Self-Transcendence and Life Stories of Humanistic Growth Among Late-Midlife Adults

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Abstract

Objective: Self-transcendence is the experience of feeling connected to something greater than oneself. Previous studies have shown high scores on self-transcendence are associated with well-being and other psychological benefits, but have rarely examined the lived experiences of highly self-transcendent people. **Method:** Black and White men and women in late-midlife completed Life Story Interviews and self-report measures of self-transcendence. In Study 1 ($N = 144$, $M_{\text{age}} = 56.4$), we used grounded theory methodology to differentiate stories told by participants scoring either extremely high or extremely low on self-transcendence. In Study 2 ($N = 125$; $M_{\text{age}} = 60.4$), we created a quantitative coding scheme, and scored 1,375 new life story scenes. **Results:** In Study 1, six narrative themes were identified (closure, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, secure attachment, self-actualization, spiritual pluralism) as part of a “humanistic growth story.” In Study 2, four of the narrative themes were found to predict self-transcendence scores with significant effect sizes of $\beta = .26$ to $.47$. **Conclusions:** In our sample, highly self-transcendent individuals tended to narrate their lived experiences as spiritual journeys of humanistic growth. This study adds to our understanding of one path of personality growth in late midlife, that toward self-transcendence.

Keywords: self-transcendence; ego integrity; life story; narrative identity; humanistic psychology

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Self-transcendence is the phenomenon of experiencing one's self as expanding both backward and forward in time; a feeling of connectedness to all of humanity, the earth, and the cosmos; and a turn toward existential concerns such as the meaning of life and future death. Typically measured through scaled self-report measures (Cloninger et al., 1993; Levenson et al., 2005; Reed, 1991; Wong et al., 2016), scores on self-transcendence have been shown to be positively associated with purpose in life, sense of coherence, self-esteem, hope, positive affect, and well-being (Coward, 1996), and negatively associated with neuroticism (Levenson et al., 2005) and depression (Ellermann & Reed, 2001).

Prior research has identified a number of important correlates of self-reported self-transcendence, but has left open the question of what it *feels* like to live a self-transcendent life—how the experienced lives of the highly self-transcendent differ from the lives of the not-so-self-transcendent. The current study adopts a narrative perspective (McAdams & McLean, 2013) to examine the stories that highly self-transcendent people tell about their most important experiences in life. We aim to delineate a particular form of life narrative that captures the phenomenological experience of moving through life as a self-transcendent person. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, we derive and describe the contours of this story, and then assess its relation to scaled self-report measures of self-transcendence.

The Nature of Self-Transcendence

Maslow's (1950) phenomenological description of self-transcendence instigated initial scientific interest in the construct. In his last years, Maslow (1969) revised his eponymous

pyramid with its capstone of self-actualization so that a new zenith—self-transcendence—sat on top. Self-transcendence resolved Maslow’s peak–experiences conundrum; these experiences seemed not only to facilitate self-actualization, but also to take one outside of one’s self and connect to something larger. In a peak experience, Maslow (1961) wrote, the person feels that

as he gets to be more purely and singly himself, he is more able to fuse with the world, with what was formerly not-self, for example, the lovers come closer to forming a unit rather than two people, the I-Thou monism becomes more possible, the creator becomes one with his work being created, the mother feels one with her child, the appreciator *becomes* the music or the painting or the dance (and it becomes him), the astronomer is “out there” with the stars (rather than a separateness peering across an abyss at another separateness through a telescope-keyhole). (p. 255)

The fusion Maslow described in this passage appears somewhat paradoxical, in that as one actualizes one’s self, one simultaneously transcends the self. Frankl (1963) developed a similar perspective, contending that “the more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself” (p. 50). This simultaneity of self-actualization and deep connection to others illustrates the *sympatheiac* nature of self-transcendence. The ancient Greeks used the concept of *sympatheia* to describe the inextricable connectivity between all beings on earth and in heaven. This interconnected aspect of self-transcendence relates to both *interpersonal* self-transcendence, referring to connectedness to other humans (Reed 1991; Reed 2014), and *transpersonal* or *cosmic* self-transcendence, referring to connectivity or union with nature or the perceived divine (Cloninger et al., 1993; Maslow, 1969; Reed, 1991, 2014).

Reed has probed interpersonal self-transcendence in depth; a number of studies by Reed (2014) and colleagues converge to suggest that the self-transcendent status of caregivers and nurses, particularly in behaviors and beliefs about connecting with family and patients, is positively correlated with their quality of life. Transpersonally, a large study of Dutch adults found positive associations between cosmic transcendence and meaning in life, as well as

between cosmic transcendence and social well-being for those in supportive family relationships (Braam et al., 2006; Sadler et al., 2006).

Beyond connection to others and the cosmos, Reed (2014) has characterized self-transcendence as involving *intrapersonal* expansion, adopting an accepting attitude toward both the past and the future and bringing greater awareness to one's own philosophies, values, and dreams. As such, self-transcendence bears striking resemblance to Erikson's (1963) concept of *ego integrity*, which is marked by the older adult's deep acceptance of their particular life as it has been lived. Research has shown that ego integrity is positively associated with psychological well-being, marital satisfaction, and level of comfort in receiving help, and to negatively correlate with depression (James & Zarrett, 2005; Lamers et al., 2014). Like those who exhibit ego integrity, moreover, highly self-transcendent people tend to prioritize questions of life meaning over material possessions (Reed, 1991, 2014), showing what Tornstam (1997) has called "ego-transcendence" and what Levenson et al. (2005) refer to as "increased interiority."

Salutogenic Effects of Self-Transcendence

Self-transcendence is often understood to be a natural maturational process most relevant to those in the last stages of life, either due to old age or terminal illness (Erikson, 1997; Levenson et al., 2005; Tornstam, 1997). This developmental understanding of self-transcendence emphasizes a particular wisdom that accompanies approaching death and the accumulation of increasingly difficult life events. For example, a study of the oldest-old found positive correlations between self-transcendence and resilience, sense of coherence, purpose in life, and mental health (Nygren et al., 2005). Self-transcendence has been found to negatively correlate with depression and positively correlate with meaning in life in elders (Klaas, 1998). Those facing end-of-life or significant health have been found to score higher in self-transcendence

than younger or healthier peers (Ho et al., 2016; Iwamoto et al., 2011; Jewell, 2010; Nakagawa, 2007).

Theorists have traditionally conceptualized self-transcendence as most relevant for people approaching end of life. There have been fewer attempts to measure self-transcendence with samples for whom death is less imminent. Yet given the evidence that increased self-transcendence is associated with a bevy of positive outcomes, more attention is needed to understand self-transcendence across the lifespan. Late midlife adults (individuals in their late fifties to mid-sixties) are an appropriate age group for expanding this research to non-clinical, non-elder samples. Late midlife adults are beginning to forecast the later chapters of their life: many are planning for retirement, transitioning into empty-nesters or grandparents, and bringing clarity to their future legacies. As a first step in exploring relationships between self-transcendence and the myriad established benefits, this study seeks to better understand the nature of self-transcendence in the lived experience of late midlife adults.

The Narrative Approach

To examine the lived experience of self-transcendence, the current study focuses on life narrative. Spanning cognitive science, personality, social, developmental, and clinical psychology, narrative research recognizes humans to be meaning-making creatures who seek to make sense of their lives by integrating their experiences—past, present, and imagined future—into more-or-less coherent stories (Adler et al., 2018; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Accordingly, narrative researchers typically employ methodologies that ask participants to provide detailed descriptions of important scenes and chapters in their lives. These narrative accounts are typically coded for motivational and affective themes such as agency, communion, redemption, contamination, meaning-making, and personal growth, as well as for structural features such as

narrative coherence (Adler et al., 2015; Bauer et al., 2019; Waters & Fivush, 2015). Eliciting and analyzing participants' narratives provides the unique benefit of capturing a vividness of detail and particularity that makes the stories intelligible as lives lived while also making them amenable to scientifically credible thematic analysis.

Narrative research has provided a wide variety of rich insights into the ways life stories depict lived experience and its relation to psychological constructs. In a series of qualitative and quantitative studies, McAdams and colleagues identified a particular pattern of co-occurring narrative themes that tend to be strongly linked to living an especially caring, productive, and generative life among midlife American adults, called *the redemptive self* (McAdams et al., 1997; McAdams & Guo, 2015). As in research on the redemptive self, the present study posits specific narrative themes may hang together as a distinct narrative prototype that is statistically associated with a given psychological construct (self-transcendence), providing insight into its phenomenology.

Almost no narrative research has investigated self-transcendence and its allied construct, ego integrity. However, Torges et al. (2009) found both quantitative and qualitative measures of ego integrity were correlated with overall well-being in two independent samples of midlife women, but that qualitative narrative analysis of life story scenes and open-ended questions captured a more accurate, holistic, nuanced assessment of ego integrity than their close-ended measure. In a similar vein, the present research uses a multifaceted narrative approach to expanding knowledge about self-transcendence, a highly valuable psychological asset. Learning more about this phenomenon and its lived experience may have important implications for research and application about individual coping and human flourishing.

The Present Research

What is unique about the life stories of highly self-transcendent individuals? To our knowledge, no previous studies have examined self-transcendence using life story narratives. Therefore, working within the context of discovery to identify broad narrative themes was our first step to better understand the phenomenological experience of the construct (McAdams, 2012). Additionally, our narrative tool, the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008) is *not* focused on self-transcendence. This is a benefit to this approach, as existing quantitative self-report measures directly probe the construct of self-transcendence and results may be limited by socially desirable responding.

The present research seeks to identify those characteristics which differentiate the narratives constructed by people scoring high on self-report measures of self-transcendence from stories produced by their peers scoring lower on self-reported self-transcendence. Taken together, the themes that consistently differentiate between narrators high and low on self-report self-transcendence may constitute a particular type or form of narrative identity.

In Study 1, we use a purely qualitative methodology applied to lengthy life narrative interviews to identify potential differences in the narrative themes employed by a small number of highly self-transcendent adults (based on quantitative self-report) and their less self-transcendent counterparts. In this exploratory phase, no hypotheses are formulated. Instead, we approach the interviews inductively to discover what kinds of narrative themes distinguish the stories told by these groups. In Study 2, we translate these narrative differences into a quantitative coding scheme that captures the most salient features observed in Study 1. We then test the applicability of this coding scheme to a fresh set of data, coding eleven types of life

experiences for each participant. For Study 2, then, we predict that participants' resultant narrative theme scores will be correlated with their self-reported self-transcendence scores.

Study 1

To derive thematic trends that may distinguish the lived experience of highly self-transcendent late-midlife adults from their less self-transcendent peers, we focused on full life story interviews provided by ten research participants—five scoring especially high on composite self-report measures of self-transcendence (described below) and five scoring especially low. Adopting a form of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we sought to describe the most salient thematic differences between the groups through a careful reading and re-reading of lengthy interviews.

Method

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Study 1 and Study 2 were both approved by Northwestern University Office for Research IRB under the title “Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood,” protocol ID STU00001801.

Overall sample and procedure. Participants were recruited by a social science research firm in 2009–2010 as part of a nine-year longitudinal study of adult personality development, the Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood (Cowan et al., 2019; Cox & McAdams, 2014; Guo et al., 2016; Manczak et al., 2014). The initial non-clinical community sample included 163 adults living in a large metropolitan area in the midwestern region of the United States.

Participants were included if they had completed the Time 1 Life Story Interview, the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory, and the Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale. Participants ($N =$

144) were 54.8 to 59.1 years old ($M = 56.4$, $SD = 0.95$), 62% female¹, 38% male, and 58% White, 40% Black, and 2% interracial or other². Annual household income ranged from less than \$25,000 to more than \$300,000, with a median income of \$75,000–\$100,000. Education ranged from completion of a high school diploma or equivalent to graduate education, with a median education level of college graduate.

Life Story Interviews took place in person in a dedicated interview room at a major research university. Of the nine trained interviewers, seven were graduate students, one was a postdoctoral researcher, and one was a faculty member. Eight of the interviewers were White, and one was biracial. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcription company. Prior to the in-person interviews, participants completed a battery of online or paper self-report measures (depending on participant preference). Participants received \$75 for each survey battery completed and \$75 for each in-person interview completed throughout the study. Interview and self-report measures are described below.

Life Story Interview. The Life Story Interview (LSI; McAdams, 2008) is designed to take approximately two hours and includes seven sections such as key scenes (e.g., high point, low point), challenges (e.g., biggest regret), and beliefs (e.g., ideological and ethical values). The Time 1 Life Story Interview was conducted in Year 1 of the FLSA longitudinal study.

¹ Initial FLSA recruitment took place in 2008–2009 and participants completed surveys which prompted them to select their sex (from two options, “male” and “female”). Based on its operationalization in previous studies and its application throughout data collection, it is evident that this variable was meant to query gender, albeit in a binary way. Therefore when reporting sex and gender variables in this paper, we use “sex” to report the survey-related statistics and gender terms (e.g., “men” and “women”) to more accurately capture the intent of this question in the context of the findings.

² Participants were prompted to identify their race as “White/Caucasian,” “African American,” “interracial,” and “other.” We have opted to use “White” and “Black” both for parallel language and language which seems to more closely reflect contemporary use.

Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (ASTI). The Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (Levenson et al., 2005) measures a subjective experience of self-transcendence as defined by a decreasing reliance on externals for definition of the self, increasing interiority and spirituality, and a greater sense of connectedness with past and future generations. The ASTI is a modification of Tornstam's (1997) Gerotranscendence Scale. The measure asks participants to consider their current beliefs and feelings compared with five years earlier. Representative items include "I feel that my individual life is a part of a greater whole," "I feel much more compassionate, even toward my enemies," and "My sense of self has decreased as I have gotten older" (reverse-scored). Responses range from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 4 = *agree strongly*. In previous studies using the ASTI, Cronbach's alpha has sometimes been reported as two subscales, self-transcendence and alienation—with alpha ranging from .67 to .75 for self-transcendence and .64 to .71 for alienation (Le & Levenson, 2005; Levenson et al., 2005). Glück et al. (2013) found $\alpha = .83$ for the entire scale. In this study, $\alpha = .82$ for all questions. The ASTI was administered in Year 3.

Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale (NEIS). The Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale (NEIS; Janis et al., 2011) measures a subjective sense of wholeness, integration, and a deep sense of acceptance of life as it has been lived (available at <https://osf.io/myg62/>). It was developed based on Erik Erikson's (1963) developmental stage of ego integrity versus despair and includes items such as "I see a meaningful thread running through the many events in my life," "I can face death gracefully," and "It pains me to think about dreams and goals I have had that I did not fulfill" (reverse-scored). Responses range from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*.

The NEIS has been used in about a dozen studies to date. Studies using the full 15-item scale report internal consistencies as high as $\alpha = .9$ for the original study and as low as .76

(Webster, 2016). Other studies use two subscales, “ego integrity” and “ego despair,” reporting alpha from .71 to .78 for integrity and .57 to .76 for despair (Bohlmeijer et al., 2014; Kleijn et al., 2016). In this study, $\alpha = .79$. The NEIS was administered in Year 5.

The composite score: Self-reported ST. As described earlier, the phenomena of self-transcendence and ego integrity appear to have a conceptual overlap. The relevant measures we collected, the ASTI and NEIS, seemed together to capture a more full picture of self-transcendence (ST) than either alone. Indeed the ASTI and NEIS were correlated in this sample at $r(131) = .60, p < .001$, supporting our understanding that these measures overlap, but are not entirely redundant. Because we sought a richer understanding of self-transcendence in our sample, participants’ z-scores for each measure were combined to form a composite score, “self-reported ST.”

The 10 participants used in the qualitative analysis. Participants in the entire sample were sorted from highest to lowest by self-reported ST scores. Chosen for the qualitative analysis of full life-story interviews were the five participants with the highest scores on self-reported ST and the five with the lowest scores. While the overall sample from which the top- and bottom-scoring participants were drawn was split roughly evenly between Black (40%) and White participants (58%) and male (48%) and female (62%) participants, these groups were not evenly represented at the extreme ends of the self-reported ST scale. Of the five highest scorers (“most” self-transcendent participants), all were female, four were Black, and four reported annual household incomes under \$100,000. Of the five lowest scorers (“least” self-transcendent participants), three were male, all were White, and four reported annual household incomes over \$275,000. There were no differences in education.

Reading the interviews and deriving themes. The first and third authors both read the entire Time 1 LSIs of the five most and five least self-transcendent participants. The first author is a White woman in a clinical psychology doctoral program; the third author is a Latino man, an undergraduate business major at the time of the research. The first reader had a general interest and lay knowledge of self-transcendence and related concepts, while the second reader had none.

The readers used a grounded theory-based method of narrative analysis (Charmaz & Henwood, 2017). At first, each reader worked independently to develop an overall characterization of each narrative, writing memos and adding to these memos through the method of constant comparison. Readers met frequently in an iterative process to discuss emergent themes and check these against novel and already-read narratives, first for the group of high scorers, and then for the group of low scorers. Readers collaboratively named and described working themes to delineate how the stories from the high ST group differed from the stories told by the low ST group. These themes were then checked across groups to detect outliers or inconsistent examples, prompting further clarification and specification of the unique themes which had significant expression in both the high and low groups.

Results

The interviews provided by the high-ST participants were most notable for their strongly *humanistic* flavor. The high-ST participants told stories of the reconstructed past and imagined future in ways that were reminiscent of foundational humanistic psychological theories, such as those espoused by Rogers (1947) and Maslow (1950), and contemporary theories of motivation, such as Bauer's (2016) eudaimonic-growth oriented "transformational self," and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory. The "self-transcendent story" described here conveys a decidedly *humanistic* framing for psychological development. The emphasis in the story is on

growth and actualization over time. The protagonist aims to fulfill his or her potential, to continue to learn and develop from one phase of life to the next, to be open to new possibilities and accepting of diverse perspectives, and to connect to broader humanity as a whole.

These participants tended to view themselves as moving through life as if it were an exciting and self-revealing journey. They emphasized the sense in which the self changes and develops over time, regularly employing metaphors of growth, fulfillment, and actualization. While they expressed deep interest in their individual quest and inner life, they also suggested they were strongly connected to other people, including their family of origin, friends, broader community groups, and even humankind as a whole.

While the narratives of the most self-transcendent participants are fundamentally concerned with connection, growth, and actualization, they were at the same time balanced with a great deal of acceptance of the reality of personal foibles and cosmic tragedies, and the humility to recognize all humans are subject to these. We offer a summary of “Denise’s” interview to provide an in-depth illustration of one highly self-transcendent person’s narrative.

Denise’s Life Narrative

Denise had her early start in a neighborhood where she felt safe and secure. “If I stepped out of my mother’s house, there were eyes watching me....It was a kind of a, a very connected way of growing up.” On the weekends, she spent time with her teachers and classmates, and played sidewalk games with her neighbors. It was “a really lovely time. I really felt like a part of everybody around.” These halcyon days were short-lived, however, as her mother’s mounting travails with substance abuse cast a young Denise, as the eldest daughter, in a new role as ersatz mother. She remembers her mother emphasizing the importance of school, yet when Denise was accepted into college, her mother was “pissed....All of a sudden she was going to lose the person

who did the grocery shopping, the bill paying, the cleaning of the house, the combing of the heads...I wasn't going to be getting any encouragement from her." Yet, it was in that moment that Denise "realized that I would be able to move away, if you will, from everything that I had grown up with and be different. You know, that [college] would be the thing that would make me different. From what, I don't know. I don't know what I thought I would be like...but that was a defining moment."

Right after graduating from high school, Denise enrolled in college, got married, and left home; soon after she had two children followed by a divorce. For years she worked long hours to provide for her children as a single mother. She attributes her career success in part to "always [having] been persistent...I would be given some of the toughest projects, the ones that other project managers couldn't get done and I would get them done." Though she provided for her children's material needs, a family rupture led to a wake-up call that she had neglected their emotional needs. She felt in the moment that she was "a complete and utter failure....Maybe more like my mother than I wanted to admit." This was the low point of her life. Even so, she learned "even when things seem to be very dark I don't stay that way forever. You know, I move ahead....I needed to really clean up my act and figure out how I had gotten to that point." She learned "it's okay to fail even at...a profound level....and you can live." This failure led to a series of changes after which "all of a sudden I could start to take ownership for my life."

As she exercised this newfound agency, she embarked on an expansive spiritual search.

At a mountain retreat, she was

feeling a little down from everything that had been going on, but still very, you know, very open and very hopeful. And I felt rewarded...[when I saw a] falling star. And so I think what it says is that, you know, the universe is there with you....even at points where you're not sure about where you're going and what's going on. God's always with you.

Denise described a core spiritual belief in a “higher purpose or a higher hand in everyone’s life...And so I think of all of us as being very connected.” Denise continued:

We may have different words for the same thing and I think that even people who are atheist probably use “conscience” as a motivator. And to me conscience is simply another way of saying there’s a spiritual nature that dictates right from wrong because I think that we all want to do right.

At the time of the interview, Denise described “feeling very much like I’m very lucky, you know, that I am where I am. Feeling very much like in the last...years I’ve been on a path towards much more conscious actualization of what I want to do with my life.” Indeed, she titled her next chapter in life “The Unfolding.” Having just earned an additional advanced degree and preparing to send her last child to college, she planned to continue with an invigorating career change, and “having greater and better choices over my time and direction.” As the interview concluded, Denise reflected, “I think I feel like a traveler that’s been on a journey.... for me, the discovery has been just finding out who I really am and moving towards that.”

The five most self-transcendent people in our sample were striking in their commonalities even as they exhibited a much idiosyncrasy. In particular, these women narrated six themes:

1. A sense of **closure** regarding difficult experiences and life in general; holding few regrets and experiencing instead a sense of deep acceptance and recognition that life has unfolded exactly as it must have.
2. **Interconnectedness**, or a sense of being deeply and pervasively embedded in a world of relationships, a world that both fulfills and transcends the self.
3. A drive to continue to grow and change, emphasizing concrete formal and informal **lifelong learning** for self and others.
4. An early **secure attachment** to trusted caregivers or adults, providing a strong foundation for social and moral development.

5. Striving toward **self-actualization** by coming to recognize one's own inherent potential and actively striving toward and realizing this potential.
6. **Spiritual pluralism**, embracing a profound personal spirituality which recognizes the divine as omnipresent and accessible to all regardless of religious or spiritual perspective.

Humanistic conceptions of development such as those found within these “self-transcendent stories” tend to perceive persons as inherently good, intrinsically worthy, and capable of realizing a deep potential within. By contrast, more *normative* framings of psychological development emphasize socialization, conformity, and finding a meaningful niche in the social world (de St. Aubin, 1996; Tomkins, 1987). From a normative perspective, human beings are not necessarily inherently good but must be trained and taught to become good citizens, learning to balance their own needs with the demands of society.

Interestingly, the five least self-transcendent narrators tended to embody more normative views of persons. The general life stories for these individuals were characterized by strong concern for others' approval, rather black-and-white views of morality, and strong sense that a good life involves reaching certain benchmarks such as being a good parent, spouse, or worker. For most of the least self-transcendent individuals, a failure to reach these benchmarks was expressed with a sense of foreclosure; for those who were more successful, the success appeared to be more external than internal. Most of these individuals seemed to describe life's primary task as “hanging on” to normative perceptions of the good life, even long past recognizing the need or desire to give up—there is a sense of survival in these stories, even if this survival is more depleting than enlarging. We share “David's” life narrative to illustrate one less self-transcendent person's story.

David's Life Narrative

David describes a happy, stable childhood; perhaps “a little bit dysfunctional” in retrospect. “I was...I wouldn’t say pushed aside,” by his parents, “but I mean, I wasn’t a problem” compared with his troubled sibling, whom his parents “really, really dropped the ball” on, setting the stage for a lifetime of family turmoil.

He felt “somewhat accepted” as child, always having a few friends though never feeling “that close to them.” As a young man going to school dances, he was a “wallflower...being rejected” by girls, but didn’t “take it as being a personal affront,” because “I understood, you know, who I was and what I was and you know...kind of rejected and pushed aside under certain circumstances,” such as his physical appearance.

While David enjoyed college somewhat, he “didn’t get as much out of it as a lot of other people” academically, and as an adult sees his major choice as a “huge mistake.” He met his wife during this time, eventually marrying and fathering children. Things “went okay for a while...those were actually the good years,” until “things fell apart” due to their child’s significant disability.

Shortly after college graduation, he was “thrown into” taking over the family business, “which I wasn’t prepared to do, but I ended up doing it, you know, ’cause I had no choice.” In time, running the business turns relationally toxic, emotionally unfulfilling, and financially ruinous. He returns to the scene of the business’s downfall many times throughout the interview, expressing extreme regret about his decision-making. “I made a decision, which I knew was the wrong decision....I remember [saying] this is going to be the worst, you know, this is going to kills us....and the whole thing was a disaster.” He explains making these disastrous business decisions and many others as efforts to placate family. “I made a lot of sacrifices...and it really hurt me.”

Indeed, David views himself as often taken advantage of by others because of his open, caring, and honest personality. He describes a number of people dealing with him dishonestly and selfishly. He “doesn’t really trust anybody anymore” after observing with disappointment that “morals and ethics are out the window these days.”

When asked about his experiences of religion and spirituality, David identifies as an atheist without any transcendent experience, and has a negative view of religious people who use “religion to wash away your sins, sins, [so] you could [sin] again. I never understood the concept.” In contrast, David describes himself as “very ethical and moral, even almost to a fault” and describes the most important value in human living as “to be caring and kind to your fellow...human beings....to treat everybody equal and give everybody equal chances.”

He relates this view to “having experience with...a little discrimination that my son goes through.” David’s major life project is caring for his disabled child, “I’m like his alter ego, I’m always there for him to help him, to teach him what to do.” He describes showing “a lot of wisdom and a lot of patience” in advocating for his child, and notes that he might’ve been a successful teacher or social worker had he taken another path in life. Care for his son is the one area where David expresses somewhat less abashed pride, yet he generally takes a very tempered view of himself. For his life high point, he describes behaving ethically in a situation where others didn’t. He reflects:

It was more important to do things the right way than it was to, you know, stretch the rules and things like that. So like—yeah, I suppose I’m, yeah, I suppose I could be proud of that. I mean, it’s not that—not that big of a deal, it’s, it’s no accomplishment in the whole scheme of things. It really isn’t.

At the time of the interview David describes himself as “stuck in a middle age morass,” hoping his next chapter will involve “really living my life.” His language is tentative but hopeful, noting while there are “too many family pressures” and that he doesn’t have the personality

generally “to do anything....to be able to, you know, do it and accomplish it,” he hopes to become a “productive member of society” and to have new, diverse experiences.

David describes the central theme of his life as “not being able to take control of my own life.” In reflecting on the interview experience, he hopes that “telling my life story like this maybe it could motivate me to, to get out of this little rut, this rut I’m in right now, and move onto my next, my next step you know.”

The least self-transcendent people in this study seemed to congregate around the “opposite” ends of the poles of the themes exhibited by the most self-transcendent people. While there was variation in the low-scoring narratives, each was characterized by several of the following themes:

1. A **lack of closure** in regards to past experiences of disappointment; often an unwillingness to respond appropriately to negative life events or a persistent longing for “the road not taken.”
2. Deep feelings of **disconnectedness** and feeling “left behind”; expressions of care were often contrasted with others’ disappointing behavior.
3. A lack of satisfaction with, inattention to, or frustration with educational experiences or resistance to **lifelong learning**.
4. Relatively stable and unremarkable childhoods in which the narrator felt cared for but did not have a sense of being particularly important or cherished; at times, fear-motivated or **insecure attachment** was described.
5. A **lack of self-actualization**; a sense of foreclosure or failure in one or more areas of life, an insecure sense of future possibilities to grow and change.

6. A lack of transcendent experiences, a belief in random luck, or a personal spirituality characterized by an exclusive orientation—**neither spiritual nor pluralistic**.

Discussion

Where the low-ST participants tended to narrate life stories of being stymied by misfortunate, feeling little self-worth, and a sense of life meaning measured by fittingness with societal norms, the life narratives from high-ST participants tended to convey a humanistic yet grounded sensibility about psychological development. The emphasis in their accounts was on growth and actualization over time. The protagonist aims to fulfill his or her potential, to continue to learn and develop from one phase of life to the next, to be open to new possibilities and accepting of diverse perspectives, and to connect to humanity as a whole. In many ways, these five narratives of the most self-transcendent midlife adults seem to offer support for the view of self-actualization and self-transcendence offered by Frankl. Perhaps it is through recognizing one's self as a member of the broadest human community, filled with living potential and frailty both, that one may grow toward the fulfillment and wholeness of self-actualization.

The narrative themes which make up the developmental story presented here also seem to fit with the phenomenology of self-transcendence. Considering the narrative themes in this context, each seems to relate to an aspect of the multifaceted construct. For example, the protagonist's relationship with the self can be understood through the extent to which the narrator endorses themes of closure, self-actualization, and lifelong learning (representing intrapersonal self-transcendence). The narrator's relationship to humanity (interpersonal self-transcendence) involves the narrative themes of interconnectedness and secure attachment. Finally, the narrator's relationship to something greater, such as the cosmos or the divine, (transpersonal self-transcendence), is captured by the narrative theme of spiritual pluralism.

Study 2

In Study 1, we identified six narrative themes that appeared to differentiate the life stories of adults who are highly self-transcendent and those who are not (based on their self-reported ST scores). The objective of Study 2 was to test whether the narrative themes are statistically associated with self-reported ST. Study 2 thus included two phases: first, the translation of qualitative findings from Study 1 into quantitative coding schemes; second, applying these coding schemes to an entirely new set of narratives. These new narratives were collected in Year 5 of the FLSA study, which we also refer to as Time 2, and the 10 participants included in Study 1 were excluded from this study. We predict individuals' self-reported ST scores will be correlated with blind ratings of quantitative narrative themes in selected portions of Time 2 Life Story Interviews.

Translation of Qualitative to Quantitative Findings

The first and third authors collaborated to develop a quantitative coding scheme for narrative themes identified in Study 1. The coders met several times to describe observations, draft coding schemes, compare these with the ten focal narratives from Study 1, and clarify coding schemes. The resultant coding manual contained six narrative themes (presented alphabetically): closure, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, secure attachment, self-actualization, and spiritual pluralism. Each of the six themes was dimensionalized on a scale with five equally spaced anchor points, from -2 to 2. For all scales, a score of 0 represents an absence of codeable language or equal evidence for criteria on both poles of the scale. The complete coding manual is available at <https://osf.io/myg62/>.

While empirically derived from the ten cases in Study 1, each theme enjoys a rich theoretical pedigree in the self-transcendence literature and in humanistic theories of

development. Further, some of the narrative themes, developed by two coders naïve to most common narrative themes at the time of development, have some overlap with narrative themes developed and used by other narrative researchers. Each theme and its theoretical connections are described below, and illustrated with paradigmatic narrative examples in Table 1.

Closure. At the highest score of this narrative theme, the narrator rejects the usefulness of regret to their life. A story high (+2) on this dimension regards the notion of regret as somewhat useless or irrelevant. This narrator views difficult life experiences as necessary, productive, and often not worth dwelling on. At the lowest end of this dimension (-2), the protagonist is mired in regret and cannot seem to move forward; this person is stuck in the past.

Erikson's (1963) concept of ego integrity is marked by a profound acceptance of life as it has been lived. The "integrated" individual may be less invested in constructing and revising their life story and more focused instead on accepting and savoring the story. Erikson suggested the process of acceptance occurs through a life review in which people reintegrate past regrets into their life stories. Successful integration leads to ego integrity, wisdom, and reconciliation, with lack of success resulting in panic, guilt, rumination, and rigidity (Butler, 1974). Empirical evidence seems to support these theories (e.g., Wong & Watt, 1991; Zhang & Chen, 2016).

Other extant narrative coding schemes appear to be theoretically related to closure, though this has not been tested empirically. The themes "closure/resolution" (King et al., 2000) and "positive coherent resolution" (Pals, 2006) measure the extent to which a difficult past event is described by the narrator coherently (e.g., the narrator signals a definitive conclusion), emotionally resolved (i.e., the narrator is no longer troubled by the event), and positively (i.e., the narrator endorses a neutral to positive outcome). These themes have been operationalized and applied across narrative studies (Adler & Poulin, 2009; Sengsavang et al., 2018; Weststrate &

Glück, 2017; Whitehead & Bates, 2016). The present study's narrative theme of "closure" is primarily similar to the "emotional resolution" component of this theme, with an important difference of the highest score in closure characterized by a "no regrets" orientation, rather than "very resolved."

The second coding scheme with resonance to closure is a scheme developed by Torges et al. (2009) to measure ego integrity. In addition to elements of "emotional resolution," the scheme also includes elements of what we call self-actualization, interconnectedness, and spiritual pluralism, with an explicit emphasis on aging and future death.

Interconnectedness. High interconnectedness (+2) is characterized by a strong feeling of connectedness or unity with others, perhaps all of humanity. Interconnectedness includes philosophical and moral facets as well as an emotional quality in its articulation. At the low end of this dimension (-2), the protagonist's narrative is characterized by loneliness, isolation, and a separation from the human community. The theme of interconnectedness bears some similarity to the well-known theme of "communion" (Adler, 2012; McAdams, 2002; McLean et al., 2019)—particularly the "all of humankind" aspect of the "unity/togetherness" subtheme.

What we are calling interconnectedness is closely allied with Alfred Adler's psychological construct *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* (Ansbacher, 1992). Often mistranslated as "social interest," the concept is better captured by "community feeling" or "humanistic identification." *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* may be understood as a combination of communion (Bakan, 1966) and an affinity for humanity as a whole (O'Connell, 1965).

"Harmonious interconnectedness" was identified as a common theme among people of faith age 65 and older in a grounded theory study by Hungelmann et al. (1985). This theme resonates strongly with interconnectedness and spiritual pluralism in our findings. In addition to

a tolerance of religious differences, the theme describes “a sense of harmonious interconnectedness between self, others/nature, and Ultimate Other which exists throughout and beyond time and space,” brought about via natural maturation and leading to increased feelings of purpose and meaning (Hungelmann et al., 1985, p.152).

Lifelong learning. A narrative high (+2) in lifelong learning is characterized by an emotional affinity toward, and evidence of commitment to, learning across the lifespan. Learning may take the form of formal or informal education, and is defined by concrete, specific educational experiences (e.g., earning a degree or practicing a technical craft). At the low end of the dimension (-2), the protagonist is resistant to or rejects such learning. Maslow (1943) identified “freedom to investigate and seek for information” as among the conditions that were “immediate prerequisites for the basic [physiological] need satisfactions” (p. 383). For Maslow, the desires to explore, know, and understand are central to self-actualizing.

Of course, individual attitudes toward learning reflect not only such intrinsic motivations but social inequalities. In the context of aging in particular, the cumulative effects of early cohort advantage or disadvantage tend to magnify over time according to the “Matthew effect” (Dannefer, 1987). This cumulative disadvantage/advantage hypothesis suggests that differences in lifelong learning orientation could result from early experiences with education inequality.

Secure attachment. A narrative high in secure attachment (+2) describes a warm, positive relationship with caregiver(s). This relationship is characterized by trust, safety, and warm affinity. This understanding of secure attachment is similar to Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth’s (1978), but is expanded to include rich language and fond recollection in its telling. On the low end of this dimension (-2), the protagonist describes being alienated, neglected, or

abused by his or her caregiver(s). This end of the coding scheme was theoretically expanded to include neglect and abuse, as these events did not appear in the ten focal narratives of Study 1.

It may not be surprising that the attachment theme appeared to be especially salient in the narratives provided by the five high-ST participants. Bodner et al. (2014) found that women 50–65 with secure attachment styles scored higher in presence of meaning than insecurely attached women, and that adults of all ages with secure attachment styles scored higher on this measure than insecurely attached adults. Otway and Carnelley (2013) found that an avoidant attachment style predicted decreased self-transcendence, and posited that attachment insecurity translated roughly to unfulfilled safety and love needs (Maslow, 1943). These unfulfilled needs would likely prevent a person from fulfilling esteem, self-actualization, and self-transcendence needs.

Self-actualization. Narratives high in self-actualization (+2) are characterized by an articulation of congruence with or understanding of one's self and a feeling of life fulfillment. The protagonist describes themselves as though they have found their path and know who they are as a person, and as though they are gratified by life as it is. On the low end of this dimension (-2), the protagonist is unsure of their identity or believes they have fallen very short of fulfilling their potential, and are very dissatisfied with their current life.

There is strong overlap with Maslow's (1943) description of self-actualization as the fulfillment of personal potential—"what a man *can* be he *must* be" (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). From a developmental perspective, socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) posits that as the time horizon of the future narrows, self-actualizing goals shift from knowledge acquisition to experiencing emotional meaning (Carstensen, 2006). SST describes a softening of the intensity of past regrets and an increasing acceptance of life as it has been lived. Like self-transcendence,

this latter effect can be found in both older and younger adults who perceive the future as shorter (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990).

Spiritual pluralism. Narratives high in spiritual pluralism (+2) combine two key considerations. First, the protagonist possesses a profound sense of personal spirituality. The spirituality may include references to a god figure, a divine connectedness to all of humanity/the earth/the cosmos, unifying moral codes, or transcendent experiences: the protagonist must connect to “something greater.” Second, the narrative must be specifically expansive and inclusive; anyone may access such spirituality regardless of religion, beliefs, race, ethnicity, or other social classifications. On the low end of the dimension (-2), the protagonist disavows experiential spirituality or espouses extremely exclusive spiritual views (e.g., “those who do not share my beliefs are cut off from the divine”).

Fowler's (1981) “stages of faith” model seems to bridge our narrative themes of interconnectedness and spiritual pluralism. In stage 5, “conjunctive” faith is posited to appear in midlife, and includes a recognition of the self as part of a larger social unconscious which ultimately brings about an increased intimacy with outgroup members. In stage 6 (Fowler's highest stage), individuals experience a shift from the self to a participation with the ultimate other as the center of experience. Fowler calls this stage a “commonwealth of being.”

Method

Participants

For Study 2, participants were selected from the initial pool of participants in the FLSA study. Participants were included if they had completed the Year 5 (Time 2) Life Story Interview (LSI), the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (ASTI), and the Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale (NEIS). The 10 participants selected for qualitative analysis in Study 1 (highest and lowest

scoring on self-reported ST) were excluded from Study 2. At Time 2, participants ($N = 125$) were 58.8 to 62.4 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 60.4$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 0.92$) and the sex and race breakdown remained the same at 62% female, 38% male, 58% White, 40% Black, and 2% interracial or other. Median education was college graduate, and median income was \$75,00 to \$99,999. In our analyses, we conduct tests to examine possible differences by race, sex, income, and education, but we do not make hypotheses about such differences.

Overall Procedure

LSIs and self-report measures were collected in the same manner as described in Study 1. Self-reported ST scores from Study 1 were also used in Study 2, as the NEIS and ASTI were administered only once. For Study 2, ASTI had a Cronbach's alpha of .77 and NEIS had a Cronbach's alpha of .79. For statistical analyses, we used R version 3.2.4 (R Core Team, 2017) and R packages car (Fox & Weisberg, 2011), irr (Gamer et al., 2012), lm.beta (Behrendt, 2014), and psych (Revelle, 2018). The method of narrative coding is described below.

Life Story Interview

A variation of the Life Story Interview (LSI; McAdams, 2008) described in Study 1 was administered in Study 2, which occurred four years after Study 1. Of seven trained interviewers, five were graduate students, one was a postdoctoral researcher, and one was a faculty member. Two interviewers were approximately the same age as participants while the other interviewers were adults in their twenties. Five interviewers were White, one was Colombian-American, and one was Chinese-Canadian. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by a data transcription company, and de-identified for narrative analysis.

Training with narrative themes. During the training period, very few instances for the theme of secure attachment were found. A possible explanation is that the coding scheme was

developed based on a reading of the entire Life Story Interview, including several scenes relevant to childhood that were not initially selected for Study 2 (e.g., overview of all “life chapters,” a positive childhood memory, a negative childhood memory). Thus we determined that secure attachment did not appear frequently enough in the Time 2 narratives to be included in the final coding manual. We were left with five themes—closure, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, self-actualization, and spiritual pluralism. Though childhood scenes were later coded, we chose to code for only these five themes to maintain consistency with the initial scenes coded.

Narrative coding. We coded eleven scenes from the LSI: all eight “key scenes”: high point, low point, turning point, positive childhood memory, negative childhood memory, religious/spiritual/mystical experience, and wisdom moment; as well as biggest failure or regret; next chapter (anticipated future and plans/hopes/dreams); and greatest single value and overall life theme. Coders were blind to participants’ self-reported ST scores and all other self-report and demographic information, other than those identities disclosed by participants within the narrative text (e.g., “As a Black man...”). Training was conducted on narratives from excluded Study 1 participants’ Time 1 narratives. As is typical in narrative identity research, the coding manual was revised for clarity and thoroughness as it was tested.

The scenes were coded in two groups.³ In the first group, coders achieved interrater reliabilities in the excellent range across themes: $M_{ICC} = .92$; $ICC_{SelfActualization} = .94$; $ICC_{Closure}$

³ Five scenes (turning point, religious/spiritual/mystical experience, biggest failure or regret, future, and single value/overall life theme) were coded by the first author and the third author. At the time of the research, the second author was a White undergraduate woman majoring in music and creative writing. The five scenes were coded by both coders independently for all 125 participants; scores were averaged across coder resulting in one score per narrative them per scene (Syed & Nelson, 2015).

Reviewers requested that we code an additional seven scenes. These scenes were coded by three coders, a master coder (first author) and two reliability coders. The reliability coders were both undergraduate students majoring in human development and psychological services. SK is a Black woman and TV is a White woman. In line with the gold standard/master coding method of establishing

= .94, $ICC_{\text{SpiritualPluralism}} = .95$; $ICC_{\text{LifelongLearning}} = .89$; and $ICC_{\text{Interconnectedness}} = .89$ (Hallgren, 2012).

In the second group, coders achieved interrater reliabilities in the acceptable to excellent range:

$M_{ICC} = .73$; $ICC_{\text{SelfActualization}} = .74$; $ICC_{\text{Closure}} = .59$, $ICC_{\text{SpiritualPluralism}} = .76$; $ICC_{\text{LifelongLearning}} = .94$;

and $ICC_{\text{Interconnectedness}} = .63$. Four coders coded a total of 1,375 scenes. For the purpose of analysis, each participant's scores for all eleven scenes were averaged to produce a single score for each of the five narrative themes.⁴

Results

Descriptive Findings

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for each of the study variables, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, and range. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to examine the distribution of each variable in the sample ($\alpha = 0.05$). Self-reported ST scores were normally distributed, as were the ASTI and NEIS. The narrative theme of self-actualization was normally distributed across the sample, but none of the other narrative themes were. In particular, while there was variance in all of the narrative themes, lifelong learning scores were especially restricted in range; the majority of mean scores fell between 0 and 0.2, with only one participant's mean falling below 0. This could be because study participants are likely to be more engaged in lifelong learning than the general population (e.g., participation in a nine-year longitudinal study), or it may be this code is not as sensitive to individual differences as others.

reliability, the master coder coded all narratives and these scores were used as the final scores for these scenes; the reliability coders coded 25% of the dataset in parallel to help prevent coder drift (Syed & Nelson, 2015).

⁴ There was variation in how useful each LSI scene was in drawing out content related to each narrative theme, and how well each narrative theme in a given scene predicted self-reported ST. For a scene-by-scene analysis, please see Couch and Reischer (in prep).

We tested for possible group differences in self-reported ST and narrative themes by sex, race, income, and education. Black participants were significantly more self-transcendent than White participants, $M_{\text{Black}} = 0.24$, $SD_{\text{Black}} = 0.75$; $M_{\text{White}} = -0.13$, $SD_{\text{White}} = 0.73$, $t_{\text{Welch}}(101.22) = 2.73$, $p < .01$. Black participants scored significantly higher than Whites on the themes of self-actualization $M_{\text{Black}} = 0.73$, $SD_{\text{Black}} = 0.37$; $M_{\text{White}} = 0.58$, $SD_{\text{White}} = 0.42$, $t_{\text{Welch}}(113.51) = 2.01$, $p < .05$ and spiritual pluralism, $M_{\text{Black}} = 0.25$, $SD_{\text{Black}} = 0.20$; $M_{\text{White}} = 0.08$, $SD_{\text{White}} = 0.17$, $t_{\text{Welch}}(94.03) = 5.02$, $p < .001$.

There were no group differences in self-reported ST by sex, income, or education, and there were no differences in narrative themes by sex. There was an effect of income level on one theme, spiritual pluralism, such that for every standard deviation increase in income level there was a .34 standard deviation decrease in spiritual pluralism. There was also an effect of education level on one narrative theme, lifelong learning, such that for every standard deviation increase in education level there was a .23 standard deviation increase in lifelong learning. Because the theme of lifelong learning includes a described commitment to learning throughout the lifespan, this relationship is not surprising.

Most narrative themes were significantly positively correlated with each other in the moderate range ($r = .29$ to $r = .46$). The themes of self-actualization and closure both correlated with all other themes, and were highly correlated with each other ($r = .65$). Given our conceptualization of a coherent humanistic growth story, it makes sense that many of the themes would be correlated. Considering the narrative themes as a group, Cronbach's alpha was .76.

Predictive Validity of Coding Scheme

The chief goal of Study 2 was to determine the extent to which differences identified in Study 1 could be quantified and statistically predictive of self-reported ST scores. The findings,

presented in Table 3, provide support for the hypothesis of a positive connection between self-reported ST on the one hand and the suite of humanistic growth themes conveying the experiences of closure, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, self-actualization, and spiritual pluralism on the other.

Because of race differences in self-reported ST, we controlled for this variable when examining the relationships between these scores and narrative themes. The narrative themes of closure ($\beta = .47, p < .001$), self-actualization ($\beta = .38, p < .001$), and spiritual pluralism ($\beta = .37, p < .001$) were the most strongly correlated with self-reported ST. Interconnectedness predicted self-reported ST at $\beta = .26, p = .004$. Only lifelong learning did not predict self-reported ST at a significant level, $\beta = .15, p = .09$. Putting all of the narrative themes into one model controlling for race results in an $R^2 = .31, F(6, 114) = 8.99, p < .001$.⁵ These results provide considerable empirical evidence for the value of the humanistic growth narrative prototype, and its associated coding scheme.

Discussion

Illustrating interrelationships among the themes, consider the following two narrative examples. In the first, a participant describes a high point scene: performing with his band to an audience which included family members. He recalled:

I felt kind of like a rock star for, for a weekend....I played for an hour and it was, it was just a riot. I mean a room full of people paying attention and talking and listening sometimes, and laughing and singing or humming and tapping their feet...It was good to feel like that in my own skin. You know I just, there was, it was like I wasn't missing anything...I wasn't thinking about, well I should have done this or I should have done that or next time I'm going to do this or say whoa, oh boy, I just, I just, what a job. There wasn't even any of that. It was just, it was a really comfortable [laughing], a really comfortable feeling....When it was over everybody starts turning away and stuff. I said,

⁵ In a model predicting self-reported ST by all narrative themes and controlling for race, two narrative themes remained statistically significant, closure ($\beta = .34, p = .002$) and spiritual pluralism ($\beta = .20, p = .036$).

“No, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute,” and I said, “I want to thank my wife and my children for giving me this rock star weekend.” It was really cool.

This participant describes an experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and connectedness with family as part of a peak experience, the puzzle which prompted Maslow to expand his theory to self-transcendence. Though this participant does not label this experience as “self-transcendence,” this narrative scene nonetheless illustrates the instantiation of several of the narrative themes on the “high” end of the coding dimensions (in particular, closure, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, and self-actualization). This excerpt underscores the way the humanistic growth narrative prototype is a coherent one which may appear in many different manifestations throughout a participant’s life story. In contrast, consider the following response to a question about the future.

Well, I think maybe I’d [have] a boring [life story] book...But somebody else would have had a completely different book because their most outstanding part of their life would have been their husband, and their children, and their mother and father, and taking care of their elderly mother and father, and I don’t have any of that, so it’s been really about my career and luckily I do have something to speak about because I went back to work, so otherwise, I would really be a zero....So [the next chapter is about] doing the best with what I have...and trying to keep every day happy in my own way.

This participant illustrates the instantiation of several of the narrative themes on the “low” end of the dimensions scored for humanistic growth narrative (in particular, closure, interconnectedness, secure attachment, and self-actualization). We emphasize exhibiting low self-transcendence isn’t inherently “bad”—this participant looks toward the future with a degree of steadfastness and survival—yet there is a sense in which disappointments and insecurity make it more difficult to transcend the present and look toward the future.

In sum, we hypothesized that narrative themes of humanistic growth described in Study 1, and quantified and scored on a new set of life story narratives in Study 2, would correlate with participants’ self-reported ST scores. This hypothesis was robustly confirmed for the themes of

self-actualization, closure, spiritual pluralism, and interconnectedness. However, the theme of lifelong learning was not significantly associated with self-report ST scores in Study 2, nor did we test for the theme of secure attachment in Study 2.

General Discussion

Previous research has shown that people who score high on self-reported ST enjoy numerous psychological and social benefits. But few prior studies have examined the phenomenology of self-transcendence—that is, what it feels like to be a self-transcendent person moving through time (see though Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015; Raeesi Dehkordi et al., 2020; Tornstam, 1997; Williams, 2012; Yaden et al., 2017). Employing a life-narrative approach (McAdams & McLean, 2013), the two studies reported here show that people high in self-reported ST tend to construct humanistic stories of growth to make sense of their lived experience. More so than those scoring lower on self-reported self-transcendence, they describe events and challenges in their lives as laced with themes of self-actualization, acceptance, deep spirituality and respect for other spiritual traditions, dynamic growth and change, and a sense of broad interconnectedness.

Study 1 found six narrative themes that differentiated high and low self-transcenders: closure, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, secure attachment, self-actualization, and spiritual pluralism. Taken together, the six comprise what we call a humanistic growth narrative for life, reflecting central ideas in humanistic scripts for psychological development described by Rogers (1947), Maslow (1950), and Tomkins (1987). Study 2 demonstrated the overall utility of four of the original six narrative themes in tracking self-report scores of ST for a sample of late-midlife American adults. The theme of secure attachment did not appear often enough to be coded in Study 2, however, and the theme of lifelong learning showed a modest and nonsignificant

association with self-reported ST after controlling for race. Overall, the narrative approach extends our understanding of the phenomenology of self-transcendence by identifying a coherent life-narrative pattern that may be described as a humanistic growth story.

The humanistic growth story described in this report seems oriented toward spiritual growth and the inner life. Reflecting the lived experience of people high on self-reported ST, the story “feels” like a spiritual quest—the protagonist of the humanistic growth story seems focused on evolving, exploring, expanding, fulfilling, and ultimately transcending the self.

Humanistic Growth Stories and the Phenomenology of Self-Transcendence

The “self-transcendent story” may be understood as relevant not only to the study of the construct itself, but as part of a larger story about healthy adult development, and a particular *type* of healthy adult development. We suggest the “self-transcendent story” is an especially humanistic kind of “good” adult development story, but not the only kind. Consider, for example, the “redemptive self” (McAdams, 2006). A narrator who embodies this narrative identity tends to be highly generative. Generativity, like self-transcendence, is associated with many “good things” such as strong support networks, involvement in religious, spiritual, and political activities, volunteerism, and subjective mental health and life satisfaction (McAdams, 2006). Yet where generativity seems to adhere to norms within the social system (e.g., attending to others’ suffering, developing a powerful moral code and prosocial outlook), self-transcendence seems to open up within the self and beyond the social system (e.g., intrapersonal and transpersonal expansion). The good story of self-transcendence may be particularly interesting to those seeking to understand and foster successful coping with life challenges and harmonious interconnectedness among diverse people.

The humanistic feel of life-narrative accounts provided by adults high on self-reported ST is especially apparent in interview responses to the prompt asking for a memorable spiritual or religious experience. For example, one participant scoring especially high on self-reported ST articulated their experience this way:

I remember...reaching up, taking a leaf off a tree, and I asked the tree if I could have the leaf...It belonged to the tree and I felt like...when I took the leaf from the tree that the leaf came off of its own accord kind of. So I felt like it was a gift from the tree....

For me, it doesn't matter if you call it God or life force of the universe or whatever you call it, there is something so much greater, because I'm just a little part of it, but there's everything that we do that we're involved in, everything we participate in—it's alive. Even at a molecular or an atomic level, everything is moving and at some level seems to have some kind of consciousness or awareness at least of where it is, or what it is, or what it's doing....

I am here to participate as fully as I can and not—I'm not here to be in charge.... We're supposed to celebrate the fact that there are men and there's women and that there's old ones and young ones and there's trees and flowers and cold weather and hot weather. We're supposed to celebrate that. We're supposed to enjoy all of this stuff instead of trying to control these things.

This narrative excerpt provides a compelling account of the experience of self-transcendence, while emphasizing the humanistic growth themes of self-actualization, spiritual pluralism, and interconnectedness. Another participant, who scored low on self-transcendence, responded to the same prompt this way:

I've never had that kind of [transcendent] experience....I think that's probably a bad thing just from a personal point of view because I think that is something, at least for me, I could have, you know, I could have found some sort of value in, you know, a support, a source of, you know....And so no, I've, I've never had that kind of experience.

Whereas it might not be surprising to find humanistic growth themes in accounts of demonstrably spiritual experiences, participants high in self-reported ST tended to import the same kinds of themes into life-narrative accounts of many different sorts, such as responses to prompts asking for turning point events and plans for future chapters in life. Turning point events, for example, were often framed as journeys in self-discovery, or learning to accept negative experiences (closure), or moving from an isolated experience to one of

interconnectedness. Descriptions of anticipated future chapters in life tended to describe expectations of continued growth and the hope for further fulfillment of one's inherent potential.

Limitations

Our initial reliance on quantitative self-report measures of self-transcendence to anchor the study of narrative themes is arguably a limitation. We utilized two self-report measures—the ASTI and NEIS—in an attempt to obtain a more robust measure of self-transcendence (ST), resulting in “self-reported ST.” Some elements of ST, such as loss of self-boundaries, were not well-represented in these scales. It is possible that had we used other measures to define self-reported ST, our findings may have been quite different. Further, because we combined two measures, it may be more difficult to compare our composite score to studies which employ either the ASTI or NEIS alone. No research to date has measured the correlation between the ASTI or the NEIS and other measures of ST, so we avoid speculating.

Although we identified the narrative theme of secure attachment in Study 1, we did not include questions specifically about childhood among our selected scenes in the first phase of Study 2. This may have led to the theme appearing to be less relevant as we conducted coding training for Study 2, which then resulted in our decision to drop the theme for quantitative analysis. We kept our coding manual consistent with this decision in the second phase of Study 2, which did include childhood scenes. We may have erred, and future researchers might consider including this theme in their exploration of the life stories of self-transcendent people. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that in developing the coding schemes for secure attachment and lifelong learning (the least “successful” of our tested narrative themes), the lower ends of each scale (-2) were theoretically, rather than empirically, determined. This is best demonstrated in comparing Denise and David's narratives—Denise and David obviously

different along the themes of closure, interconnectedness, secure attachment, and spiritual pluralism, but Robert demonstrated more of an absence of secure attachment and lifelong learning than a rejection of these themes. Perhaps this speaks to the limits of adapting qualitative findings into quantifiable terms.

As in any study, but especially one reliant on human coding of narrative text, the researchers themselves may have unwittingly introduced potential bias to the research. It is probable that the individual identity characteristics and life experiences of the authors contributed to their interpretations of life story narratives. In addition, high consensus between the authors involved in analysis may have resulted in decreased opportunities for intellectual conflict and novel interpretations of the findings.

The narrative themes derived in this study may overlap in content with some constructs and coding categories developed in previous studies of life stories. For example, the theme of “interconnectedness” bears significant resemblance to the idea of “communion,” which has been coded in many studies of narrative identity (Adler et al., 2016). Further research is required to sort through the various dimensions and features of life stories generated in this rapidly growing research literature. An important step in that direction was taken by McLean et al. (2019), who factor-analyzed scores from a set of different thematic coding systems obtained from a range of different narrative prompts from different samples to arrive at three broad categories: motivational and affective themes, autobiographical reasoning, and structural aspects.

While efforts to integrate different coding systems within a broad framework are useful, there is also the danger of premature closure in this relatively new research area. After all, it took at least 50 years for personality psychology to settle on the Big Five as an integrative framework for dispositional personality traits (Goldberg, 1993). And even today, new traits are being

proposed that do not fit readily within the Big Five scheme (Ashton & Lee, 2020; Moshagen, M., Zettler, I., Horsten, L. K., & Hiblig, in press). The best strategy for narrative identity research, therefore, may be to promote creative work on two different fronts—continuing to derive promising constructs regarding newfound variations that arise in life narration (as the current study aims to achieve) while looking to synthesize constructs and results across different labs and contexts when appropriate.

Future Directions

To our knowledge, ours is the first empirical study to compare self-transcendence between Black American and White American adults. The one study we have found which examined self-transcendence in Black and White adults did not test for race differences (McCarthy et al., 2013). Our findings offer a number of interesting questions for further investigation. In Study 1, there was a marked discrepancy between the “most” and “least” self-transcendent participants, with middle-class Black women making up most of the top group and affluent White adults making up the bottom group. (Though we found no self-reported ST effects by income or sex in Study 2, these differences also call for further investigation.) In Study 2 Black adults scored significantly higher on self-reported ST and on the narrative themes of self-actualization and spiritual pluralism. These findings lead us to wonder to what extent the life story narratives of Black and White adults may vary in their alignment with the conceptualizations of self-transcendence and ego integrity described by the ASTI and NEIS scales. Might the differences we found across race say something important about these groups or the psychological constructs? More research on diverse Americans is needed in order to begin to answer these questions.

Further, as theorists have traditionally conceptualized ST and ego integrity as most relevant for people in later stages of life, our approach to investigating these constructs in a non-clinical sample of late-midlife adults may expand our understanding of the developmental relevance of the constructs across the lifespan. Future research should continue to investigate the nature and correlates of self-transcendence in young, midlife, and older adults with and without life-threatening concerns, including efforts to replicate or clarify known salutogenic effects at end of life.

Finally, given that this study used novel methodology to investigate life-narrative associations with self-transcendence, it would be important to apply these narrative methods in other samples across the lifespan and across various groups to further test the utility of this method. Care should also be taken to note the geographic (metropolitan city in the Midwest of the U.S.), socioeconomic (middle class), and other sociocultural contexts of the present research.

Conclusion

The present work is the first attempt to use life narrative methods to study the lived experience of people who differ on the dimension of self-reported self-transcendence. Additionally, this study is one of few focused on self-transcendence in a sample of adults not facing end of life, and even fewer that investigate self-transcendence in late-midlife adults or compare the self-transcendent experiences of Black and White adults in the U.S. The narrative themes that emerge in the life stories of adults high on self-reported self-transcendence converge on a humanistic growth story for understanding psychological development, encompassing themes of closure, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, secure attachment, self-actualization, and spiritual pluralism. Late-midlife adults high in self-transcendence are challenged to make meaning of their life stories as part of some greater whole. Narrative analysis provides a window

into the lived experience of those facing this challenge by examining the stories they tell about their lives. The findings contribute to a growing body of research in personality and developmental psychology examining how life narrative accounts reveal the personalized dimensions of lived human experience.

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Table 1.

Coding Scheme with Examples from Study Narratives

Narrative theme	Description	Self-reported ST	Example
Closure	The degree to which past regrets inform the protagonist's life in the present.	High	"I don't let regrets dictate my life. I, I, I like to think that you can't move forward if your, your head is turned around behind you."
		Low	"Well, probably the biggest regret is not going to college....I can't help but think that my whole entire life would have been different had I gone away to college like I wanted to."
Interconnectedness	The degree to which the protagonist feels connected to all of humanity.	High	"One day it hit me...how can you believe in reincarnation because that means I could have been at any—in any one of my lives male or female, White, Asian, Latino, whatever...How can you have some grievances with somebody who you could have been?"
		Low	"Unfortunately, I became gated, I, you know, I don't really trust anybody anymore. Basically...I trust no one now, which is kind of sad, but that's just the way it is, you know."
Lifelong Learning	The degree to which the protagonist values and engages in informal and formal education throughout life.	High	"I've done pain studies, and you know, I've taken different classes on health. And so I still have the desire to learn. I like to learn, and I like trying...new things."
		Low	"I don't feel the need for a computer, but the rest of the world does...So I got it and now, I hate it...And every little thing...makes me more upset about the technology that's passing me by."
Secure Attachment	The degree to which the protagonist describes a warm, secure relationship with primary caregiver(s).	High	"My best friend in the world is my mother, I owe [her] everything. I, I used to do a lot of speaking engagements...[and] my mother would always be there. And I'd always, you know, point her out and say she's the wind beneath my wings, which she always is."

		Low	"My mother was kind of in the background, you know, during my childhood. And I didn't ha—I didn't have a lot of memories of her." [This was the lowest instance; it scored a -1, not a -2.]
Self-Actualization	The degree to which the protagonist understands their self and their potential, and has fulfilled that potential.	High	"I think I feel like a traveler that's been on a long journey and I think that all of us are like that...that we're always looking and always moving out towards discovery, whatever that happens to be for us....I think for me the discovery has just been finding out who I really am and just moving towards that."
		Low	"I've really kind of tread along in the last, the last two, three, four yearsI hope in the next year...to get all this stuff that kind of paralyzed me in the last 10, 15 years behind me and to get onto really living my life. I mean, you know, enjoying it more than I am...I would really like to become, you know, a productive member of society."
Spiritual Pluralism	The degree to which the protagonist endorses personal spirituality paired with the belief that such spirituality is available to others regardless of identity or beliefs.	High	"I couldn't commit to Protestant or Catholicism because I always felt that those religions condemn people who didn't believe in Christ and...I couldn't believe that a billion or hundreds of millions of Chinese could be wrong just because they didn't follow Christ. So I had to embrace a spirituality that included everyone."
		Low	"I've never heard angels sing...I am searching for that feeling that I wish I had a spiritual connection. That's a great help and a tool to others...But I'm not here for the grace of God, as some might say."

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics for Each Study Variable

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Range
<i>Self-report measures</i>					
Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (ASTI)	3.04	0.39	2.22	4.00	1.78
Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale (NEIS) ¹	4.35	0.57	2.33	5.67	3.34
Self-Reported ST (ASTI + NEIS) ¹	0.02	0.75	-1.90	1.88	3.78
<i>Narrative themes</i>					
Closure	0.03	0.28	-0.73	0.82	1.55
Interconnectedness	0.06	0.17	-0.55	0.77	1.32
Lifelong Learning	0.18	0.18	-0.09	0.91	1.00
Self-Actualization	0.65	0.41	-0.45	1.55	2.00
Spiritual Pluralism	0.15	0.20	-0.36	0.86	1.22

Note. ¹All measures have an $n = 125$, except for the Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale and self-reported ST with $n = 124$. Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (Levenson et al., 2005), Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale (Janis et al., 2011).

Table 3.

Correlational and Multiple Regression Results for Relations between Narrative Themes and Self-Reported Self-Transcendence

	Self-Reported ST	
	<i>r</i>	β
Closure	.50***	.47***
Interconnectedness	.28**	.26**
Lifelong Learning	.19 [†]	.15 [†]
Self-Actualization	.41***	.38***
Spiritual Pluralism	.40***	.37***

Note. For each narrative theme, the first number is the Pearson correlation between the narrative theme and self-reported ST, and the second number is the standardized beta for the narrative theme included in a multiple regression equation along with race to predict self-reported ST. Self-reported ST is a composite of the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (Levenson et al., 2005) and the Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale (Janis et al., 2011).

[†]*p* = .09, **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001