression analysis, one of the narrative themes was entered along with income, education level, gender, race, and length of interview as predictors of one of the self-report indices of psychosocial adaptation. Numbers in brackets are 95% confidence intervals.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). Beyond case studies (Colby & Damon, 1992), qualitative explorations (Tuval-Mashiach, 2006), and analyses of cultural and historical texts (McAdams, 2013b), however, no previous research in psychological science has cast an empirical eye on the full multifaceted narrative of a person's life—a particular kind of story about life with a particular kind of beginning, middle, and anticipated ending.

The results from the current study show that highly generative (caring and productive) midlife adults are much more likely than their less-generative counterparts to narrate their lives as variations on this five-theme prototype. The same kind of life story is also associated with increased levels of public-service motivation and psychological well-being but is unrelated to depression. Thus, the prototype of the redemptive self appears to be a life-story format that is deeply implicated in healthy psychosocial adaptation in the midlife years. While direct observations of caring and productive behavior were not obtained, previous research has shown that measures of generativity and public-service motivation are strongly associated with actual behaviors indicative of positive parenting, volunteerism, civic engagement, and a generally prosocial approach to life (e.g., Coursey et al., 2008; Rossi, 2001). Finally, two well-validated narrative constructs that are not part of the redemptive-self pattern—contamination sequences and meaning making—appeared to be unrelated to levels of psychosocial adaptation at midlife, with the exception of a modest association between contamination sequences and depression.

Research on narrative identity is based on the assumption that people draw on their own life stories to make sense of their lives and to cope with life's challenges (McAdams & McLean, 2013). As internalized and evolving narrative structures, life stories are psychological resources that can be used to accomplish many different ends. Redemptive life stories of the kind examined in the current study would appear to be well-suited for supporting a generative adult's efforts to have a positive impact on the next generation, at least in American society. The story tells the adult that he or she enjoyed an early advantage or blessing in life that, when combined with sensitivity to the suffering of other people, may set up a kind of moral challenge: "I am blessed, but others suffer." Commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations may be reinforced by the life-narrative theme of moral steadfastness, as the narrator grounds the pursuit of generative goals in a strong personal ideology. Moreover, the story's emphasis on redemption sequences affirms the adult's hope that the hard work and daunting challenges that generativity presents—raising children, working for change in the community, trying to make a positive difference in the world—will ultimately bring

positive outcomes: Today's defeats will turn into tomorrow's victories (McAdams, 2013b).

Finally, the theme of prosocial goals extends generative commitments into the envisioned future. Reflected in the fact that prosocial goals showed the strongest empirical association with self-reported generativity, this fifth theme may admittedly overlap with the construct of generativity itself. Yet even when prosocial goals are removed from the prototype, the other four themes of the redemptive self exhibit strong positive associations with a self-reported tendency to promote the well-being of future generations.

The geographic and socioeconomic parameters of this study limit its generalizability. As in many past studies, income was positively associated with psychological well-being, though the statistical effect emerged only within each of the two race subsamples rather than when the entire sample as a whole was analyzed. Within the African American subsample only, higher education levels were associated with stronger generativity and public-service motivation. Other interesting differences appeared for race/ethnicity. As reported also in Hart et al. (2001), African Americans scored significantly higher on generativity than did Whites. More research is needed to determine how general this finding might be. Intriguingly, the life stories constructed by the midlife African American participants in this study were laden with themes of moral steadfastness and prosocial goals, exhibiting mean scores nearly double those of Whites.

Surveying African American folktales, cultural narratives, and religious traditions, McAdams (2013b, Chapter 7) has argued that the core ideas behind the redemptive-self prototype are especially resonant with the cultural mythos of African American experience, as described by sociologists and historians. In the current study, for example, a sizeable number of the narratives told by African Americans regarding instances in their lives of moral steadfastness and prosocial goals were flavored with religious sentiments. McAdams (2013b) suggests that many of the most compelling illustrations of the redemptive-self prototype in American heritage and history are found in the African American community.

Future studies need to replicate these findings in other geographic areas and cultural contexts, and with respect to a broader age range in midlife. Theoretical writings on the redemptive self have suggested that this kind of story for life resonates well with Americans' traditional understandings of how to live a good life (McAdams, 2013b). Whether these same understandings apply to other societies is an open question (Hammack, 2008).

The study's correlational nature suggests another important limitation. Whether developing a particular kind of life story (such as the redemptive self) leads to heightened generativity, or whether being highly

generative in the first place predisposes midlife adults to construe their life in redemptive terms, cannot be determined from the current results. Both possibilities seem plausible.

The very nature of life-narrative research, moreover, adds further ambiguities regarding causal inference. Life stories themselves are selective and highly biased reconstructions of the autobiographical past (and the imagined future; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams & McLean, 2013). To a great extent, they convey what a person currently imagines the past to be, rather than what the past really was.

At the same time, the fact that life stories are not perfectly accurate portrayals of what actually happened in the past is itself the main epistemological justification for scientific research into narrative identity. If life stories were like video recordings of the objective past, then they would tell the researcher next to nothing about identity and nothing about how a person endeavors to make sense out of and give coherent meaning to his or her life. As subjective narratives, life stories provide a sense of temporal meaning and purpose to life, and they provide psychological resources for meeting many of life's challenges in the adult years.

Research into life narratives, therefore, departs from some of the standard conventions that have traditionally informed psychological research. Even though life-narrative interviews delve into past autobiographical events, the veridicality of those events and their putative causal status in a person's life are not the focus of the inquiry. Instead, life-narrative research traffics in the subjective tales—biased and reconstructed as they are—that people tell about their lives, the personal myths they formulate to make sense of who they are today and how they believe they have come to be the persons they are becoming.

### Author Contributions

D. P. McAdams conceived of the project, oversaw data collection and analysis, derived the hypotheses from previous work, and developed the coding procedures. J. Guo helped to develop coding schemes for the narrative data, performed significant content analysis of the life-narrative data, supervised the other coders, and worked with D. P. McAdams on statistically analyzing the data and responding to comments from the first submission of the manuscript.

### Acknowledgments

We thank Izora Baltys, Megan Corey, Mark Davis, Sunhee Han, Julian Perez, Jennifer Siedjak, Carolyn Pichert Swen, and Umair Tarbhai for assistance in interview coding; Gina Logan for her oversight of the interviews; and Dan Mroczek for statistical advice.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

### Funding

This research was supported by a grant to D. P. McAdams from the Foley Family Foundation.

### References

- Adler, J. M. (2012). Living into the story: Agency and coherence in a longitudinal study of narrative identity development and mental health over the course of psychotherapy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102*, 367–389.
- Adler, J. M., Kissel, E., & McAdams, D. P. (2006). Emerging from the CAVE: Attributional style and the narrative study of identity in midlife adults. *Cognitive Therapy and Research, 30*, 39–51.
- Affleck, G., & Tennen, H. (1996). Construing benefits from adversity: Adaptational significance and dispositional underpinnings. *Journal of Personality, 64*, 899–922.
- Andrews, M. (1991). *Lifetimes of commitment: Aging, politics, society*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Bauer, J. J., McAdams, D. P., & Sakaeda, A. (2005). Interpreting the good life: Growth memories in the lives of mature, happy people. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88*, 203–217.
- Beck, A. T., Steer, R. A., & Brown, G. K. (1996). *Manual for the Beck Depression Inventory-II*. San Antonio, TX: Psychological Corp.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Conway, M. A., & Pleydell-Pearce, C. W. (2000). The construction of autobiographical memories in the self-memory system. *Psychological Review, 107*, 261–288.
- Coursey, D. H., Perry, J., Brudney, J. L., & Littlepage, L. (2008). Psychometric verification of Perry's Public Service Motivation instrument: Results for volunteer exemplars. *Review of Public Personnel Administration, 28*, 79–90.
- Cox, K. S., Wilt, J., Olson, B., & McAdams, D. P. (2010). Generativity, the Big Five, and psychosocial adaptation in midlife adults. *Journal of Personality, 78*, 1185–1208.
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Hammack, P. L. (2008). Narrative and the cultural psychology of identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 12*, 222–247.
- Hart, H. M., McAdams, D. P., Hirsch, B. J., & Bauer, J. J. (2001). Generativity and societal involvement among African Americans and White adults. *Journal of Research in Personality, 35*, 208–230.
- Josselson, R. (2009). The present of the past: Dialogues with memory over time. *Journal of Personality, 77*, 647–668.
- Manczak, E., Zapata-Gietl, C., & McAdams, D. P. (2014). Regulatory focus in the life story: Prevention and promotion as expressed in three layers of personality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*, 169–181.



- McAdams, D. P. (2008). *The Life Story Interview*. Retrieved from <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/docs/LifeStoryInterview.pdf>
- McAdams, D. P. (2013a). The positive psychology of adult generativity: Caring for the next generation and constructing a redemptive life. In J. D. Sinnott (Ed.), *Positive psychology: Advances in understanding adult motivation* (pp. 191–205). New York, NY: Springer.
- McAdams, D. P. (2013b). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- McAdams, D. P., & de St. Aubin, E. (1992). A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 62*, 1003–1015.
- McAdams, D. P., Diamond, A., de St. Aubin, E., & Mansfield, E. D. (1997). Stories of commitment: The psychosocial construction of generative lives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 678–694.
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 22*, 233–238.
- McAdams, D. P., Reynolds, J., Lewis, M., Patten, A., & Bowman, P. J. (2001). When bad things turn good and good things turn bad: Sequences of redemption and contamination in life narrative and their relation to psychosocial adaptation in midlife adults and in students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*, 474–485.
- McLean, K. C., Pasupathi, M., & Pals, J. L. (2007). Selves creating stories creating selves: A process model of self-development. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 11*, 262–278.
- McLean, K. C., & Pratt, M. W. (2006). Life's little (and big) lessons: Identity statuses and meaning-making in the turning point narratives of emerging adults. *Developmental Psychology, 42*, 714–722.
- Park, C. L. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychological Bulletin, 136*, 257–301.
- Perry, J. L. (1996). Measuring public service motivation: An assessment of construct reliability and validity. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 6*, 5–22.
- Peterson, B. E. (2006). Generativity and successful parenting: An analysis of young adult outcomes. *Journal of Personality, 74*, 847–869.
- Peterson, B. E., Smirles, K. A., & Wentworth, P. A. (1997). Generativity and authoritarianism: Implications for personality, political involvement, and parenting. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 1202–1216.
- Pratt, M. W., Norris, J. E., Arnold, M. L., & Filyer, R. (1999). Generativity and moral development as predictors of value-socialization narratives for young persons across the adult life course: From lessons learned to stories shared. *Psychology and Aging, 14*, 414–426.
- Roelofs, J., van Breukelen, G., de Graaf, L. E., Beck, A. T., Arntz, A., & Huibers, M. J. H. (2013). Norms for the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II) in a large Dutch community sample. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 35*, 93–98.
- Rossi, A. (Ed.). (2001). *Caring and doing for others: Social responsibility in the domains of family, work, and community*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*, 719–727.
- Tavernier, R., & Willoughby, T. (2012). Adolescent turning points: The association between meaning-making and psychological well-being. *Developmental Psychology, 48*, 1058–1068.
- Tuval-Mashiach, R. (2006). "Where is the story going?" Narrative forms and identity construction in the life stories of Israeli men and women. In D. P. McAdams, R. Josselson, & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Identity and story: Creating self in narrative* (pp. 249–268). Washington, DC: APA Books.
- Walker, L. J., & Frimer, J. A. (2007). Moral personality of brave and caring exemplars. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93*, 845–860.
- Zacher, H., Rosing, K., Henning, T., & Frese, M. (2011). Establishing the next generation at work: Leader generativity as a moderator of the relationship between leader age, leader-member exchange, and leadership success. *Psychology and Aging, 26*, 241–252.