Moving Beyond Redemptive Magnitude: Examining Redemptive Forms and Themes in Young Adults'

Narratives of Difficult Life Experiences

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Abstract

Narrative redemption involves reframing negative autobiographical experiences such that they convey positive meaning. Redemption is intertwined with processes of narrative identity development and psychological well-being. In line with recent theoretical advances in the conceptualization and measurement of redemption (Perlin & Fivush, 2021), we examined how narrative identity themes (agency, communion, thematic coherence, and narrated growth) and psychological well-being related to two redemptive *forms*: 1) a *return* to baseline, or 2) *emergence* to a new state. Further, we examined whether individuals framed challenges and event resolutions with situational or identity *themes*. We tested this dual conceptualization of redemption (i.e., redemptive forms and themes) using narratives about difficult life experiences provided by a college sample ($N = 221$). Redemptive forms and themes were associated, such that identity resolutions were most prevalent for emergent redemption. Additionally, emergent redemption was associated with the highest expressions of agency, growth, and coherence. Regarding the relation between redemption and psychological well-being, emergent redemption was associated with the greatest endorsements of self-reported personal growth. We argue that more nuanced considerations of redemption could benefit considerations of narrative identity development and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Redemption; Narrative Identity; Agency; Growth; Thematic Coherence; Well-Being

Moving Beyond Redemptive Magnitude: Examining Redemptive Forms and Themes in Young Adults' Narratives of Difficult Life Experiences

People make sense of difficult life experiences by integrating them into a unified life story, that is, one's *narrative identity* (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Some individuals recollect difficult events as having a silver lining; they spin personal stories such that affectively negative beginnings turn into affectively positive endings. In the narrative identity literature, this storytelling theme is known as *redemption* (McAdams et al., 2001). Redemptive reasoning is tied to healthy identity development and psychological well-being (PWB) in adulthood (for a review, see Dunlop, 2021a). For this reason, redemption is prominent in narrative identity research (McLean et al., 2020b). Nevertheless, to date redemption has been operationalized almost exclusively in terms of *magnitude* (i.e., *the extent to which* a narrative is redemptive; e.g., Cox et al., 2019) without consideration of typologies of redemption (i.e., *how* a narrative is redemptive).

In response, Perlin & Fivush (2021) advanced a novel model of redemption (hereinafter, the "PF model"; Dunlop, 2021b) that specifies redemptive *forms* and redemptive *themes*. Redemptive forms involve either stability or change; in the PF taxonomy, redemptive narratives are classified as either: 1) *return*, involving restoration of homeostasis; or 2) *emergent*, involving improvement. Redemptive themes consist of framing challenges and/or resolutions as concerning either: 1) personal *identity*; or 2) surrounding *situations*. All narratives of difficult life experiences can, therefore, be classified as emphasizing either *identity* or the *situation* in both the event *challenge* and event *resolution*, and narrators may redeem such events in the form of *return* or *emergent* redemption (or with no redemption at all).

This study provides an initial empirical examination of the PF model in a sample of young adults. The PF model's chief advantage is that it clarifies the unique psychosocial

functions of redemption in different lifespan periods. In other words, how redemption manifests, and its utility to the narrator, are likely to depend on that individual's place in the life course (e.g., young, middle, or older adulthood). For example, as compared to middle and older adulthood, growth, self-determination, and the crystallization of one's values are the principal psychosocial tasks for young adults in Western contexts (e.g., Erikson, 1963).

The first aim of the study was to establish how redemptive *forms* are associated with *themes* of challenge and resolution in young adults' narratives. The second aim was to assess associations among redemptive forms, redemptive themes, and other narrative identity themes (i.e., agency, communion, narrated growth, and thematic coherence). The third aim was to extend and nuance the positive relations between redemption and PWB by exploring how this novel conceptualization of redemptive forms and themes (and their interaction) dovetails with PWB.

Aim 1: Configurations of Redemptive Forms and Redemptive Themes

The PF model contends that different configurations of redemptive forms (i.e., no redemption, return, emergent) and redemptive themes (i.e., identity or situation in the challenge and resolution, respectively) produce qualitatively distinct ways of expressing redemption. Drawing such distinctions between redemptive forms and themes adds nuance to the prevailing operationalization of redemption in the narrative identity literature, which emphasizes redemptive magnitude (e.g., Cox et al., 2019; McAdams et al., 2001).

The PF model further suggests that redemptive forms and redemptive themes are likely to be paired in ways that conform to cultural norms of storytelling (Perlin & Fivush, 2021). Such socio-culturally and developmentally constrained patterns of narration are termed *master* (i.e., dominant) *narratives* (Hammack, 2008). Thus, given a narrator's current place in the life course, certain redemptive forms and themes may be common. Further, given the emphasis on personal

growth, individuation, and identity exploration and commitment during young adulthood in Western contexts (Arnett, 2000; Ebner et al., 2006; Erikson, 1963; Marcia, 1966; McLean et al., 2010), an emergent redemptive form with identity themes may be culturally encouraged.

Aim 2: Redemption and Other Narrative Identity Variables

Redemption is one among many variables used to analyze narrative identity (Adler et al., 2016). Recently, narrative researchers have proposed an integrative taxonomy for classifying content-analyzed variables (McLean et al., 2020b). Dubbed “the Big Three”, this taxonomy identified three major “factors” of narrative identity: 1) *motivation/affect* (e.g., agency, communion); 2) *structure* (e.g., factual elaboration, contextual coherence); and 3) *autobiographical reasoning* (e.g., narrated growth; thematic coherence). Based on McLean et al.’s (2020b) factor analysis, redemption loads primarily on the motivation/affect factor and, secondarily, on the autobiographical reasoning factor. Given that redemption is associated with both motivational and autobiographical reasoning processes, we assess elements of narrative identity that fall into those two factors. Regarding the motivational factor, we examine redemption’s relation with agency and communion. Regarding the autobiographical reasoning factor, we examine redemption’s relation with narrated growth and thematic coherence.

Agency and Communion

Agency refers to a motivation for self-determination, autonomy, and self-mastery, whereas communion refers to a motivation for affiliation, love, and intimacy. Agency and communion have been construed as the two broadest motivational orientations of life stories (McAdams et al., 1996) and are paradigmatic of the motivational/affective factor.

There has been mixed evidence for how redemption relates to both agency and communion. Generally, empirical research suggests that redemption is significantly positively

associated with agency but is inconsistently linked with communion, or at least less so (Adler et al., 2015, Study 1; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Philippe et al., 2011). To a degree, existing findings may be contingent on the narrative episodes assessed. In the majority of cited studies (Adler et al., 2015; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002), scores on narrative variables were aggregated across multiple episodes that differed in valence and content (e.g., high points, low points, turning points). The degree to which redemption relates to agency and communion has not been reported for a single episode of a difficult life experience. Further, research regarding these associations in young adults' narratives is scant (cf. Philippe et al., 2011). Young adulthood may be a crucial period of the lifespan in which both agency and communion come to the psychological fore (McLean et al., 2010). Individuals are exploring and crystallizing their sense of self while simultaneously attempting to cultivate intimate relationships with others (see Erikson, 1963). In turn, these motivational shifts may interact with redemption, as young adults enlist redemption to deal constructively with developmentally appropriate life tasks.

Narrated Growth

Narrated growth refers to reflections on how experiences lead to positive self-transformation (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2015). While redemption and growth are related, research has distinguished them conceptually (Adler et al., 2016) and empirically (McLean et al., 2020b). McLean et al. (2020b) found in a large-scale factor analysis of narrative variables that narrated growth belongs first to the autobiographical reasoning factor and, secondarily, to the motivational and affective factor. Note that this is the reverse pattern from redemption reported above. Thus, redemption and growth are similar but ultimately non-reducible to one another.

By separating return from emergent, the PF model permits a precise investigation of how redemption relates to narrated growth. This may prove particularly fruitful in a young adult

sample. As established above, young adults are likely to emphasize growth themes (Ebner et al., 2006), and the PF model contends that redemption is likely to be recruited for growth in young adulthood (see also McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). Thus, narrated growth may be quite strongly associated with emergent redemption in young adulthood. A recent study provides the most direct evidence for the association between narrated growth and redemptive forms. In a sample of Swedish young adults, Eriksson et al. (2020) investigated four affective sequences (redemptive, neutral/vague, negative, and combination positive and negative) in narratives of difficult life events. In this study, redemptive sequences were defined as “narratives with a positive state of emotions to frame the difficult experience, such as ending with positive growth or increased understanding of the event”, p. 163). This definition conceptually approximates what we term “emergent”. Further, neutral/vague sequencing is comparable to, though not coterminous with, our definition of “return”. Eriksson et al. (2020) found that redemptive sequences (in our scheme, similar to emergent) evinced greater scores on a growth coding scheme than neutral/vague sequences (in our scheme, similar to return).

Thematic Coherence

Thematic coherence refers to an individual’s connection of multiple events reported within a narrative, as well as the individual’s connection of those events with the individual’s broader life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Reese et al., 2011). Redemption has been theoretically identified as one narrative variable that confers the life story with continuity and coherence, particularly for midlife adults (McAdams, 2006). However, little work has examined the empirical associations between redemption and thematic coherence. Tangentially, personal development has shown positive associations with thematic coherence in a cross-cultural sample, aged 12–21 years (Reese et al., 2017). Based on this alone, one may expect emergent narratives

to be associated with the greatest thematic coherence.

Aim 3: Redemption and Psychological Well-Being (PWB)

Redemption has demonstrated robust positive ties to PWB and related constructs (life satisfaction) among young adults (Cox et al., 2019; Eriksson et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2015; McAdams et al., 2001; Philippe et al., 2011). However, such trends are not without qualification, depending on factors such as age (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008), the PWB dimension in question (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008), and gender (McLean & Breen, 2009).

While no research has examined the relation between PWB and the exact redemptive forms we articulate here, growth expressed in low point narratives appears to predict PWB beyond redemption (Bauer et al., 2019).¹ Additionally, Eriksson et al. (2020) examined multiple affective sequences as they related to satisfaction with life (SWL). In this study, redemptive sequences (in our scheme, similar to emergent) evinced greater SWL than purely negative sequencing, yet it did *not* show greater SWL than neutral/vague (in our scheme, similar to return) or combination sequencing. Moreover, those exhibiting neutral/vague sequencing demonstrated lower psychological distress than those exhibiting negative sequencing (in our scheme, similar to non-redemptive). These results may suggest that emergent and return redemption may both show greater PWB than non-redemptive narratives, but they may not differ from one another.

The Current Study

We analyzed young adults' narratives of difficult life experiences to examine: 1) how redemptive forms and themes are canonically configured in young adulthood; 2) whether redemptive forms relate to other factors of narrative identity, namely, the motivational/affective and the autobiographical reasoning factors; and 3) how redemptive forms, and their interaction

¹Bauer et al. (2019), however, define growth themes as distinctly value-laden over against purely affective self-development. In our scheme for emergent redemption, we do not draw such a distinction.

with redemptive themes, predict PWB and its subscales. We note that the hypotheses below were not pre-registered and are, therefore, formally exploratory.

First, we tested whether redemptive forms (non-redemptive, return, emergent) were associated with redemptive themes (identity, situation) in challenges and resolutions. Young adults' redemption should theoretically present more often as concerns about identity and improvement than as concerns about the situation or homeostasis. We hypothesized that: (H1a) identity challenges and (H1b) identity resolutions would be most prevalent for young adults using emergent redemption relative to non-redemptive individuals or those using return.

Second, we tested whether redemptive forms are associated with other narrative identity themes. Forms of redemption (relative to non-redemptive narration) should be positively associated with other dimensions of narrative identity that reflect personal identity development, such as motivations for agentic actions as well as autobiographical reasoning (i.e., drawing links between experiences and the self; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Further, emergent redemption should be associated with higher levels of life story integration and narrative framing around the self, reflecting themes of autobiographical reasoning and agentic motivation (Eriksson et al., 2020; Reese et al., 2017). Therefore, we hypothesized that: (H2a) non-redemptive individuals would have the lowest scores on other narrative identity themes; (H2b) return redemption would be associated moderate scores on narrative identity themes; and (H2c) emergent redemption would be associated with the highest scores on narrative identity themes.

Third, we tested whether redemptive forms are associated with differences in endorsements of PWB. Given the PF model's theorizing regarding redemption's changes across the lifespan, it is reasonable to suspect that only those features of redemption that accord with the psychosocial functions typical of young adulthood (i.e., identity and improvement) should

promote PWB. Therefore, we hypothesized that: (H3a) non-redemption would coincide with the lowest scores on PWB; (H3b) return redemption would coincide with moderate scores on PWB; and (H3c) emergent redemption would coincide with the highest scores on PWB. Lastly, we expected PWB to differ by redemptive form (return, emergent) and resolution theme (identity, situation). We hypothesized that: (H3d) emergent redemption would coincide with the highest scores in intrapersonal PWB endorsements (i.e., autonomy, sense of purpose, personal growth) when individuals incorporated identity resolutions, and that (H3e) emergent redemption would coincide with the highest scores in interpersonal and environmental PWB endorsements (i.e., environmental mastery) when individuals incorporated situation resolutions. We did not have hypotheses regarding the roles of event challenges (identity, situation) for this research question.

Method

Participants

As part of a larger project assessing narrative identity and positive development in emerging adulthood, 221 full-time undergraduate students were recruited from a private southeastern U.S. university to narrate multiple autobiographical episodes in their lives (e.g., conflicts with others, difficult life experiences) and self-report aspects of well-being and personality traits. In the current study, only difficult life experience narratives and PWB were analyzed. Eight participants were excluded from data analysis because they provided insufficient or off-topic narratives when completing the study procedures. Of the remaining 213 participants, ages ranged from 18–24 years ($M = 19.12$, $SD = 1.13$; 54.9% female). Participants identified with the following ethnicities/races: White (43.7%), Black (9.4%), Southeast Asian or Pacific Islander (26.8%), Latina/o (6.1%), Indo-Asian (5.6%), Middle Eastern or North African (2.3%), Multiracial (5.6%), Unidentified (0.5%). Participants were recruited via a SONA recruitment

system as part of enrollment in an Introductory Psychology course.

Procedures

All procedures were approved by the overseeing Institutional Review Board. Procedures were conducted through an online survey, completed by participants at their own computers and at their convenience. After study procedures were explained and written informed consent was obtained, participants completed multiple open-ended narrative prompts, including one asking about a difficult life experience, and a battery of self-report questionnaires. All narratives and self-report questionnaires were completed in a single session over the span of approximately one hour. Participants received course credit for participation. All data and materials are publicly available at https://osf.io/2necv/?view_only=8bf18696a0504b8dbd6f225adb744db4.

Measures

Psychological Well-Being (PWB)

Participants completed the 54-item version of the Ryff Well-Being Scale with six subscales (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Subscales included *autonomy* ($\alpha = .80$); *environmental mastery* ($\alpha = .85$); *personal growth* ($\alpha = .82$); *positive relationships* ($\alpha = .84$); *sense of purpose* ($\alpha = .81$); and *self-acceptance* ($\alpha = .88$). Each subscale was completed on a six-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 6 = *Strongly agree*).

Narrative Coding

Redemptive forms. Narratives were coded as either non-redemptive or as one of two redemptive forms: return or emergent. *Non-redemptive narratives* express an ongoing inability to deal with a difficult life event. Narrators may convey confusion about the event or an emotional inability to act, or they may tell the story in a matter-of-fact manner with no effort at post-event reflection. As well, vague hopefulness, mixed resolutions (i.e., both positive and negative), and

ambiguous attempts at redemption warrant a non-redemptive code. For example, saying, “this experience fundamentally changed me”, is too ambiguous to merit redemption, leaving unclear how the person was changed. *Return narratives* suggest recovery to baseline or restoration of homeostasis. While emotionally moving on from a situation may warrant a return code, resigning oneself to a worse situation does not. An example appears below:

In my first semester of college, I struggled with feelings of inadequacy and struggled to keep my grades up. In my second semester of college, I spiraled so hard that I failed all of my classes and was academically suspended. [...] After that semester, I spent some time reflecting on my life and what I wanted to do with it. Now, I'm in the process of learning how to reach out to others and how to manage my time efficiently.

- Narrative from a 19-year-old woman, situation challenge and identity resolution

Finally, *emergent narratives* portray negative scenes as giving way to novel positive developments. Emergent narrators take something new from the challenge that is specific, meaningful, and generalizes beyond the event. An example appears below:

One of the most confusing times in my life was when I was in 9th grade. I was most confused with my place in this world and the person I wanted to become. [...] I started out as a nice guy, but it turned out not being everything I wanted it to be. I enjoyed the liking from everyone, but I found that it made me feel increasingly more lonely [*sic*]. I decided to switch to more confidence my sophomore year and ever since I have felt better, gotten closer with people, had more success with relationship and surprisingly done better in school. A sense of confidence and self-importance really helped me realize the kind of person I wanted to become.

- Narrative from a 19-year-old man, identity challenge and identity resolution

All narratives were independently coded by two researchers and disputes were resolved through consensus discussions ($k = .75$ with 83.6% agreement).

Redemptive themes. Redemption involves either situation or identity themes in both the narrative's challenge and resolution. Therefore, narratives were coded for both a *challenge theme* (identity, situation) and a *resolution theme* (no resolution, identity, or situation). As narratives of difficult life experiences were analyzed, all narratives contained a challenge.

Identity challenges and resolutions discuss how the experience led to reflection on

enduring dimensions of self-concept (e.g., one's values, beliefs, goals, and perspectives). Conversely, situation challenges and resolutions consider the external circumstances of the experience. Transient emotional states were not coded as identity-oriented. Narratives were independently coded by the same two researchers who coded redemptive forms, and disputes were resolved through consensus discussions (*challenge theme*: $\kappa = .68$ with 82.6% agreement; *resolution theme*: $\kappa = .65$ with 75.6% agreement).

Agency. A four-point (0–3) coding scheme for agency was adapted from Grysman et al. (2016). Narratives with lower values focused on depictions of helplessness or accommodating others. Narratives with higher values displayed the narrator's assertiveness and control, both in the moment and following the challenging event. A separate coding team from that working on redemptive form and redemptive theme coding developed consensus by coding ~25% of the narratives together before coding the remaining narratives independently ($\alpha = .77$).

Communion. A four-point (0–3) coding scheme for communion was adapted from Grysman et al. (2016). Narratives with lower values either did not mention other individuals or only focused on mundane interactions with others. Narratives with higher values focused on deeper aspects of relationships (e.g., enduring feelings for others, becoming closer to others) and emphasized ways relationships were valued by the narrator, either through implied content or through explicitly mentioning relationships. The authors developed consensus by coding ~25% of the narratives together before coding the remaining narratives independently ($\alpha = .92$).

Narrated growth. A five-point coding scheme (1–5) for narrated growth was adapted from Mansfield et al. (2015). Narratives with lower scores were *growth-limiting*, emphasizing negative details and aspects about oneself/the world given the challenge. Narratives with higher scores were *growth-promoting*, emphasizing positive details and aspects about oneself/the world

despite the challenge. A separate coding team developed consensus by coding ~25% of the narratives together before one member coded the remaining narratives independently ($\alpha = .89$).

Thematic coherence. A four-point coding scheme (0–3) for thematic coherence was adapted from Reese et al. (2011). Narratives with lower values involved off-topic divergences or a minimally identifiable topic. Narratives with higher values involved clear topics with multiple attempts at causal linkages (i.e., X happened *because of* Y) and connections to one's broader life story. A separate coding team developed consensus by coding ~25% of the narratives together before one member coded the remaining narratives independently ($\alpha = .73$).

Results

Analytical Plan

Descriptive statistics of the study variables are presented in Table 1. Bivariate correlations among continuous study variables are presented in Table 2. Given previous findings that gender can be related to expressions of narrative identity (e.g., Grysman et al., 2016), preliminary analyses included chi-square analyses and independent samples *t*-tests examining whether gender was associated with narrative and self-report measures.

Chi-square analyses were used to address whether redemptive forms were associated with challenge themes and resolution themes. One-way ANCOVAs with two *a priori* contrasts (non-redemptive vs. return and emergent redemption; return vs. emergent redemption) tested whether redemptive forms were associated with other narrative identity themes (e.g., agency). Gender was controlled as a model covariate. One-way ANCOVAs with *a priori* contrasts were used to address whether redemptive forms were associated with endorsements of PWB. Lastly, 2 x 2 ANOVAs tested whether endorsements of PWB differed given both the resolution theme presented (situation vs. identity) and the redemptive form expressed (return vs. emergent).

Instances of non-redemptive narration were not considered in this last analysis.

Preliminary Analyses

Chi-square tests addressed whether gender was associated with challenge theme (identity, situation), resolution theme (no resolution, identity, situation), and/or redemptive form (non-redemptive, return, emergent). Chi-square statistics were not significant for challenge theme ($\chi^2(1) = .77, p = .381$), resolution theme ($\chi^2(2) = 3.58, p = .167$), or for redemptive form ($\chi^2(2) = 2.83, p = .243$). Independent samples *t*-tests addressed whether gender was associated with other displays of narrative identity (e.g., thematic coherence) and/or well-being (e.g., autonomy). *T*-tests were significant for narrative identity displays of thematic coherence ($t(209) = -4.43, d = -.61, p < .001$) and communion ($t(209) = -3.38, d = -.47, p < .001$), as well as endorsements of positive relations with others ($t(209) = -2.78, d = -.38, p = .006$). In each case, women had higher scores than men. Gender was thus retained as a covariate for hypothesis tests.

Aim 1: Are Redemptive Forms Associated with Redemptive Themes?

We tested whether the challenge theme and/or the resolution theme were associated with redemptive forms. First, chi-square analysis compared challenge themes (situation, identity) with redemptive forms (non-redemptive, return, emergent). This test was significant ($\chi^2(2) = 8.56, p = .014$). Identity challenges were less common among non-redemptive narratives relative to return or emergent redemption narratives. Second, chi-square analysis compared resolution themes (no resolution, situation, identity) with redemptive forms. This test was significant ($\chi^2(4) = 145.92, p < .001$). Identity resolutions were more prevalent with emergent redemption. Crosstabs are presented in the Supplemental Materials.

Aim 2: Are Redemptive Forms Associated with Other Narrative Identity Variables?

One-way ANCOVAs were used to test whether redemptive forms coincided with other

displays of narrative identity, namely, motivation (agency, communion) and autobiographical reasoning (narrated growth, thematic coherence) (McLean et al., 2020b). Two *a priori* contrasts were also tested: whether there were differences in scores between non-redemptive [-2] and redemptive individuals (return [1], emergent [1]), and whether there were differences in scores between return [-1] and emergent [1] redemption. Gender was included as a covariate.² In addition to these *a priori* contrasts, post-hoc Tukey corrected contrasts, which are provided in Supplemental Table 2, were conducted to address concerns with multiple tests.

Motivational Variables

For agency, the effect of gender was not significant ($F(1, 209) = .06$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, $p = .802$), but the effect of redemptive form was significant ($F(2, 209) = 33.81$, partial $\eta^2 = .24$, $p < .001$). Redemptive form contrasts were each significant. Narratives with return or emergent redemption showed higher agency than non-redemptive narratives (contrast = .202, $SE = .30$, $t(208) = 6.69$, $p < .001$), and narratives with emergent redemption showed higher agency than those with return redemption (contrast = .48, $SE = .18$, $t(208) = 2.70$, $p = .008$). For communion, the effect of gender was significant ($F(1, 208) = 17.65$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, $p < .001$), but the effect of redemptive form was not significant ($F(2, 208) = 1.48$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, $p = .230$).

Autobiographical Reasoning Variables

For narrated growth, the effects of gender ($F(1, 208) = 17.65$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, $p < .001$) and redemptive form ($F(2, 208) = 9.46$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, $p < .001$) were significant. Each contrast between redemptive forms was significant. Narratives with return or emergent redemption showed higher growth than non-redemptive narratives (contrast = .58, $SE = .21$, $t(208) = 2.71$, p

² Models were retested without the covariate of gender. All significant ($\alpha < .05$ level) and non-significant findings detailed below were consistent following the removal of gender.

= .007), and narratives with emergent redemption showed higher growth than those with return redemption (contrast = .32, SE = .13, $t(208) = 2.51$, $p = .013$). For thematic coherence, the effects of gender ($F(1, 208) = 13.01$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, $p < .001$) and redemptive form ($F(2, 208) = 9.46$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, $p < .001$) were significant. Each contrast between redemptive forms was significant. Narratives with return or emergent redemption showed higher thematic coherence than non-redemptive narratives (contrast = .58, SE = .21, $t(208) = 2.71$, $p = .007$), and narratives with emergent redemption showed higher coherence than those with return redemption (contrast = .32, SE = .13, $t(208) = 2.51$, $p = .013$).

Aim 3: Are Redemptive Forms Associated with Psychological Well-Being?

Main Effects of Redemptive Forms on Well-Being

Using one-way ANCOVAs, we tested whether redemptive forms coincided with endorsements of PWB (i.e., autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, sense of purpose, self-acceptance; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The *a priori* contrasts from above were re-tested here. Gender was included as a covariate for each model.

Among subscales of PWB, redemptive forms only had a significant main effect with personal growth ($F(2, 208) = 3.82$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, $p = .024$).³ The first contrast (non-redemptive vs. return and emergent redemption) was not significant (contrast = .00, SE = .20, $t(208) = .00$, $p = .997$); however, the second contrast (return vs. emergent redemption) was significant (contrast = .31, SE = .12, $t(208) = 2.65$, $p = .009$). Participants showing emergent redemption reported greater personal growth than participants showing return redemption. Participants showing return redemption reported the lowest endorsements of personal growth.

³ This set of models was retested with the covariate of gender removed. The significant association of redemption with growth was sustained ($F(2, 209) = 3.83$, $\eta^2 = .04$, $p = .023$), and no additional significant effects were noted.

Two-Way Interactions of Redemptive Form and Resolution Theme on Well-Being

Using a 2 (identity vs. situation resolution) x 2 (return vs. emergent redemption) ANCOVA, interaction effects were tested to determine whether emergent redemption coincided with high endorsements of PWB given the resolution theme individuals narrated. Non-redemptive stories and stories lacking resolution were not considered, reducing the sample analyzed to $n = 150$. Given this sample reduction and model complexity, post-hoc power analyses suggested that we would need medium-to-large model effects to reasonably detect significant effects. For example, an effect size of $f = .30$ (somewhat larger than the typical medium effect cutoff of .25) would provide power of $1 - \beta = .84$.

Only the interaction effect for reported sense of purpose was significant ($F(1, 150) = 7.12$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, $p = .009$, observed power = .755).⁴ Sense of purpose was similarly high for both return and emergent redemption when participants used identity resolutions. Sense of purpose was especially low when narrators used return redemption and situation resolution. An example narrative with return redemption and a situation resolution appears below:

The most discouraging time in my life was when my mother was hospitalized for two months with clinical depression. [...] Both my brother and I felt that if we did well in school, it would somewhat take the edge off the situation as my mother wouldn't have to worry about us, our father would be able to focus on work, and the stress level around the house would decrease. I think at some point in time, we accepted the fact that this was the situation that we had been put in. We began to understand that our mother was fighting her own battle and that we had to go on and fight our own without her. [...]

- Narrative from an eighteen-year-old man

A simple slopes test was significant for scores of return redemption given the resolution theme ($F(1, 145) = 4.97$, $p = .027$). The simple slopes test for emergent redemption, across resolution themes, was not significant ($F(1, 145) = 1.89$, $p = .172$). Figure 1 depicts this interaction.

⁴ This set of models was retested without gender. The significant interaction effect for sense of purpose was sustained ($F(1, 146) = 6.75$, $\eta^2 = .04$, $p = .010$), and no additional significant interaction effects were noted.

Discussion

We tested redemptive forms and themes beyond traditional operationalizations, which have emphasized redemptive magnitude (Perlin & Fivush, 2021). This novel conceptualization addresses two aspects of redemption: 1) the categorically different ways individuals redeem difficult life experiences; and 2) whether individuals thematically frame difficult life experiences—their challenges and their resolutions—with a focus on the situation or on identity concerns. Using this conceptualization, we rated narratives of difficult life experiences collected from a sample of undergraduates to address how redemptive forms coincide with redemptive themes, with other factors of narrative identity, and with endorsements of PWB.

Aim 1: Redemptive Forms Are Associated with Redemptive Themes

Redemptive themes in participants' challenges and resolutions of difficult life experiences were associated with the redemptive forms they displayed. Redemptive individuals were more likely than non-redemptive individuals to place thematic emphasis on identity concerns in their challenges. Furthermore, individuals using emergent redemption were more likely to frame the resolutions of such challenges with a thematic focus on identity, thus emphasizing self-improvement and personal growth. In contrast, individuals displaying return redemption were more likely to frame resolutions with a thematic focus on the situation; that is, the environment returned to a non-threatening state.

These findings substantiate the PF model's claim that there are distinct redemptive forms and themes. Researchers were able to reliably code narratives for redemptive forms, and each form accounted for an appreciable proportion of the overall sample (see Table 1). Further, as the PF model suggests, these redemptive forms are configured with challenge themes and resolution themes into canonical modes of narration. This is supported insofar as individuals thematically

frame the challenges and resolutions of their redemptive sequences differently depending on the redemptive form displayed. Specifically, non-redemptive narrators were the most likely to narrate situational challenges. This does not imply, however, that situational challenges prevent redemption. Indeed, return and emergent redemptive narratives were evenly divided between situation and identity challenges (see Supplemental Table 1). A more appreciative explanation may be that individuals who cannot make positive sense of challenges are more likely to narrate in ways that emphasize the situational aspects of the challenge, thus protecting themselves from the deleterious effects of a threat to one's self-concept. Additionally, whereas return narrators most often resolved difficulties in terms of the situation, emergent narrators most often resolved difficulties in terms of identity. This supports our hypothesis that emergent redemption bolsters reflection on deep identity concerns in young adulthood. That is, when young adults redemptively narrate experiences of change, they often emphasize how they have grown as a person rather than focusing on situational profits.

Aim 2: Redemptive Forms Are Associated with Other Narrative Identity Variables

For our second research question, we found that redemptive forms coincided with multiple narrative variables (*viz.* agency, communion, narrated growth, and thematic coherence) representing motivational and autobiographical reasoning in narrative identity. Regarding motivational variables, redemption writ large was associated with higher agency, fitting with existing literature (e.g., Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Adler et al., 2015, Study 1). Additionally, emergent redemption was associated with the highest scores of agency. This accords with the dominant American strain of redemption, which tends to call upon themes of growth and self-development (McAdams, 2008). Matching mixed evidence in existing findings (e.g., Adler et al., 2015), redemption and communion were not associated in this study. Regarding autobiographical

reasoning variables, redemption writ large was positively associated with narrated growth, and emergent redemption was associated with the highest scores on growth, fitting with theoretical underpinnings for emergent redemption involving personal change (Perlin & Fivush, 2021). Given that emergent redemption appeared to be canonically paired with identity resolutions, it makes sense that emergent redemption would be associated with greater narrated growth (see also Eriksson et al., 2020). Moreover, greater redemption was associated with greater thematic coherence. This suggests that as individuals find redemptive meaning in challenging circumstances, perhaps the narrative also tightens thematically around that redemptive meaning.

Aim 3: Redemptive Forms Are Associated with Psychological Well-Being

Redemptive forms were minimally associated with most reports of PWB. However, supported effects were in line with previous findings that redemption is associated well-being (e.g., Cox et al., 2019; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). Displays of emergent redemption coincided with the highest reports of personal growth, whereas return redemption evinced the lowest levels of personal growth. These results accord with King and colleagues' (2000) findings that narrative processes of accommodative change—conceptually similar to the narrative processes underlying emergent redemption—was associated with stress-related growth and ego development. Further, McLean and Lilgendahl (2008) found that redemption in young adults' low point narratives was exclusively associated with the personal growth subscale of PWB. We replicate this finding while adding nuance to the conceptual scheme used for redemption. Taken together, these two findings may suggest that redemption functions principally for personal growth in young adulthood (see Perlin & Fivush, 2021).

Results also suggested that individuals displaying return redemption may have the poorest views of their ongoing opportunities for personal development and maturation. This

substantiates the PF model's claim that redemptive forms capture more than a linear increase in redemptive magnitude; rather, there are distinct qualitative differences between recovering from a challenge and positive change following it. One explanation for this finding is that individuals who respond to jarring or threatening setbacks by identifying with the ways life ultimately has not changed (i.e., return redemption) may ultimately be foreclosing opportunities for personal growth. Non-redemptive individuals, on the other hand, may simply be telling an interpretively unadorned story rather than trying to make sense of it. Another possibility is that return individuals are not conforming to the culturally normative script, particularly in young adulthood (see McLean et al., 2020a). Perhaps finding no redemptive meaning in challenges helps individuals fare better with personal growth than finding the 'wrong' kind of redemptive meaning. We note that these explanations are speculative and deserve empirical scrutiny.

Additionally, we found support for an interaction between redemptive forms (return vs. emergent) and resolution themes for reports of purpose. Identity resolutions were beneficial across redemptive forms, yet situation resolutions alongside return redemption were associated with the lowest scores on purpose. This combination of reasoning—focusing on how the situational aspects of a difficult event returned to normal—may provide little fodder for considering the direction of one's life. If such an approach is a routine part of reasoning about the past, purpose could be undermined. Again, such a possibility is speculative.

Limitations and Future Directions

While findings match and extend existing research on redemption, some caveats are required. First, we relied on multiple tests for Aims 2 and 3, raising concerns of false discoveries. Further, results may not generalize well. Data in the current study were collected at a competitive private university, and we did not have sufficient sample diversity to consider age, ethnicity, and

socioeconomic status. Research on redemption, and its attendant identity processes, should expand focus across developmental periods of adulthood as well as ethnically and culturally diverse populations. Indeed, previous research suggests that meaning-making efforts, of which redemption is a part, can have different effects depending on age, gender, racial background, and SES (e.g., McLean et al., 2010; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008; Sales et al., 2013).

Finally, although these redemptive forms and themes are substantiated in this cross-section, we do not know if there is intra-individual stability in how narrators redeem difficult life experiences, or if certain redemptive forms occur with more identity or situational focus depending on how temporally distanced the individual is from the event (Perlin & Fivush, 2021; for a review on narrative meaning and processing time, see Fivush et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies over large and small spans of development would be ideal for addressing these questions.

Conclusion

We aimed to test a more nuanced conceptualization of redemption than has been presented to date (e.g., McAdams et al., 2001). Building on the theoretical work of Perlin & Fivush (2021), we rated young adults' stories of difficult life experiences for redemptive forms (non-redemptive, return, emergent) and redemptive themes (situation, identity). Redemptive forms differed by themes in the challenge and resolution. Emergent redemption coincided with the highest displays of multiple narrative identity themes (agency, thematic coherence, narrated growth) and was associated with the highest endorsements of personal growth. An interaction was supported between redemptive forms and resolution theme. Overall, findings suggest that there are qualitatively distinct forms of redemption that may relate to identity development.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Table 1*Descriptive Analyses*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Narrative Identity Ratings				
Agency	1.25	1.10	.00	3.00
Communion	1.19	.99	.00	3.00
Narrated Growth	3.29	1.12	1.00	5.00
Thematic Coherence	1.71	.72	.00	3.00
Endorsements of PWB				
Autonomy	3.97	.72	1.67	5.78
Environmental Mastery	3.93	.73	1.22	5.89
Personal Growth	4.57	.63	3.00	5.89
Positive Relations with Others	4.37	.83	2.22	6.00
Sense of Purpose	4.29	.75	1.22	5.89
Self-Acceptance	4.13	.81	1.56	5.89
	<i>N</i>	%		
Situation of Narrated Challenge				
Situation Challenge	123	57.7		
Identity Challenge	90	42.3		
Resolution of Narrated Challenge				
No Resolution	43	20.2		
Situation Resolution	75	35.2		
Identity Resolution	95	44.6		
Redemption Display				
Non-Redemptive	63	19.6		
Return	40	18.8		
Emergent	110	51.6		

Table 2*Correlations among Continuous Study Variables*

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Gender	-.01	.29	.07	.23	-.04	.02	.00	.19	.08	.05
Narrative Identity Ratings										
2. Agency	--	-.01	.52	.24	-.06	.07	.14	.02	.06	.12
3. Communion		--	.00	.08	-.01	.01	.06	.07	.05	.01
4. Narrated Growth			--	.25	.03	.11	.18	.10	.13	.16
5. Thematic Coherence				--	-.05	.04	.18	.19	.08	.02
Endorsements of PWB										
6. Autonomy					--	.39	.39	.31	.35	.36
7. Environmental Mastery						--	.34	.54	.61	.74
8. Personal Growth							--	.47	.53	.40
9. Positive Relations with Others								--	.43	.54
10. Sense of Purpose									--	.62
11. Self-Acceptance										--

Note. Correlations at the $\alpha = .05$ level are in bold. For Gender, women received the higher value.

Figure 1

Estimated Marginal Means of Sense of Purpose Given Event Resolution Theme and Redemptive Form

Supplemental Table 1*Crosstabulations of Redemptive Subtype, Narrative Challenge Type, and Narrative Resolution Type*

Redemptive Form	<u>Narrated Challenge Typology</u>		<u>Narrated Resolution Typology</u>			Total
	Situation Challenge	Identity Challenge	No Resolution	Situation Resolution	Identity Resolution	
Non-Redemptive	46 ^a	17 ^b	43 ^a	11 ^b	9 ^b	63
Return	20 ^a	20 ^a	0 ^a	27 ^b	13 ^c	40
Emergent	57 ^a	53 ^a	0 ^a	37 ^b	73 ^c	110
Total	123	90	43	75	95	213

Note. Subscripts indicate proportional differences at the $\alpha = .05$ level.

Supplemental Table 2*Tukey-corrected Pos-hoc Contrasts of Redemption Forms and Narrative Identity Theme Scores (From Research Aim 2)*

Form 1	Form 2	<u>Agency</u>				<u>Communion</u>				<u>Narrated Growth</u>				<u>Thematic Coherence</u>			
		<i>M</i> Diff	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i> Diff	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i> Diff	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i> Diff	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Non-Redemptive	Return	-.77	.20	3.94	.000	.32	.20	1.63	.235	-1.19	.16	7.60	.000	-.13	.14	.95	.608
Non-Redemptive	Emergent	-1.25	.15	8.22	.000	.05	.15	.33	.941	-1.87	.12	15.34	.000	-.45	.11	4.15	.000
Return	Emergent	-.48	.18	2.70	.021	-.27	.18	1.51	.289	-.68	.14	4.78	.000	-.32	.13	2.51	.034

Supplemental Figure 1*Standardized Narrative Identity Scores across Redemption Typologies*

Supplemental Figure 2*Marginal Means of Personal Growth given Redemption Form*