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The Last Chapters of Life:

A Proposed Research Agenda for Studying Narrative Identity in Older Adulthood

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Abstract

The study of narrative identity—the ongoing process of authoring our life stories and being shaped by them—has provided a rich conceptualization of adult personality, yielding important insights about the storied nature of meaning-making in personality, particularly for young and midlife adults. However, little research has been done to investigate narrative identity in older adulthood, potentially resulting in a constrained understanding of narrative identity across the life span. I propose that much-needed research on narrative identity in late life could substantiate or undermine a hypothesized shift in emphasis from *authoring* to *reading* life stories (McAdams, 2015), complicate and refine the master narrative framework (McLean & Syed, 2015), and offer new targets for narrative identity questions across the entire life span.

Key words: narrative identity, late life, master narrative, life stories, successful aging, adult development, personality development

In the last two decades, an increasing number of scholars have understood individuals as autobiographical authors with idiosyncratic narrative identities. We tell ourselves and others more-or-less cohesive, integrated life stories in order to make meaning of our lives, motivate our decisions, and understand how we fit into the species (McAdams, 2015). The study of narrative identity has contributed to a rich conceptualization of adult personality, yielding important insights about the storied nature of meaning-making—in the lives of young and midlife adults. Yet according to narrative identity theory, we are storytellers over our life span; our meaning-making project continues until the end. Despite a recent proliferation of narrative identity research, there has been little on older adulthood (generally considered to be 65 years and older in the United States) and end of life. With a rapidly aging population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2020) often confronted with ageism and exclusion, the inclusion of older adults in narrative identity research would not only enrich this area of scholarship, but also enhance understanding of the lived experiences of older adulthood, promoting psychologists' efforts to combat ageism (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Individual differences in narrative identity would plausibly interact with changes in developmental goals across the lifespan such that individuals might make meaning of, and thus narrate, their stories in different ways at different stages of life. We know this on an experiential level: The world-shattering breakup of an adolescent romance may be recalled with fond tenderness in later years; a religious conversion understood as enabling recovery from addiction may later be seen as guiding one's path to the afterlife. It is possible that older adults have an altogether phenomenologically different experience of autobiographical authorship than do younger adults; such a finding would have tremendous implications for our understanding of identity. Indeed, given that personality constructs from traits (e.g., Roberts, Walton, &

Viechtbauer, 2006) to values (e.g. Fung et al., 2016) and many others have been found to demonstrate significant variability across the life span, we have every reason to believe we ought to at least test for age-related differences in narrative identity.

We would also expect cultural prescriptions for how a life should unfold over the life course to exert influence on the way individuals story their lives. *Master narratives* are culturally specific narrative frameworks that set the dominant or normative picture of what makes a “good” life (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). Perceptions of normative events and behavior change over time, both in terms of cultural standards and what appears normative over an individual lifespan. For example, a “career woman” of the 1980s is simply a woman with a job today. A young man with many lovers may be seen as a benign seducer whereas the same behavior in an older man may be viewed as lecherous. Social norms exert great pressure on individual choices, resulting in limited possibilities for understanding and presenting one’s own life story. Without seeking to understand the nature and function of master narratives in late life, psychologists have an incomplete picture of the power these strong cultural scripts may have on individuals over a lifetime. Further, failing to study the lived experience of older adults’ narrative identities may serve to limit older adults’ agency and inadvertently propagate stereotyped views of older adult personality development.

For all of these reasons, I suggest that personality researchers have a responsibility to expand their research agenda to include exploring narrative identity in late life. In service of this call to action, I first provide a brief overview of narrative identity theory, methods, and unique contributions. I then motivate the need for narrative identity research on the “last chapters of life” from developmental and master narrative frameworks. Finally, I close by reviewing what is at stake in the study of narrative identity in older adulthood.

Introduction to Narrative Identity Research

Narrative identity has been conceptualized as one of three layers of personality alongside dispositional traits (e.g., Big Five) and characteristic adaptations (i.e., an individual's distinct set of values, goals, and motivations as an agent) (McAdams, 2015; McAdams & Pals, 2006). A person's narrative identity is the product of an ongoing meaning-making process of stories shaping selves and selves shaping stories throughout the life span (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Importantly, *narrative* is not simply *story* by another name. Narratives involve intentional agents pursuing valued goals over time (Bruner, 1985), and they are used to explain why people do the things they do (McAdams, 2015). A person's narrative identity is the implicitly held, and sometimes explicitly told, story of how a person came to be the person they are, including their triumphs, failures, dreams, and regrets.

Narrative identity research is often conducted through in-person or written interviews which ask "big questions," prompting participants to look backward to make evaluations about the past and forward to share predictions and hopes about the future (McAdams, 2007), or to describe "self-defining memories" (Singer, Blagov, Berry, & Oost, 2013). Participants report and reflect on major life events (e.g., lifetime highs, lows, and turning points) and personal evolution across the life span (e.g., "How have you changed since..."). Importantly, in addition to naming the who, what, where, when, and how of these "scenes," as they are sometimes called (Tomkins, 1987), participants are often asked to *make meaning* of their responses—typically in the context of considering the significance of the scene to one's self or one's life story. Interviews are analyzed for thematic patterns (called *narrative themes*) via qualitative coding methods derived from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) or thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These narrative themes are given quantitative structure via standardized codebooks, and

theme scores are analyzed along with other self-report measures of interest to the investigator. Coding is usually conducted by trained coders (Adler et al., 2017; McLean, Syed, et al., 2019; Syed & Nelson, 2015), but sometimes with the aid of automated software (e.g., Weston, Cox, Condon, & Jackson, 2016). For a useful primer on this research process, see Adler et al. (2017).

While researchers have begun to examine various facets of stability and change in narratives over time in younger and middle adulthood (Adler, 2019; Dunlop, 2019; Fivush, Habermas, & Reese, 2019; Josselson, 2009; McAdams, 2019; McLean, Köber, & Haraldsson, 2019; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2019), few projects have undertaken cross-sectional studies of narrative identity across distinct adult life stages or focused on late life in particular. Highlights of the few studies that have are described in some detail in the sections that follow, lending substance to the suggestion that investigating narrative identity in late life could lead to a richly expanded view of this aspect of personality development.

Authoring to Reading

Based on our knowledge of life span development, we might expect certain aspects of narrative identity to look, feel, or function differently in late life than at other times in life. This section reviews relevant theory and empirical evidence for such differences across the life span, with a focus on the suggestion that adults' narrative efforts may transition in late life from an emphasis on actively *authoring* their life story to an emphasis on *reading* this story (McAdams, 1990, 2015). The *author* is engaged in an active process of weaving a life story that functions to provide an explanation for how and why life has been lived thus far. The *reader*¹ might be understood as an embellishment on the author—while the reader doesn't cease to weave their

¹ "Reader" out to be understood as a working label for this construct. Further examination of this theorized shift in narrative emphasis may yield a more fitting label, reflecting what is yet to be learned about the functions of narrative evaluation, re-storying, and so on.

story, the emphasis is now on evaluation and integration of that story. Importantly, the label *reader* is not meant to indicate a different kind, but rather increased effort exerted in a different role or activity. While a younger adult primarily focused on authoring likely spends some time evaluating the story so far, a reader might be understood as spending relatively more time evaluating and working to accept the life story and relatively less actively authoring it.

Developmental Shifts

For Erikson (1963), the chief psychosocial challenge of old age is that of *ego integrity* (arising from acceptance of how life has been lived) versus despair (arising from resistance or regret of the life story). In young and middle adulthood, life goals heavily emphasize personal “gains”—building broad social networks, settling with romantic partners, raising children, and acquiring resources. As people age, the gain-loss balance of life tends to weigh more heavily in the “loss” category—these may include losses of loved ones, work, physical ability, autonomy, social opportunities, and so on (M. M. Baltes, 1995). Associated with these losses are shifts in motivation, from striving for knowledge acquisition and achievement to maintaining psychological well-being and connecting with more narrow groups of emotional intimates (Carstensen, 2006). These observations are addressed in several models of “successful aging” that suggest aging successfully includes compensating for losses and adapting to changes (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1996), reintegrating conflicts and resolving fears to make new meaning (Butler, 1974), and developing gerotranscendent perspectives on life which deemphasize materialism and rationalism in favor of self-transcendence and connectedness with something greater than oneself (Flood, 2002).

That the goals and ways of being in late life often differ from those in earlier adulthood raises the possibility that the stories older adults tell to make sense of their lives may require a

different sort of narrative work as well. To maintain psychological well-being, aging adults benefit from adaptive psychological changes such as the sort pointed to by Randall (2012), who suggests aging provides individuals the opportunity “for deepening and expanding [their] stories, for gathering them together and preparing to transcend them” (p. 177). The notion of *reader* is that in late life, an adult presumably accepts, rejects, or even edits aspects of their life story for the sake of ego integrity. Indeed, research shows a legible integration of the life story is associated with increased psychological well-being (James & Zarrett, 2005; Lamers, Westerhof, Korte, & Bohlmeijer, 2011). Further, resolving past regrets and accepting life as it has been lived has been found to positively correlate with ego integrity (Kleijn et al., 2016; Torges, Stewart, & Duncan, 2009), while failure to integrate one’s life as acceptable and meaningful has been correlated with depression and distress (Chimich & Nekolaichuk, 2004; Kleijn et al., 2016).

Adults at the end of life tend to experience an increased interiority (Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005; Neugarten, 1979) and experience insights which transcend discrete experiences in favor of a more holistic picture of their life. This shift in motivation is plausibly explained during late life by a desire to integrate events into a coherent narrative (Erikson, 1963). However, whether adults truly shift from authoring to reading has yet to be studied empirically. One route for observing increased reading in life story narratives might be an associated increase in narrative themes indicative of life story integration and resolution, such as thematic coherence and emotional closure or positive resolution.

Salient Narrative Themes in Older Adults’ Narratives

The notion that a more unified, or coherent, life story—one in which individual episodes relate in some way to an overarching narrative theme—becomes even more important for adults near end of life is an influential one (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Cohler, 1993; Erikson, 1963;

Hooker & McAdams, 2003). There is some evidence that this is so: The salience of thematic coherence for older adults was supported in one study that found older adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 72.43$) were more likely than young adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.41$) to express an overall theme connecting their self-reported memories (McLean, 2008); more research is needed. Further, the coherence of a narrative has been associated with psychological well-being for emerging adults (Waters & Fivush, 2015) and midlife adults (Baerger & McAdams, 1999); research is needed to replicate this relationship in older adulthood. An even stronger relationship between narrative coherence and well-being in older adulthood would lend empirical support to the theory that a unified life story is increasingly important as we age.

Narrative ego integrity might be demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, research by Burns and Leonard (2005) supports the idea that increased emotional closure and softening of past difficulties might be found in the life stories of older adults. The researchers categorized women's life stories by titles and descriptions given for a "life chapters" prompt. They found the greatest differences between the oldest (60–65) and youngest (40–45) groups: 70% of older women's stories were categorized by "breaking out" or "stress relief" from an unsatisfactory life, whereas none of the early midlife women had stress relief stories, and several described stories of "ongoing stress," entirely absent from the older group.

Older adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 71.9$) have also been found to be more inclined than younger adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.0$) to use their life story narratives to offer guidance or advice from their own experiences to others (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). A study by Cierpka (2012) identified "generative transfer" as a major theme of elders' narrative interviews about family and the life story. This included passing wisdom to the interviewer directly and describing the passage of family traits and values between past and future generations. The willingness to offer advice

suggests some confidence in lessons learned, which is in turn presumably associated with at least minimal acceptance of life experiences.

Finally, Singer, Rexhaj, and Baddeley (2007) found older adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 64.63$) rated their self-defining memories as more vivid and important than younger adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.93$) did. Older adults' memories were also less specific, more positive, less negative, and contained more meaning-making statements. Even in recounting traumatic memories, the majority of older adults indicated acceptance and growth emerging from pain. Similarly, Jensen, Thomsen, O'Connor, and Mehlsen (2020) found that older adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 67.04$) constructed life stories that were more positive and less negative than middle-aged ($M_{\text{age}} = 47.56$) and young adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.71$), consistent with theories of aging that posit a well-documented "positivity bias" in older adulthood serves to maintain stable and high psychological well-being (Reed, Chan, & Mikels, 2014; Schlagman, Schulz, & Kvavilashvili, 2006). Such a bias in life story recall may also serve to contribute to the narrator finding their life story to be satisfying.

A handful of studies examining aspects of narrative identity through the comparison of older adults and younger adults offer some support for the suggested transition from author to reader, particularly if "reading" is hypothesized to be characterized by increased thematic coherence and emotional closure. More research is needed to determine whether these themes or others are particularly prominent in older adulthood, and to identify whether established findings in the narrative identity literature replicate or diverge in late life. For example, narrative coding schemes developed for use with midlife adults, including those which measure emotional resolution (Pals, 2006), ego integrity (Torges, Stewart, & Duncan, 2008), and self-transcendence (Reischer, Roth, Villarreal, & McAdams, 2020), could be applied to research with older adults. The outcome of this research might suggest that the metaphor of a narrative reader, smoothing

over and integrating their life story in older adulthood, is quite apt; alternatively, it might undermine or refine this concept in other ways that help to illuminate the interaction between aging and narrative identity.

There is much opportunity to expand and deepen the relatively well-established study of life story narrative themes through research with older adults. At the same time, an investigation of older adults' narrative identity using newer narrative identity tools, such as the master narrative framework, offers the opportunity to shape emerging concepts as they are increasingly subjected to empirical scrutiny.

Master Narratives in a Life Span Context

In the past five years, narrative identity research has increasingly included questions about the interplay between master narratives and individual narrative identity (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). This section provides a case example of a classic master narrative in the United States—the redemptive self (McAdams, 2006)—as a departure point for considering that different master narratives may be identified in late life, as cultural scripts and psychosocial foci change over the life span. One specific possibility for a late life master narrative is suggested: a master narrative of successful aging.

According to McLean and Syed's (2015) model, master narratives share the qualities of being ubiquitous (widespread and well-known), useful (for providing norms), invisible (integrated into society and individuals in an unconscious way), rigid (functionally oppressive and resistant to change) and compulsory (deviations are seen as "bad"). Similarly, Rappaport (2000) described *dominant cultural narratives* as well-known, institutionally-propagated stories often coded as stereotypes or embodied in presentations of living found in media, the built environment, and other cultural milieus individuals travel within unaware. Master narratives

provide prescriptive frameworks for “good” lives and arguably constrain possibilities for meaning making by privileging particular stories as desirable and others as undesirable.

Perceptions of “good” lives and normative events and behaviors change over time, both in terms of cultural standards changing over time and the normative timing of events differing over the course of an individual life. There is substantial evidence individuals demonstrate knowledge of and are influenced by the culturally prescribed timing of normative events (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965), and that life story scenes selected for retelling are influenced by these norms (Thomsen & Berntsen, 2008). Hutteman, Hennecke, Orth, Reitz, and Specht (2014) provide a useful conceptualization of normative developmental tasks across adulthood. For example, under the task of cultivating intimate relationships, normative tasks of young adulthood include finding a long-term partner and learning to cohabitate; in middle adulthood, “adjusting to one’s spouse as a person” and maintaining relationship quality; and in old adulthood, adjusting to a spouse’s decreasing health or death. A non-normative task that may arise at any of these points would be divorce and establishing relationships with new mates, though these events are becoming increasingly normative. The authors suggest that future research should consider the processes and experiences of striving to meet developmental tasks in order to better understand individual differences in personality development.

As in the example of divorce and remarrying, a historically situated view of normative scripts in late life highlights that as cultural norms change, what constitutes age-graded normative events may change accordingly. For example, in the West, “coming out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender has become relatively safer, which very likely affects when this developmental milestone manifests for different cohorts (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2019;

Knauer, 2013). It may follow that the meaning-making of an event like coming out may have different implications for individuals across the life span and across cohorts.

What makes a good life at any life stage is firmly rooted in the culture. This context is crucial for considering the two master narratives described below. The first, the established concept of the “redemptive self,” is strongly tied to the foundational folkloric stories of the American Dream and rags-to-riches redemption in the United States. The second, a novel suggestion for a master narrative of “successful aging,” highlights a particularly Western definition of what constitutes acceptable and good old age.

The Case of *The Redemptive Self*

Among the many narrative themes explored by researchers, redemption—bad things happen, yet life ultimately turns out well for the narrator—and its correlates have been particularly well-explored. Redemption stories have been thoroughly studied as key master narratives in the United States (McAdams, 2006; McLean & Syed, 2015).

Redemption as a narrative theme was first identified by examining stories of midlife individuals who score very highly on measures of *generativity*, concern for and commitment to the next generation (Erikson, 1963; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). Continued research on highly generative midlife adults revealed a specific pattern of redemptive themes which constitute *the redemptive self*. These themes include (a) experiencing an early advantage in life, (b) having great sensitivity to the suffering of others, (c) having a sense of moral steadfastness, (d) employing redemptive sequences, and (e) having a prosocial outlook (McAdams, 2006; McAdams & Guo, 2015). Adults who use redemptive sequences to narrate their lives tend to score high on psychological well-being and low on depression (McAdams & Guo, 2015). Bauer, McAdams, and Pals (2008) suggest adults who score high on eudaimonic

well-being tend to use redemptive sequences to describe difficult life experiences, identifying transformative personal meaning emerging out of painful events. Redemptive stories have been found to be relevant not just to midlife adults in the United States, but to adults across the life span (e.g., Bauer, Graham, Lauber, & Lynch, 2019; McLean et al., 2018), exemplifying the way that findings emerging from a focus on one age group have been later found to be of relevance to other age groups.

“The redemptive self” emerged out of research on highly generative midlife adults, and indeed, Erikson (1963) posited the conflict of generativity versus stagnation was *the* chief psychosocial challenge of midlife. Because to date narrative identity researchers have primarily investigated the lives of young and midlife adults, they have observed constructs fitting these age groups best, namely, that of the author striving to establish identity, intimacy, and generativity. Had the field perhaps focused on stages of life in which adults strive for ego integrity (Erikson, 1963) and gerotranscendence (Erikson, 1997; Tornstam, 1997), other powerful narrative prototypes may have been identified. One such potential master narrative follows.

A Master Narrative of Successful Aging?

Baldwin and Estey (2015) suggest a possible master narrative of “aging as undesirable.” I argue aging may be viewed as undesirable because common depictions of old age are tied to dysfunction and loss, and so framed as deviations from a master narrative of “successful aging.” Just as it might be observed that cultural acceptance of the master narrative of redemption condemns non-redemptive narratives, a master narrative of successful aging would indicate there are also unsuccessful ways to age—that some older lives are more acceptable than others.

There is a great deal of support for the existence of a master narrative of a particular type of “successful aging” in the broader literature. For example, some researchers categorize older

adults as either part of the so-called “Third Age”—relatively fit, healthy, and economically productive, or “Fourth Age”—more dependent and frail (Pickard, 2018; Shmotkin, Shrira, Eyal, Blumstein, & Shorek, 2013). Yet many gerontologists and healthcare researchers (e.g., Hooyman, Kawamoto, & Kiyak, 2016; Rudman & Molke, 2009; van Dyk, 2016) criticize separating “desirable” old people from “other” old people who remind us of our feared mortality. Similarly, popular Western standards of successful aging (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Butler, 1974; Rowe & Kahn, 1998) have been interrogated and found to be unachievable for most people (Wahl, 2020), inappropriate in some cultures (e.g., Fry et al., 2007), and oddly disconnected from literatures on disability and dying (Martin et al., 2015).

Master narratives exert social power by constraining possibilities for what constitutes “good” individual lives (Syed, 2016). Yet while the predominant narrative of successful aging in adult development and gerontology has defined “good” as maximal physical functioning and activity, the emerging literature on successful aging from a narrative lens, outlined below, suggests “good” might instead be characterized by inner strength and resilience. Here I posit a unique potential contribution of the narrative identity approach to understanding potential master narratives of successful aging. Narrative identity research presents a possibility for a new methodological entrée into the *lived experience* of successful aging, one that is neither purely theoretical nor measurable only via medical exam. Lind, Bluck, and McAdams (2020), for example, point to how a narrative lens highlights older adults’ potential for age-related resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast to an exclusive focus on older adults’ physical vulnerabilities. Research on the master narrative of successful aging opens up possibilities for identifying alternative narratives that are truer to life for diverse, actual (rather than aspirational) experiences of aging.

Narratives of aging. The extant narrative identity research having to do with late life has largely focused on identifying correlates of well-being in old age. For example, Randall, Baldwin, McKenzie-Mohr, McKim, and Furlong (2015) analyzed open-ended interviews with Canadians 65–89 years old who scored highest and lowest on a measure of resilience. The researchers found that the highest scorers tended to employ themes of redemption, agency, a sense of openness versus foreclosure, and a sense of life being basically good despite significant challenges. All high scorers identified with a “larger reality or cause” (e.g., God), which Randall and colleagues (2015) described as lending a sense of existential security to their lives. Some low scorers described contamination sequences and engaged in obsessive rather than integrative reminiscence, with most low scorers’ narrative tone characterized as having a “sad shadow hanging over their lives” (p. 158). Using a similar approach, Nygren, Norberg, and Lundman (2007) sought to investigate the meaning of “inner strength when very old,” interviewing 85 and 90-year-olds who scored exceptionally high on purpose in life, resilience, self-transcendence, and sense of coherence. A structural analysis of the interviews found strong dialectical narrative themes: feeling competent yet faithful in others, optimistic while acknowledging hardships, balancing activity and passivity, experiencing personal stability and change, and connecting to the present while remembering the past and imagining the future.

This is not to suggest that stories of aging are or should be stories of “success,” physical or otherwise. Robinson and Stell (2015) interviewed older adults (61–74 years) who reported experiencing a personal crisis in their sixties. All participants defined the crisis as involving at least two loss events, including bereavement or serious illness. The authors investigated “the struggle for ego integrity in the face of greater mortality awareness” (p. 43) in the context of motivational tendencies to either disengage from social roles, continue with social connections,

or engage with new social opportunities, particularly after a period of loss-related disengagement. They found participants' narratives could be categorized by one of four patterns: re-engagement/integrity; re-engagement/despair; disengagement/integrity; disengagement/despair. Some, but not all, participants had successfully incorporated their crises into engaged, uplifted ways of being. Similarly, Luborsky (1993) interviewed depressed and non-depressed elders, asking them to tell their life stories both as chapters in a book and as a mural with many scenes and images. Non-depressed elders preferred life story chapters, producing five chapters for each mural scene, while depressed elders were more resistant to chapter narration, saying, for example, "it's not been a smooth progression for me" (p. 10), and producing an average of two and a half chapters for each mural scene. These results suggest that there are several paths to living (or authoring) one's late life that may be adaptive or destructive, depending on the way they are employed.

Transcending and becoming. What happens when the master narrative isn't "working" in late life? McLean et al. (2018) observed two "solutions" to alienation arising from narrative marginalization in young and midlife adults: (a) finding a new group which comes with an alternative narrative facilitating new social fittingness, and (b) resolving dissonance by employing the structure of a redemptive master narrative. Yet are certain narrative options cut off in late life? Perhaps it is too late to identify with a "new group" and there is more pressure to resolve dissonance. Or, perhaps late life provides the opportunity to bring in new narrative options, such as transcendent themes which are more integrative and less constrained in nature.

It has been suggested that changes in older adulthood may compel individuals to author more creative, abstract, and transcendent narratives. Drawing on the idea of "life as novel" in order to avoid understanding the later parts of life as "hermetically...and

hermeneutically...sealed” (Randall & Khurshid, 2016, n. p), individuals are seen as re-storying as they go, creating individual meaning-worlds through a combination of memory and imagination (Randall, 2012). For example, Blix, Hamran, and Normann (2015) provide case studies of narratives of “roads not taken” by indigenous Sami elders in Norway, and suggest that the telling of these stories are not simple recountings of regrets, but instead serve to enable identity formation in the here-and-now. Bringing together concerns about late life development and master narratives, Blix et al. (2015) found their participants “negotiated tensions between the norms and standards of traditional...culture and the majority society” in these narrations (p. 175), using stories of “who and what they *could have become*” to help in the telling of “who they are *becoming*” (p. 176).

Ultimately, undertaking explorations of master narratives more common in late life or unique to late life may give rise to an expanded understanding of narrative identity as well as a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of late life.

A Call to Action

Given that narrative identity theory is relevant to adults across the life span, narrative identity research on late life and end of life is imperative to building a more comprehensive model of this storied layer of personality. I have suggested two possible departure points for a research agenda for studying narrative identity in late life: (a) applying typical narrative coding methods to identify narrative themes and constructs of relevance to late life development, and (b) using the master narrative framework to explore a possible master narrative of successful aging. There are a number of important reasons to take up this agenda.

First, we are currently limited in our ability to generalize most extant narrative identity findings beyond (U. S.) young and midlife adults, and we remain unaware of how developmental

shifts in later life may change how individuals narrate their life stories. While the concept of autobiographical authorship (McAdams, 2013) has been increasingly accepted in personality development, this framework has been least examined in older adulthood—a problem akin to ignoring questions of life span stability and change in the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992), now demonstrated to change significantly across the lifespan (e.g., Donnellan & Lucas, 2008). It is possible that older adults and those at end of life may experience narrative identity in ways unique to these seasons of life. At the moment, we are hampered in our ability to speak to this question.

In addition to enhancing psychology scholarship, exploring narrative identity in late life is all the more pressing given the practical needs of a rapidly “greying” world (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2017). Missing research about narrative identity in late life likely serves to make psychologists of all stripes less prepared to effectively meet the challenges of our aging society. Moreover, a lack of late and end of life narrative identity research may help to sustain stereotypes about the lives of older adults and lead to misunderstandings about how older adults understand their own life stories. Even the most casual interrogation of how “success” is defined in the suggested master narrative of “successful aging” lends support to this possibility.

Further, exploring potential late life master narratives could help illuminate understudied aspects of younger and middle adulthood. The successful aging narrative highlights a powerful conflict that is relatively ageless: the gap between the subjective experience of the embodied individual and societal norms related to that individual’s objectified body. For example, conflicts between master narratives about “good bodies” and narrators’ experiences of embodiment may be particularly salient in not only the phenomenology of aging, but also in the lived experiences

of adults of any age whose bodies are socially marginalized through disability, gender presentation, type of work, and so on. Using findings emerging from research on late life to explore such instances of bodily “deviance” may highlight novel research questions about embodied phenomena that are central to our narrative identities, but not yet central to narrative identity theory.

Finally, while late life reading and late life master narratives have been separated in this review, there are likely important interplays between them. As one example, older adults are hypothesized to spend more time reading because of the developmental imperative to evaluate and integrate the life story in service of acceptance. However, there may be a *social* imperative to “read” earlier in life for individuals who find their life stories to be in serious conflict with the master narrative. A number of predictions may follow: perhaps marginalized adults of any age spend relatively more time reading than their peers; perhaps marginalized older adults go on to be engaged in other, more complex, narrative tasks built upon earlier reading; perhaps the reading role is more-or-less salient or difficult for marginalized older adults; and so on.

Due to the paucity of late life narrative identity research, the nature of individual and developmental differences in narrative identity, the functions of master narratives in older adulthood, and the interplays between these appear to be almost completely open empirical questions. A full picture of human psychology, so intimately bound up with storytelling, requires analysis of all chapters of that story, from birth to death. Researchers looking to make or extend their mark should consider attending to these particularly fertile last chapters of life.

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