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NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING

ABSTRACT. Narrative identity refers to the internal, dynamic life story that an individual constructs to make sense of his or her life. We argue that narrative identity is closely tied to the subjective interpretation of oneself as happy. We present a view of eudaimonic well-being that extends beyond the sense of having pleasure and meaning in one's life (measured as self-report well-being) to include higher degrees of psychosocial integration in that meaning (measured as ego development). This combination of qualities is characteristic of the good life, or *eudaimonia*, in a tradition dating to Aristotle. We then describe research showing how several patterns of narrative identity correspond to this extended notion of eudaimonic well-being. First, people at high levels of eudaimonic well-being tend to emphasize personal growth in their life stories, with different kinds of personal growth corresponding to different facets of eudaimonic well-being. Second, these people also tend to frame difficult life experiences as transformative experiences wherein they suffered deep pain but gained new insights about the self. Third, charting the move from suffering to an enhanced status or state, their stories often follow a culturally-shaped script of redemption, which in American society is often conceived as upward social mobility, liberation, recovery, atonement, or the full actualization of the inner self.

KEY WORDS: life stories, the good life, happiness, meaningfulness, ego development, growth stories, self-transformation, the redemptive self

INTRODUCTION

The philosopher George Berkeley is known for his claim, *Esse est percipi*: To be is to be perceived. He was making an argument for the primacy of subjectivity in being – that an object owes its existence to the mind of the perceiver. Is something of the sort true for happiness? Where there is happiness, there is always a subjective interpretation of conditions as good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Certainly more objective conditions

– notably physical health and money – work for and against happiness in myriad ways. But happiness is ultimately a subjective appraisal of one’s life as happy. From this perspective, happiness itself should be intertwined with a person’s subjective understanding of who he or she is and what his or her life means.

In recent years, many social scientists have argued that adults living in modern societies make sense of their lives in terms of *stories* (Bruner, 1990; Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1985; Sarbin, 1986; Singer, 2004; Taylor, 1989). Beginning in adolescence, people fashion and internalize life stories, or *narrative identities* (McAdams, 2001a; Singer, 2004), to integrate the reconstructed past and imagined future. Narrative identity provides life with unity, purpose, and meaning. To the degree that happiness – especially eudaimonic happiness – depends on a sense of meaningfulness in life, narrative identity should play a key role in personal interpretations of whether one is happy.

EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING AND THE GOOD LIFE

Aristotle, drawing on the ideas of Socrates and Plato, held that the greatest good was *eudaimonia*, a happiness consisting of pleasure and virtue. *Eudaimonia* was the highest cultivation of personal character; it was *the good life*. Recently psychologists have reframed Aristotle’s formula for happiness in terms of pleasure and psychosocial meaning, what has become known as eudaimonic well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Sometimes eudaimonic well-being and the good life are equated, and sometimes they are not, but in either case the two share a close relationship: Both consist of pleasure and meaning.

Eudaimonic well-being has been contrasted with hedonic well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Ryff and Singer, 1998). Hedonic well-being primarily involves pleasure. It tends to be more individualistic and based upon how good one feels about one’s life. Two empirical measures that tap mainly into hedonic well-being are the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, which focuses on emotional experiences (Watson et al., 1988), and the

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWL), which assesses global evaluations of one's life without specific reference to sources of meaningfulness (Diener et al., 1985). Eudaimonic well-being also involves pleasure but emphasizes meaningfulness and growth – a more enduring sort of happiness. It tends to be more humanistic and based upon how meaningful one's life feels in addition to simply how good it feels. For example, Ryff's measure of Psychological Well-Being (PWB, Ryff and Keyes, 1995) assesses feeling good about one's life in six ways, some of which deal specifically with sources of humanistic meaning and development in life, such as meaningful relationships, purpose in life, and personal growth. In sum, hedonic well-being deals simply with an appraisal that one feels good, whereas eudaimonic well-being deals with an appraisal that one feels good while explicitly considering one's sense of meaningfulness in life.

However, *eudaimonia* for Aristotle was not simply a matter of *feeling* that one was a good and virtuous person; it was also a matter of cultivating *high degrees* of virtue. Similarly, psychologists have recently portrayed the good life not merely as a matter of feeling that one's life has meaning (e.g., satisfaction with meaningful relationships or meaningful work) but also as a matter of cultivating higher degrees of richness, complexity, or integration in that meaning (Bauer et al., 2005; King, 2001; King and Napa, 1998; Pals, in press-b). According to these researchers, Loevinger's (1976) conception of ego development offers a wide lens for observing the richness of meaning-making in one's psychosocial life. Individuals at the higher stages in Loevinger's scheme tend to interpret their lives in more complex, nuanced, and integrative ways, compared to individuals who score at the lower stages of ego development (Westenberg et al., 1998). Higher ego development brings with it a richer and more mature understanding of the self and the self's relations to others.

Ego development is not typically considered to be a facet of well-being. Indeed measures of ego development typically do not correlate with measures of happiness and well-being in adulthood (Bauer and McAdams, 2004a, b; Helson and Roberts, 1994; Helson and Wink, 1992; King et al., 2000; Vaillant and

McCullough, 1987; Westenberg and Block, 1993). In other words, people who think complexly about their lives seem just about as likely to be happy as unhappy (except perhaps for adults at the lowest levels of ego development; Loevinger, 1993). The tendency of psychologists to exclude ego development (and related concepts like moral reasoning and cognitive complexity) from definitions of well-being reflects the historical tendency of research on well-being to focus on hedonic forms of happiness. We think that a more comprehensive appraisal of a human's being well – consonant with eudaimonic well-being – should extend beyond just how *good* one *feels* about the self in a world of others to incorporate how *integratively* one *thinks* about the self and others. In this view, “well-being” involves appraisals of a wider range of human capacities and experience (cf. self-actualization, Maslow, 1968; the fully functioning person, Rogers, 1961). Empirically, what Aristotle meant by the good life may be partly captured in the combination of self-reported well-being (both hedonic *and* eudaimonic) and ego development (Bauer and McAdams, 2004a, Bauer et al., 2005; King, 2001; King and Raspin, 2004; King et al., 2000; Pals, in press-b). Such an approach attempts to measure people who are both *happy* (in terms of both pleasure and meaningfulness) and *mature* (in terms of meaning-making complexity and perspective-taking), to use King's (2001) two terms.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY: INTERPRETING AND INTEGRATING ONE'S LIFE

People make sense of their lives by creating life stories. People use narratives to try to derive some measure of unity and purpose out of what may otherwise seem to be an incomprehensible array of life events and experiences (McAdams, 1985). The process of constructing life stories takes place in everyday life, as people participate in activities, talk about them with others, think about other's perspectives on them, and reflect on how all these things fit together – on and on, day in and day out, appropriating new experiences and revising old stories slowly over time (Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne,

2000). Life stories, like stories generally, make use of characters, plots, themes, tones, and other narrative elements to convey meaning. Themes – or recurrent, goal-directed sequences in life narratives – go a long way in establishing meaning and have, therefore, been widely examined in narrative research (McAdams, 2001a). For example, researchers have extensively examined the themes of agency and communion in people's life stories (Ackerman et al., 2000; McAdams, 1982; McAdams et al., 1996; Woike, 1995). Life stories with themes of agency express personal concern for things like power, achievement, personal mastery, impact on others, status, and independence. Themes of communion express personal concern for things like love, intimacy, friendship, dialog, affiliation, and nurturance.

Whereas themes of agency and communion may reveal certain consistencies in the content of life stories, other narrative features capture dynamic patterns of change. For example, McAdams et al., (2001) coded life-narrative accounts for two kinds of emotional sequences – redemption and contamination patterns. In a redemption sequence, an emotionally negative life scene turns positive; the bad is salvaged or redeemed by a positive outcome. By contrast, a contamination sequence scripts the move from an emotionally positive scene to a negative outcome; a good experience is ruined, sullied, contaminated by what follows. The density of redemptive imagery in life-narrative accounts is positively associated with self-report measures of well-being and generativity (an adult's commitment to promoting the well-being of the next generation; Erikson, 1963), and negatively associated with depression. By contrast, contamination sequences are strong predictors of depression, low levels of life satisfaction, and feeling that one is not able to make a positive contribution to others and to the next generation (Adler et al., in press; McAdams et al., 2001).

Several other patterns of narrative identity also capture dynamic change and richness in interpreting one's life. The following sections describe some of these patterns in relation to eudaimonic well-being.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND DEVELOPMENT: THE GROWTH STORY

The *growth story* is a personal narrative that showcases one's development or developmental processes. Growth can be observed most explicitly in narratives that overtly declare that one has grown or developed in some way. Growth can also appear as a theme or a value orientation, where development itself is something the person values and uses to justify the importance of an event. The process of creating growth can be observed in a narrative that differentiates, elaborates, integrates, or otherwise strives to make greater sense of various experiences (e.g., Woike and Matic, 2004), as well as in narratives with a temporal structure that suggests progress (e.g., time as stair-like or upwardly spiraling; Brockmeier, 2000). Research on narrative identity in recent years has shown that some personal narratives and life stories involve growth and development, while many others do not (e.g., Bauer and Bonanno, 2001; Bauer and McAdams, 2004a, b; Blagov and Singer, 2004; Bluck and Gluck, 2004; King and Smith, 2004; McAdams, 2001a; Pals, in press-a; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne et al., 2004).

Growth stories have implications for eudaimonic well-being as well as a variety of phenomena in personality and developmental psychology. Growth itself plays a central role in eudaimonic well-being. For example, personal growth is one of six dimensions in a prominent measure of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff and Keyes, 1995). Growth is also central to the eudaimonic definition of health in humanistic psychology. For Maslow (1968), the self-actualizing person is motivated by growth, valuing personal growth (or self-actualization) to the point of believing that it is among the very greatest goods. For Rogers (1961), the fully functioning person strives to gain an increasingly deeper understanding of his or her inner life. In a developmental model of the good life, high levels of both well-being and meaning complexity represent the endpoints of two theoretical branches of personality development (social-emotional and social-cognitive development, respectively; Bauer and McAdams, 2004a; Bauer et al., 2005). Given the close tie between growth and eudaimonic well-being, growth stories reveal

one process of interpreting life in a way conducive to eudaimonic well-being.

Four different kinds of growth stories have been found to correlate with and differentiate measures of eudaimonic and hedonic well-being: intrinsic, agentic, communal, and integrative. These growth stories characterize an array of life interpretations – high points in life, low points, turning points, broader periods of life transitions, plans for the future, even the broad spectrum of a life story.

Intrinsic growth

Themes of intrinsic growth in life stories involve an emphasis on intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated concerns. Self-determination theory frames intrinsic versus extrinsic motives in terms of (respectively) humanistic, eudaimonic, growth-oriented concerns versus materialistic, hedonic, safety-oriented concerns (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2001). Intrinsic motivation is inherently growth-oriented, in keeping with an organismic perspective on human development (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Werner, 1957). Intrinsic motivation guides the individual to focus on the kinds of intrapsychological skills that theoretically foster development, whereas extrinsic motivation guides the individual to focus on concerns that are ultimately geared toward presenting an image of success to others and to the self.

Recently a series of narrative studies has examined the role of intrinsic *growth memories* in people's personal narratives. In two studies of life stories, college students and adults were asked to write about their high points, low points, and turning points in life (Bauer et al., 2005). These *self-defining memories* (Singer and Salovey, 1993) were then coded into quantitative variables representing the presence of intrinsic versus non-intrinsic memories. Intrinsic memories were defined as memories with themes emphasizing the importance of personal growth, meaningful relationships, and contributing to society and future generations (based largely on Kasser and Ryan, 1996; Sheldon and Kasser, 1995). Non-intrinsic themes included concerns for attaining money, status, social approval, physical appearance, and maintaining one's conditions in life. In both studies, people

who had more intrinsic memories had higher levels of well-being – in terms of hedonic well-being (SWL, Diener et al., 1985) but especially eudaimonic well-being (PWB, Ryff and Keyes, 1995). The relationship between intrinsic memories and PWB (eudaimonic well-being) remained strong when controlling for SWL (hedonic well-being), but SWL no longer correlated significantly with intrinsic memories when controlling for PWB.

Similar relationships were found in a study of adults' narratives of major life changes (Bauer and McAdams, 2004b). People wrote one-page narratives about each of six episodes within a voluntary transition from one career to another or from one religion to another. People whose transition stories were highly intrinsic – i.e., people who felt their transitions were geared toward intrinsic growth – had higher levels of both SWL and PWB, but especially PWB. In addition, these people were also more satisfied with how the transition impacted their lives in a range of ways – personally, in relationships, at work, spiritually, etc.

Life stories are not only about the past. They also include some narration of the anticipated future – major life goals, dreams, and plans (McAdams, 1985). Whereas people use narrative memories to interpret the past, people use narrative goals to plan the future, to chart the broad courses of action in their lives. Like significant autobiographical memories, life goals express themes and value orientations, some of which involve growth. For the college students and adults mentioned above, people who had intrinsic *growth goals* were likely to have higher levels of both PWB and SWL (Bauer and McAdams, 2004a). People whose major life growth goals were hierarchically coherent with shorter-term growth goals had especially high levels of well-being, especially eudaimonic well-being.

To give a sense for what intrinsic growth looks like in self-narratives, excerpts of high points in life appear below. The first narrative deals with both personal growth and meaningful relationships:

I was by the lake at night I was able to formulate all my values and beliefs into one comprehensive system At that moment I understood and more importantly felt my relationship with the rest of the living world.

The next excerpt is from an intrinsic memory from a life-transition story (Bauer and McAdams, 2004b). This narrative emphasizes the gaining of new understandings of self, another, and a relationship:

We took time to discuss issues and thoughts that didn't normally present themselves in our daily lives. I learned more about [my husband] and his spirituality. This really strengthened our marriage, as my feelings for him became deeper and more caring.

The following excerpts are from narratives of major life goals. They emphasize the importance of personal growth, meaningful relationships, and helping society:

- To be as integrated physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually as I can be ... exploring my own process and to develop/continue intimate relationships with family and friends.
- I would like to get married and have children I'm trying to learn about myself before I can begin learning how to make myself a part of another person. In my marriage, I want to be happy and use my marriage to continue to explore the world around me.
- My desire is to simplify my life in every way – to sell our house and live in a place that requires less responsibility, to use fewer clothes, have less furniture, and striving for quality rather than quantity.
- I want to stay happy ... I want to get married. I want to have children. I want to give back to my community.

Agentic and communal growth

The two great themes of life stories, agency and communion, hold different relations to well-being. Communal themes often correlate with well-being, but agentic themes often do not (Mansfield and McAdams, 1996; McAdams, 1985). However, where agentic and communal themes involve intrinsic growth, a more consistent tie to well-being may be found (Bauer and McAdams, 2000). For example, intrinsic themes can deal with agentic concerns of self-understanding and self-mastery (but not status-seeking and dominance) or with communal concerns of

intimacy and sharing (but not communion for the sake of bolstering self-esteem or gaining others' approval). In the life-transitions study mentioned earlier, people whose transition stories emphasized agentic and communal growth had higher levels of eudaimonic well-being (Bauer and McAdams, 2004b). Agentic themes correlated only with PWB, not SWL. Communal themes correlated more strongly with PWB than with SWL. Interestingly, communal growth was a much stronger predictor of well-being (and transition satisfaction) than agentic growth was. This finding was surprising, given the tendency for career research and career counseling to focus on agentic concerns like "doing what you love" and personal success. The happiest career changers appeared to be the ones who highly valued the role of other people, not just the self, in their career transitions.

The following excerpts illustrate themes of agentic and communal growth (from Bauer and McAdams, 2004b). The first narrative of a career change emphasizes agentic growth exclusively by conveying a sense of personal abilities without reference to other people or relationships:

I had grown accustomed to making a couple hundred thousand dollars a year and being able to afford whatever I wanted to buy I also knew that the social work profession paid significantly less I approached the conflict with much trepidation Today, I have resolved this conflict. I am much more content and able to appreciate the smaller things with less money.

The next excerpt, from a narrative of a change in religions, emphasizes communal growth but not agentic growth.

I knew how important her religion was to her and that if I wished to love her completely I would have to accept that part of her for us and our future family. She was the more religious of the two of us and I knew I would be the one to eventually convert.

The reader may note that, although the participant emphasized communal growth, the reason for the religious conversion was not personal ideology (i.e., not for reasons of intrinsic religiosity; Allport and Ross, 1969) but rather to serve some other purpose, namely to facilitate social relationships (i.e., extrinsic religiosity). The coding in this study of religious conversion

distinguished intrinsic and extrinsic from the standpoint of the person, not the religion.

The final narrative emphasized an agentic-growth concern for having an impact on others and a communal-growth concern for future generations. This excerpt, from a narrative of a career change, contained themes of both agentic growth and communal growth:

During a staff rotation in pediatrics ... I knew that no matter how much I held him, sang to him, tried to teach him, that I was too late for this little human being. Instances of neglect and abuse in children, which were more frequent than you'd ever imagine, began to create a feeling in me that I wanted to be there early enough to make a difference.

Integrative growth

Several of the excerpts above included elements not only of intrinsic growth but also of a specifically conceptual kind of growth. This growth, which can be called *integrative growth* (Bauer et al., 2005; Blagov and Singer, 2004), is seen in narratives emphasizing learning, exploring, coming to deeper understandings, and integrating new and old perspectives on one's life. Such concerns are inherently developmental as they have been theoretically proposed to foster social-cognitive development, a branch of developmental theory that charts the path to higher levels of complexity by which people can think about the self and others (e.g., Damon and Hart, 1988; Loevinger, 1976). Much of this work has been based upon or is consonant with Piaget's (1970) theory of cognitive development. Several studies have examined integration in narratives in relation to measures of both well-being and complexity of meaning – sometimes in an attempt to study the good life.

Overall, integrative themes correlate highly with ego development but hold some ties to PWB. King and colleagues have consistently found that people whose narratives of difficult events emphasize integration and elaboration have higher levels of ego development (King and Raspin, 2004; King et al., 2000; King and Smith, 2004). King (2001) framed the combination of pleasure-based happiness (e.g., SWL) with complexity of meaning (ego development) as an empirical measure of the good life.

In research on life stories and stories of voluntary life transitions, people whose narratives emphasized exploring, learning, and integrating new information had high levels of ego development and in some cases high levels of PWB (Bauer and McAdams, 2004a, b; Bauer et al., 2005). In cases where integrative or exploratory themes did relate to PWB, they did so in specific ways. Integrative themes mapped onto the dimensions of PWB (purpose in life and personal growth) that are most associated with conceptual meaning and least associated with simple affect. People who emphasized both integrative and intrinsic themes (e.g., learning more about relationships) had high levels of both ego development and well-being, suggesting that the good life involves a rich and complex narrative identity (Bauer et al., 2005; King et al., 2000).

Growth stories are not derivatives of traits or demographics

Might personality traits like neuroticism and extraversion account for the relationships between growth stories and well-being? After all, neuroticism and extraversion are known to hold strong ties to well-being and positive and negative affect. And there is a commonly held belief that traits underlie or drive other personality factors (McCrae and Costa, 1999). In the studies reported above, there was a general trend for neuroticism (inversely) and extraversion to correlate with intrinsic memories, intrinsic goals, and well-being (Bauer and McAdams, 2004a, b; Bauer et al., 2005). Yet the relations between growth stories and well-being held in the large majority of analyses when controlling for personality traits. Thus growth stories may be related to traits, but growth stories are not mere derivatives of traits, at least not in relation to well-being. Indeed life stories may be one way that people keep particular traits going (McGregor et al., in press; Pals, in press-a). Life stories enable people to interpret the past in terms of trait-like perceptions of “who one is” and to plan the future in terms of traits that one wants to continue develop in their lives.

Similarly, growth stories seem to cut across gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In the studies reported above, these and other demographic variables did not correlate with growth

stories (except that, in one adult sample, integrative memories showed a slightly significant tie to education level). Also, demographic variables did not influence the relations between growth stories and other measures of personality and development. This finding is notable, given the role that culture and other social ecologies play in the development of narratives that individuals use to make sense of their lives (Fivush and Nelson, 2004; Pasupathi, 2001).

STORIES OF DIFFICULT LIFE EVENTS

Given the empirical connection between certain qualities of narrative identity on the one hand and well-being on the other, it becomes especially important to understand how adults narrate the most difficult experiences in their lives and integrate them into their evolving life stories over time. Indeed, the emotional aftermath of difficult experiences can seriously threaten well-being, making their interpretation and enduring meaning within narrative identity especially critical. This has been well established in the area of hedonic well-being, in which studies have shown that an inability to move past a difficult experience is associated with negative affect and poor emotional health. For example, King and Raspin (2004) showed that women who narrated a difficult divorce with an excessive focus on possible selves that had been lost through the experience of divorce were unhappier than women who were less focused on what they had lost. In addition, King and her colleagues (King et al., 2000) showed that parents of Down Syndrome children who wrote narratives about learning of their child's condition that lacked emotional closure and ended on a negative emotional note were more unhappy than parents of Down Syndrome children whose narratives concluded with a positive, emotionally resolved ending. Based on findings like these, Pals (in press-b) contended that one important narrative-identity process in adulthood is the construction of a well-integrated and complete story of a difficult life experience that concludes with a positive ending and emphasizes how emotional well-being was restored in the person's life. Pals (in press-b) showed that middle-aged women

whose narratives displayed this process, labeled coherent positive resolution, developed higher levels of resiliency over time and scored higher on life satisfaction in late midlife than women whose narratives were more incomplete and emotionally unresolved.

The findings presented above highlight the connection between the narration of difficult life experiences and indicators of hedonic or simple affect-based well-being. However, when one broadens the focus from hedonic to eudaimonic well-being and the experience of the good life, difficult life experiences can be understood as much more than threats to emotional health that require resolution. From the standpoint of eudaimonic well-being, they also represent challenges to identity that offer a narrative opportunity for the growth and transformation of self (Pals and McAdams, 2004). More specifically, recent studies suggest that while resolved positive endings in general may help to heal emotional pain and enhance hedonic well-being, it is only those positive endings that also fully acknowledge the negative impact and incorporate exploration and a sense of accommodative change in response to the difficult life events that are predictive of eudaimonic well-being, as indicated by the combination of hedonic well-being and maturity (King, 2001; King et al., 2000; Pals, in press-b). For example, King et al. (2000) showed that in addition to closure and positive endings within parents' narratives of finding out a child has Down Syndrome, those narratives also contained a second, independent component of variation – the extent to which they acknowledged actively exploring and integrating a sense of accommodative change in response to the experience – which was predictive of ego development. Thus, parents who could be described as living “the good life” or displaying eudaimonic well-being told stories of their difficult experience that incorporated both accommodative change and a positive ending. Moreover, the interaction of accommodation and closure uniquely predicted an enduring sense of growth as a result of the difficult experience two years later: parents whose narratives contained both accommodative change and closure reported the highest levels of growth in response to the experience, whereas those whose

narratives contained closure without accommodation reported the lowest levels of growth. This finding suggests that there is something dynamic going on in how these two processes operate together within narrative identity, an idea further addressed below.

Building on the King et al. (2000) findings, Pals (in press-b) argued that the two independent narrative processes described above facilitate the development of eudaimonic well-being over time by interacting to produce an enduring sense of positive self-transformation within the life story. More specifically, Pals (in press-b) articulated a two-step narrative process of growth by which adults first openly acknowledge the negative emotional impact of the difficult life experience and explore its meaning and then construct a resolved, positive ending by seeing the self as positively transformed by the experience. In this way, adults may work through and narrate the experience as an identity challenge that offers the possibility for growth rather than as an emotional threat that must be minimized within the life story and disconnected from identity. In support of this perspective, it was found that coherent positive resolution and exploratory narrative processing (similar to accommodative change) together predicted the theme of positive self-transformation within midlife women's narratives of difficult life experiences, and positive self-transformation, in turn, uniquely predicted eudaimonic well-being nine years later as measured by the combination of hedonic well-being and maturity (Pals, in press-b). Thus, an enduring sense of positive self-transformation, as a newly constructed component of narrative identity, may create new possibilities and ways of being that enrich life's meaning and contribute to the experience of the good life. From this perspective, the narrative pathway toward eudaimonic well-being in adulthood may actually require difficult life experiences and the capacity to process them as creating positive self-transformation, a developmental pathway that King (2001) has eloquently referred to as "the hard road to the good life." Finally, these studies highlight how the general notion of growing in response to difficult experiences – an increasingly studied phenomenon called post-traumatic growth (Calhoun

and Tedeschi, 1998) – is, fundamentally, a narrative identity process of exploration and self-transformation.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE: THE REDEMPTIVE SELF

The conceptualizations offered and the studies reviewed in this paper reflect a particular cultural perspective. In contemporary American society, narratives about heroic protagonists who defy convention in order to follow their true (intrinsic) longings, or who suffer through life's harshest tribulations only to emerge enhanced or integrated in the end, enjoy considerable cachet and admiration. While American society is repeatedly taken to task for its crass materialism and its preoccupations with wealth and celebrity (e.g., Cushman, 1995), Americans deeply value stories of personal redemption (McAdams, 2006). Sometimes these stories suggest religious meanings, but more often they adopt images and ideas from secular life. In popular fiction, Hollywood movies, television shows from reality TV to the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and in many other venues, American protagonists continue to distinguish themselves as rugged and resilient individualists who delight in their nonconformity and who continue to grow and develop, especially in response to failure and setbacks. Indeed, these kinds of redemptive narratives have always held a privileged status in American society, going back to the spiritual autobiographies written by the New England Puritans in the 17th century (McAdams, 2006). Among the most popular forms for redemptive life narratives in American society today are stories of upward social mobility, liberation, recovery, atonement, and self-actualization (McAdams, 2006). In each of these forms, the intrinsically motivated protagonist overcomes intense suffering to experience an enhanced status or state – moving from rags to riches, slavery to freedom, sickness (or addiction) to health, sin to salvation, or immaturity to the full expression of the good inner self. In some of these stories, the protagonist may feel that there is something wrong or bad about the self and, as a result, may work hard to try to redeem life in some way. In many others, however, what is wrong is the suffering that comes to people through no

fault of their own – through sickness, for example, loss, poverty, and so on. Redemptive narratives typically chart the protagonist's movement over time from suffering to an enhanced status or state. Redemptive life narratives in contemporary American society seem to suggest that if the road is not hard, the life cannot be good, as echoed in King's (2001) portrayal of the good life mentioned earlier, as echoed in King's (2001) description of the good life mentioned earlier.

High levels of well-being and ego development are surely important ingredients for the good life. But eudaimonic well-being may also be enhanced through a third psychological venue – the successful engagement of developmental tasks (Erikson, 1963). In the midlife years, generativity represents just such a task. Erikson described generativity as an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations. Adults can express generativity through parenting, teaching, mentoring, civic activity, volunteer work, and engaging in other forms of caring and productive activities available to them in their social worlds (McAdams and de St. Aubin, 1992). Yet not all adults in their midlife years are able or willing to commit themselves to generative life projects, and generativity may indeed wax and wane in response to various on-time and unexpected changes over the adult life course (MacDermid et al., 1998). Researchers have developed a number of valid measures of individual differences in generativity (McAdams, 2001b). In general, these assessments tend to be modestly but positively related to self-report well-being and uncorrelated with ego development (McAdams, 2001b).

If generativity may suggest yet another angle on the good life, at least among middle-aged adults, what kinds of life stories do highly generative adults construct? McAdams and colleagues have conducted a series of intensive interview studies contrasting the narrative identities of American men and women scoring especially high and especially low in self-report measures of generativity (Mansfield and McAdams, 1996; McAdams, 2006; McAdams and Bowman, 2001; McAdams et al., 1997). Compared to their less generative counterparts, highly generative American adults tend to construct redemptive

life stories, readily employing the discourses of upward social mobility, liberation, recovery, atonement, and self-actualization. In addition, their stories portray protagonists who (1) believed as children that they were chosen for a special destiny, (2) witnessed the suffering of others at an early age, (3) committed themselves, in adolescence, to a clear and compelling set of personal values and beliefs to which they have sworn allegiance ever since, and (4) expect continued growth in the future. Reflecting deeply cherished (and contested) themes in the American cultural tradition, these narrative variations on the good (American) life describe a gifted (*chosen*) hero whose *manifest destiny* is to journey forth into a dangerous world in order to make it better (to *redeem* it), and who, sustained by deep (intrinsic) convictions, confronts many setbacks along the way, but learns from each of them, and continues to grow. The stories celebrate personal growth and redemption for sure, but they also affirm the sense that one is special and destined for greatness, that the world is dangerous and in need of the protagonist's reforming efforts, that the righteous protagonist should never conform but always trust his or her inner convictions, and that good things will come out of suffering, no matter what. This overall narrative pattern may be termed *the redemptive self*. In American society, the redemptive self helps to support and sustain a generative approach to life, in midlife (McAdams, 2006).

Stories of personal growth are probably common the world over. But each society may offer its own characteristic versions, reflecting societal norms and structures, religion, history, and common expectations regarding the human life course. The redemptive self is a characteristically American life story – a story of growth and transformation that plays extraordinarily well in places like Los Angeles, New York, and Omaha, but whose characters, plots, and themes may seem somewhat foreign to generative adults living in, say, a rural Chinese village, or France. We are not suggesting that eudaimonic well-being, the good life, generativity, or stories of positive personal transformation are unique to American society. Instead, we are contending that life stories are strongly shaped by culture and that,

therefore, narrative conceptions of the good life may vary somewhat from one society to the next. Future research on eudaimonic well-being and on narrative identity should continue to examine basic psychological processes and common narrative forms, but it should also look eagerly and listen keenly for cultural peculiarities and the different, culturally-shaped ways in which people the world over live good lives and construct good stories about them.

CONCLUSION

From the time of Aristotle, people have realized that the good life involves pleasure and more. In our view, the “more” includes not only a sense of meaningfulness that comes from one’s understanding of self and world but also higher degrees of richness or psychosocial integration in that understanding. A well-validated psychological construct that taps into the latter is Loevinger’s (1976) ego development. Recent studies of narrative identity have worked from a conception of eudaimonic well-being as consisting of high levels of both well-being and ego development. In general, the findings from these studies show that happy and mature people tend to highlight scenes of personal growth and redemption in their life stories. These scenes take many different forms. Some emphasize intrinsic motivation, a life-narrative theme that is especially strongly linked to self-report well-being. Others emphasize the exploration and integration of the self, themes that are especially strongly linked to high levels of ego development. Individuals who express high levels of eudaimonic well-being tend to frame especially difficult scenes in their life stories as transformative episodes wherein they experienced intense pain and suffering but through which they learned new lessons in life, attained new self-insights, deepened personal relationships, and/or came to a more profound understanding of the world in which they live.

People’s conceptions of well-being and of a life well-lived are influenced by prevailing social norms, religious values, economic and political considerations, and societal expectations regarding how lives should develop and what it means to live a good life.

Life stories of personal growth and redemption, therefore, surely reflect prevailing cultural narratives. In contemporary American society, life narratives of personal growth and redemption often feature a nearly-self-sufficient and morally-steadfast protagonist who keeps growing and expanding, even (and especially) in response to personal suffering and setbacks. Among the most powerful cultural discourses for personal growth in American society are those affirming upward social mobility, personal liberation, recovery, atonement, and self-actualization. Whether the same findings apply across cultures remains a question for future empirical research.

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