Stories of Commitment: 
The Psychosocial Construction of Generative Lives

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In this study, the authors analyzed the internalized life stories of 40 highly generative and 30 less generative adults with similar demographic profiles to discern the extent to which the 2 groups constructed different identities. The highly generative adults were more likely to reconstruct the past and anticipate the future as variations on a prototypical commitment story in which the protagonist (a) enjoys an early family blessing or advantage, (b) is sensitized to others’ suffering at an early age, (c) is guided by a clear and compelling personal ideology that remains stable over time, (d) transforms or redeems bad scenes into good outcomes, and (e) sets goals for the future to benefit society. Commitment stories sustain and reinforce the modern adult’s efforts to contribute in positive ways to the next generation. The findings connect to a growing interdisciplinary literature on narrative and human lives and suggest a new research agenda that draws on nomothetic conventions to interpret storied psychosocial constructions that people fashion to make sense of their lives in time and in culture.

A number of theorists in psychology and sociology have recently observed that contemporary American adults make sense of their sometimes scattered lives by fashioning and internalizing stories that integrate their reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future (e.g., Kohler, 1982; Giddens, 1991; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Howard, 1991; MacIntyre, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Taylor, 1989). In his life-story theory of identity, McAdams (1984, 1985, 1990, 1993) argued that beginning in late adolescence and young adulthood, men and women living in modern societies seek to construct more-or-less integrative narrative selves to provide their life with a semblance of unity and purpose. Because stories are the traditional vehicle of choice for conveying how human beings make sense of intentional action organized in time (Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1983/1984), they are ideally suited for making sense of one’s own life in time (McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988). Identity, therefore, may itself be viewed as an internalized and evolving life story, a way of telling the self, to the self and others, through a story or set of stories complete with settings, scenes, characters, plots, and themes.

The purpose of the present investigation is to examine the life stories of two groups of adults who differ on the psychosocial dimension of generativity. After Erikson (1963), generativity refers to the adult’s concern for and commitment to the well-being of the next generation, as manifested in parenting, teaching, mentoring, and other behaviors and involvements that aim to contribute a positive legacy that will outlive the self (see also, Kotre, 1984; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). In the current study, the life stories of a sample of highly generative schoolteachers and community volunteers (n = 40) are compared with the life stories constructed by a contrasting sample of purportedly less generative adults who are similar to the first group with respect to age, social class, and educational background (n = 30). Although the main data for the study are intensive life-story interviews, the study does not aim to explicate the developmental antecedents or childhood origins of adult generativity. Instead, the focus of the inquiry is on how the interviews reveal a contemporaneous life story about past, present, and future: an identity today about how the past, present, and future fit together in narrative. The interviews are coded as storied psychosocial constructions in the here and now rather than as perfectly veridical reports of the past. The central question of the inquiry, then, is this: How do highly
generative adults differ from their less generative counterparts in the ways in which they narrate their lives to make sense of who they are, who they have been, and who they may be in the future?

Narrative and Human Lives

The current study is located at the intersection of personality psychology and what Josselson and Lieblitch (1993) call "the narrative study of human lives." According to this perspective, lives may be viewed as narrated texts, known and read as stories, framed through discourse, and told in culture. Cohler and Cole (1994) wrote the following:

The life story is a narrative precisely because it represents a discourse of a particular kind, organized with a potential listener or reader in mind and with an intent, often implicit, to convince self and others of a particular plot or present ordering of experience rendered sensible within the understanding of coherence shared by speaker and listener or reader as participants within a particular culture. (p. 6)

With respect to identity, therefore, what Cohler and Cole term the implicit intent is to convince the self and others that one's life can be told through a more-or-less coherent narrative that makes sense both to the self and within the context of one's own society (McAdams, 1985). A person's identity partly reflects the kinds of stories that prevail in his or her culture. Thus, each person's life story may be located within a particular literary tradition, the storied world and the world of stories within which the individual lives, acts, and narrates.

Bruner (1990) argued that narrative is the natural mode through which human beings make sense of life in time, and he implored psychologists to turn their research toward stories (e.g., Britton & Pellegrini, 1990). Sarbin (1986) suggested that narrative may be a new "root metaphor" for psychology as a whole. Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in narrative methodologies in sociology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and psychology (McAdams & Ochberg, 1988), with some approaches using quantitative coding schemes to make narrative amenable to nomothetic research (Smith, 1992; Stewart, Franz, & Layton, 1988). Personality and social psychologists have begun to collect narrative accounts that people devise to cope with personal problems and explain puzzling or difficult life events (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Harvey, Weber, Galvin, Huszti, & Garnick, 1986; Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). Of particular interest in this regard have been narrative accounts of close interpersonal relationships, analyzed to shed light on the dynamics of human love and friendship (S. L. Murray & Holmes, 1994; Sternberg, in press; Veroff, 1992). In a related vein, Main and her colleagues (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) developed the Adult Attachment Interview, which aims to assess the degree of narrative coherence manifested in the adult's storied reconstruction of emotionally charged childhood relationships.

Whereas stories, therefore, may be used as a methodology to examine such constructs as motives, stages, values, cognitive strategies, attachment styles, and so forth, the story may also be construed as a construct itself: as an end to be explored on its own terms. From this perspective, a life story may be viewed as a psychosocial construction, accessible through narrative methods as well as other research methodologies, that functions itself as a bona fide aspect of personality (McAdams, 1996). Some traditional theories of personality (e.g., Adler, 1927; Erikson, 1963) and adult development (e.g., Frenkel, 1936; Levinson, 1977) have indeed hinted at the possibility that life stories themselves might be construed as personality constructs (McAdams, 1994b). For example, H. A. Murray (1938) contended that "the history of the organism is the organism" (p. 39), and he sought to capture the storylike quality of lives in time through such constructs as proceedings, durances, and serials. But more recent theoretical offerings have been much more explicit about the story as a construct. For instance, Tomkin's's (1987; Carlson, 1981) "script theory" views personality in terms of the reconstructed affect scenes that individuals integrate into self-defining, internalized scripts. In their dialogical theory of self, Hermans and Kempen (1993; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992) recently proposed that personality be reconceptualized in terms of a multiplicity of "1-positions" that interact through an internal dialogue in the mind to produce self-defining narratives for adult life. Following the Russian literary theorist Bakhtin (1975/1981), Hermans and Kempen conceive of the individual self as a "polyphonic novel."

McAdams (1994a, 1995) proposed that personality description encompasses at least three independent levels: (a) dispositional traits, such as the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1990); (b) contextualized concerns, such as developmental tasks and personal strivings (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990); and (c) integrative narratives of the self. The third level is the level of identity, wherein contemporary adults construct life stories to provide their lives with a sense of unity and purpose (McAdams, 1985, 1993). As psychosocial constructions, life stories are based on empirical fact (e.g., "I was born prematurely on February 7, 1954") but also go beyond fact as imaginative renderings of past, present, and future, to make one's life in time into a meaningful and followable narrative (e.g., "My father always said I was lucky to survive that premature birth; I beat the odds once, and now I am going to make my life count in a big way"). As integrative imaginative stories of one's real life, functioning to give life a meaningful ordering, life stories may be judged by such aesthetic standards as coherence and richness and by such pragmatic standards as credibility. Lying somewhere between pure fantasy and slavish chronicle, therefore, life stories are psychosocial constructions that aim to spell out personal truths: narrative explanations for life in time that are believable, followable, and even compelling. Among the features that McAdams identified as key components of contemporary adults' life stories are nuclear episodes (key scenes such as high points, low points, and turning points); imagoes (idealized personifications of the self that function as main characters in the story); thematic lines (recurrent goal sequences in narrative, especially those concerned with the goals of power—agency and love—communion), and an ideological setting (backdrop of belief and value that situates the plot in an ethico-religious location). With respect to the last feature, MacIntyre (1984) and Taylor (1989) argued that the creation of a self through narrative typically involves the establishment of some sort of moral stance, an implicit perspective on the good, from which the person can judge the quality of his or her own life and the lives of others.
Constructing a meaningful and coherent self through narrative may be a psychosocial challenge that is especially characteristic of modern Western societies (McAdams, 1996). According to Giddens (1991), modernity brings with it the problem of exploring, controlling, developing, and crafting a self as a reflexive project that the Western man or woman works on. Increasingly since about 1800, Western adults have faced the challenge of fashioning a modern self that affirms both similarity to others and individual uniqueness, finding a niche within society that can be individualized so that it becomes one's own (Baumeister, 1986; Langbaum, 1982). As modern men and women fashion individual selves, they draw on the established literary traditions of the culture, rendering life stories that contain, for example, "origin myths" set in early family experience, turning points in which the protagonist gains new insight, heroes who support the protagonist's strivings and villains who stand in the way, and endings that resolve conflict and bring events to a satisfying conclusion (Denzin, 1989). Within modernity, therefore, "a person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens, 1991, p. 54).

Generativity and Commitment

In Erikson's (1963) developmental theory, generativity vs. stagnation is the seventh of eight successive stages, usually associated with the period of middle adulthood. Ideally, the generative adult seeks to nurture, guide, and care for those things and people that will potentially survive the self and thereby contribute positively to the next generation. Early studies of generativity relied on clinical ratings and subjective judgments to explore developmental assumptions about the generativity stage (Ryff & Heintke, 1983; Snarey, Kuehrle, Son, Hauser, & Vaillant, 1987; Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). But recently researchers have developed and validated standard measures of individual differences in generativity to examine age—cohort differences, personality correlates, and life outcomes of adult generativity. Using self-report scales, behavior checklists, and accounts of personal strivings to assess generativity, McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993) showed that midlife (age 37–42) men and women scored higher on generativity, overall, than younger (age 22–27) and older (age 67–72) adults, in support of Erikson's claim that generativity is an especially prominent issue of midlife. By means of a Q-sort measure of generativity, Peterson and Klohnen (1995) showed that highly generative women at midlife displayed a variety of prosocial personality characteristics and expressed generative attitudes through parenting, work, or community service. Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) found that generativity among parents was positively associated with the extent of their involvement in their children's schooling. Generativity has been positively associated with measures of empathy and with both agentic (achievement and power) and communal (affiliation and intimacy) motivation (Guyot & Shelton, 1993; McAdams, Ruettel, & Foley, 1986; Peterson & Stewart, 1993; Van de Water & McAdams, 1989).

Synthesizing a number of theoretical accounts of generativity, McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) developed a conceptual model, which views generativity as a constellation of seven psychosocial features, centered around the personal and societal goal of providing for the next generation. According to the model, (a) cultural demand about age-appropriate behavior and (b) inner desire concerning needs to attain symbolic immortality and to be needed by others work together in adulthood to stimulate a conscious (c) concern for the next generation, which, when combined with a (d) belief in the worthwhileness of human life for the future, may lead to (e) generative commitment and finally (f) generative action, as expressed in behaviors that aim to create or maintain worthy products and outcomes that may be offered to the next generation as a gift. The last feature of the model is (g) generative narration, which refers to the way in which the adult understands and narrates his or her generative efforts and projects in the context of his or her self-defining life story. For many adults, generativity is narrated to produce a satisfying ending for the life story, envisioned for the future, through which one's products and outcomes outline the self as self-extending legacies that suggest a way in which endings, in a sense, "give birth to" new beginnings (Becker, 1973; McAdams, 1993).

In an examination of eight provocative case studies, Kotre (1984) explored different ways in which adults incorporate generativity into their life narratives. Peterson and Stewart (1994) found that among samples of graduates of Radcliffe and Mills Colleges who are now at midlife, the most generative women tended to stress the importance of mentors in the past and to integrate important political events into their narrative accounts of their own life. Colby and Damon (1992) interviewed 23 "moral exemplars," men and women who are strongly committed to doing good works for others in their community, and found that their life stories tended to center on an abiding conviction about the goodness of their own pursuits, a sense of mission or destiny about their own work (often rooted in spirituality or religion), and an ability to overcome obstacles and hardships. Although Colby and Damon were not studying generativity per se, their moral exemplars were, for the most part, highly generative adults whose work often aimed to benefit directly children and youth. The exploratory findings from Colby and Damon, furthermore, are reminiscent of what Tomkins (1987) identified as a commitment script (see also Andrews, 1991; Carlson, 1988). The adult whose life narrative is organized around a commitment script envisions a clear and unambiguous goal in the future that, in some cases, is an imagined reenactment or magnification of a highly positive childhood scene. Within a commitment script, affect scenes tend to be sequenced in such a way that bad things often end up turning good.

The Current Study

Tying together perspectives on life narratives and adult generativity, the current study examines how highly generative adults construct self-defining life stories that differ in fundamental ways from those constructed by their less generative peers. Guiding the search for group differences in life stories are the portraits of moral exemplars offered by Colby and Damon (1992), the delineation of commitment scripts in the writings of Tomkins (1987), and a careful reading and analysis of the life-story interviews of 10 adults (5 high in generativity and 5
low in generativity), conducted before the current study. On the basis of these sources, it is expected that compared with less generative adults, highly generative men and women will tend to reconstruct their past and anticipate their future within the narrative frame of a commitment story. It is suggested that in the prototypical commitment story, the protagonist comes to an early realization that (a) he or she has been blessed or chosen in a positive way whereas (b) many other people seem to be significantly less fortunate. The protagonist is guided by (c) a clear and compelling personal ideology that remains steadfast over time. Moving through the story over time, she or he (d) encounters numerous obstacles and negative scenes that eventually are redeemed or made into good outcomes. The protagonist (e) dedicates his or her life to the pursuit of goals aimed at benefiting others or society as a whole. This hypothesized cluster of five themes characteristic of commitment stories—early advantage, sensitivity to the suffering of others, moral steadfastness, redemptive sequences of life scenes, and commitment to prosocial goals—may also be found in biographical accounts of such paragons of generativity as Mahatma Gandhi. Indeed, Erikson (1969) underscored Gandhi's childhood sense of being chosen and his ultrasingitivity to the suffering of others. In addition, these elements may be observed in many of the classic stories of generativity from ancient myth and folklore, as one sees in the redemption sequence in the story of the birth of the Israelite nation (Abraham and Sarah must suffer many years of childlessness before Isaac can be born) and in the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter, in which the fertility goddess, Demeter, must endure a winter of separation before her daughter, abducted to the underworld, can come back joyfully to her in the spring (McAdams, 1993).

From the standpoint of methodology, finally, the current study breaks new ground in its effort to combine idiographic—qualitative emphases with the conventions of nomothetic—quantitative research. Although case studies and life histories have traditionally proven useful in the development of hypotheses and theory formation (e.g., Levinson, 1977; White, 1981), rarely have personality researchers been successful in using them for the evaluation of propositions in a quantitative manner. One reason for this is that intensive, interpretive studies virtually never use the convention of a control group, or contrasting sample to whom results from the targeted cases may be compared. For example, Colby and Damon (1992) did not compare their observations of 23 moral exemplars to case data obtained from a contrasting sample of people who might have been, say, morally less noteworthy. By contrast, the current study examines life stories of 70 adults, 40 of whom are initially chosen for their strong commitment to generativity and 30 of whom constitute a contrasting sample of less generative but still well functioning men and women, similar in age and demographics to the generative group. In addition, the current study uses quantitative content analysis of the narrative data, enabling the researchers to determine the extent to which thematic narrative differences between the two groups are statistically meaningful.

Method

Participant Selection

Three different indicators of generativity were used for participant classification. The first was professional—volunteer status. Participants in the high-generativity group were recruited from a pool of teachers recognized for excellence in primary and secondary education and from adults who had made substantial contributions to children, families, and students in unpaid volunteer work. By contrast, participants in the contrasting group were not employed as primary or secondary school teachers and were not involved at the current time in unpaid volunteer work with children, families, or students.

The second sampling criterion was the participants' scores on a paper-and-pencil questionnaire assessing individual differences in generativity concern, the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). The LGS is a 20-item self-report scale, which includes such items as "I try to pass along knowledge I have gained through my experience" and "I feel as though my contributions will exist after I die." The participant rates each item on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 (statement never applies to me) to 3 (statement always applies to me). The scale shows high internal consistency (Cronbach's α of .82 and .83 in McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) and adequate test–retest reliability (.73 over a 3-week span in McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Loyola Generativity Scale scores have been shown to be positively correlated with measures of generative acts, strivings for generativity in daily life, and themes of generativity in autobiographical recollections (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams et al., 1993).

A third criterion was participants' scores on a paper-and-pencil measure of daily generative acts, the Generative Behavior Checklist (GBC; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). The GBC is a 50-item checklist of behavioral acts. Of the total, 40 acts represent generative behaviors, whereas the remaining 10 are neutral acts unrelated to generativity. Examples of purported generative acts are "taught somebody a skill," "read a story to a child," and "attended a neighborhood or community meeting." On the GBC, the participant responds to each act by specifying how often in the previous months he or she has performed the given act. The participant marks 0 if the act has not been performed during the previous 2 months, 1 if it has been performed once, or 2 if the act has been performed more than once during the past 2 months. The scores on the 40 generative items are then summed, to provide a composite index of generative behavior in daily life. Previous research has shown that GBC scores correlate significantly with LGS scores, with generativity strivings, and with generativity themes in autobiography (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams et al., 1993).

A total of 70 participants (32 men and 38 women), ranging in age from 25 to 72 years (mean age = 43.2, SD = 10.6), participated in an

1 These 10 prior interviews were not included in the 70 cases considered in the current study. The 10 served instead as a practice sample that was used to derive ideas, test banches, and develop coding procedures. The exploration of the 10 practice protocols was guided by an extensive reading of the theoretical literature on generativity. The procedure of formulating thematic coding systems with a small derivation sample and then testing the systems through blind cross-validation on a larger second sample is a methodological paradigm borrowed from the literature on assessing social motives in Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) stories (see, for example, McAdams, 1980, for intimacy motivation; McClelland, Clark, Roby, and Atkinson, 1949, for the need for achievement; and Winter, 1973, for power motivation). In these studies, TAT stories written by an "arousal group" of individuals, whose temporary motive levels were experimentally heightened, were compared with TAT stories written by a control group, to derive thematic categories that successfully differentiated between the two groups. In a parallel fashion, before the current study, life-story interviews conducted with 5 adults known to be highly generative were compared with those conducted with 5 less generative adults, to derive categories that differentiated between the two groups. Thus, the coding systems used in the current study were derived both theoretically (drawing from the literature on generativity, commitment scripts, and moral exemplars) and empirically.
Table 1
Demographic Characteristics and Generativity
Scores of the Two Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>High-generativity group</th>
<th>Contrasting group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male/female)</td>
<td>18/22</td>
<td>14/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>43.1 (10.0)</td>
<td>43.2 (11.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education levela</td>
<td>3.4 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.2 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median family incomeb</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% currently married</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. children</td>
<td>1.5 (1.3)</td>
<td>1.1 (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGS score</td>
<td>45.0 (5.6)</td>
<td>34.5 (8.3)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBC score</td>
<td>35.7 (9.7)</td>
<td>24.9 (8.9)***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. LGS = Loyola Generativity Scale; GBC = Generative Behavior Checklist.

a Education was coded on a 5-point scale: 1 = high school or below; 2 = some college; 3 = college degree (bachelor’s degree); 4 = master’s degree; 5 = advanced graduate degree (e.g., doctor of philosophy or doctor of medicine).
b Annual family income (in 1991 or 1992) was coded on a 10-point scale: 1 = under $10,000; 2 = $10,000–$19,999; 3 = $20,000–$29,999; 4 = $30,000–$39,999; 5 = $40,000–$49,999; 6 = $50,000–$59,999; 7 = $60,000–$69,999; 8 = $70,000–$79,999; 9 = $80,000–$89,999; 10 = $90,000 and over.

*** p < .001.

Intensive study of life stories, generativity, and adult personality development. Of the 70, 50 participants (71%) were between the ages of 35 and 55 years, inclusive. The high-generativity group consisted of 40 participants (18 men and 22 women), whereas the contrasting group was made up of 30 participants (14 men and 16 women). Most of the participants in the study were middle-class and upper-middle-class professionals, and the vast majority were White (3 African American, 1 Latina, and 1 Asian American). As can be seen in Table 1, the two groups did not differ significantly in mean age, family income, or education level. The high-generativity group, however, did show a higher proportion of participants who were currently married.

In the high-generativity group, over half of the participants (22 out of 40) were recruited on the basis of their professional status as elementary and secondary school teachers who were recognized in their communities for teaching excellence. Of these 22, 8 were award winners of the 1990 Golden Apple Award, an award given annually to 10 outstanding teachers in the Chicago metropolitan area. The other 14 teachers worked at two private schools that have perennially received high marks for excellence in elementary and secondary education. The remaining 18 participants in the high-generativity group were adults who had distinguished themselves for their considerable volunteer work with children, families, or students. Of these, 12 were regular volunteers at a neighborhood food pantry that provides free food for needy children and families, and the other 6 were mental health professionals who volunteered to supervise graduate students in their clinical work without receiving financial remuneration. In a professional or volunteer capacity, therefore, the 40 participants in the high-generativity group were readily recognized by others for their contributions to the well-being of future generations: the hallmark of generativity in adulthood.

The 30 participants in the contrasting group were contacted through newspaper advertisements for a study of personality in adulthood. When respondents to the advertisements phoned in, they were asked a series of questions, to obtain information on age, gender, occupation, volunteer activities, and history of psychiatric care. Because this was a study of nonclinical adults, those respondents who were currently receiving some form of mental health care or who had ever been hospitalized for a mental illness were excluded from consideration. To maximize differences in generativity between the two groups, any prospective participants for the contrasting group who were currently employed as primary or secondary school teachers or who were currently engaged in volunteer work involving children, families, or students were also dropped from consideration.

Every effort was made to match the two groups on demographic indexes of professional status, education level, family income, age, and gender. The contrasting group, therefore, was by no means a random sample, nor was it representative of the respondents to the advertisement. Instead, it consisted of reasonably well functioning community adults who generally matched the high-generativity group across a number of important demographic characteristics. Although other unmeasured characteristics might distinguish the two groups, a primary difference between the groups was assumed to be generativity.

In the current study, the LGS and GBC were used to screen out participants whose scores were either too high (contrasting group) or too low (high-generativity group) to be consistent with their classification according to professional—volunteer status. Cutoff scores for the LGS and the GBC were determined from McAdams et al.’s (1993) survey of generativity among young, middle, and older adults. Therefore, teachers and community volunteers whose LGS scores and GBC scores were both below the mean scores obtained from McAdams et al.’s (1993) earlier sample of 152 adults were considered to have scores too low to be included in the high-generativity group, and they were thus dropped from the study. This resulted in a loss of only 5 participants (from originally 45 to the final 40). Similarly, those adults recruited from the advertisement who were accepted as interviewees but whose LGS and GBC scores were both above the mean of those obtained in McAdams et al. (1993) were dropped from the study because their scores on the scales were deemed to be too high for inclusion in the contrasting group. This resulted in a loss of 9 subjects, from 39 to 30. As a result of this sampling arrangement, the participants in the high-generativity group had much higher mean scores on the LGS and GBC than did participants in the contrasting group (p < .001), as can be seen in Table 1.

In summary, then, the 40 participants in the high-generativity group consisted of well-recognized teachers and community volunteers who scored above the mean (from a previous study with a different sample; McAdams et al., 1993) on at least one (and usually both) of two self-report measures of generativity. On the other hand, the 30 participants in the contrasting group consisted of respondents to a newspaper advertisement who were chosen to be highly similar to the high-generativity participants with respect to age, gender, income, education, and professional status but who were not teachers or community volunteers and who scored below the mean on at least one (and usually both) of two generativity scales. Within the high-generativity group, 22 participants were employed as teachers, 6 were employed as mental health professionals (counseling psychologists and social workers), 2 were lawyers, 3 were employed in business or management, 2 were in technical white-collar jobs, 1 was a pastor, 2 were retired, and 2 were unemployed. Among the participants in the contrasting group, 12 were employed in business or management (including 2 who owned small businesses and 3 who were financial analysts), 3 were college professors, 3 were lawyers, 2 were engineers, 1 was a television producer, 2 worked in retail sales, 2 worked in city government, 1 was a secretary, 1 was a paralegal, 1 was a chef, 1 was a graduate student, and 1 was retired.

Procedure
Each participant was paid $40 for participating in two sessions. In the first session, the participant completed a consent form and a series of paper-and-pencil measures, including the LGS and GBC. In a second session, a trained interviewer administered the life-story interview to the participant. In addition, most of the participants were administered a short version of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Murray, 1943) at the end of the second session. Data from the TAT were not used in the current study.
The Life-Story Interview

Described in McAdams (1985, 1993), the life-story interview is a semi-structured procedure wherein an interviewer asks the participant a series of questions designed to elicit the main features of a person's self-defining life story. The interview typically requires 2–3 hr of time to complete. As shown in Appendix A, the interview begins in a general fashion and moves gradually to more specific questions.

The interviewer begins by asking the participant to think about his or her life as if it were a book and to divide the book into chapters, providing a title and plot summary for each (after Fowler, 1981). Following the life chapters, the participant is asked to describe in detail eight specific scenes, or nuclear episodes (McAdams, 1985), that stand out clearly in the story. These are a peak experience (life-story high point), nadir experience (low point), turning point experience, earliest memory, significant childhood memory, significant adolescent memory, significant adult memory, and other significant memory. For each scene, the participant should describe in detail what exactly happened, when the event occurred, who was involved, what the participant was thinking and feeling during the event, and what, if anything, the scene says about the participant or his or her life story (after McAdams, 1982; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). Next, the interviewer asks the participant to identify and describe the four people who have had the biggest impact on the life story. The interviewer also asks if the participant can identify a personal hero or heroine. After that, the participant describes what he or she sees as the future chapters of the story—detailing plans, hopes, dreams, goals, and so on for the future and describing any ways in which these future possibilities might provide opportunities for being creative or making a contribution to others. Following is a short section in which the participant identifies two current areas in which he or she is experiencing tension or conflict. Next is the section on personal ideology, which contains a number of specific questions on religion, politics, and values (modeled in part after Marcia, 1980). The interviewer asks the participant to describe his or her religious beliefs and values and how they have developed over time, to describe political views, and to answer a series of more philosophical questions, such as “What is the most important value in human living?” Finally, the interviewer asks the participant to think back on the entire interview and to discuss the extent to which the interview suggests a dominant theme or message in the story.

Note that although the interview aims to obtain a story about a life, the respondent does more than tell stories in the interview. Some open-ended questions routinely pull for storylike responses (e.g., life chapters, high points, and low points); however, others are more geared to elicit declarative statements and other responses that are less like narratives (e.g., “What is the overall theme of your life story?”).

In the current study, each taped interview was transcribed into single-spaced, typed pages. (The standard questions asked by the interviewers were not transcribed, but clarifying questions and dialogues between the interviewer and the participant were transcribed verbatim.) For 70 interviews, a total of 2,123 single-spaced, typed pages were produced.

Coding the Interviews

Drawing from Colby and Damon's (1992) descriptions of the life stories of moral exemplars, Tomkins's (1987) articulation of a commitment script, and a careful reading of prior interview protocols from 5 highly generative and 5 less generative adults, the researchers delineated a narrative framework for the commitment story. In essence, the commitment story encompasses the protagonist's experience of an early blessing or advantage, early sensitivity to the suffering of others, steadfast commitment over time to a clear and detailed personal ideology, redemptive affective sequences in which bad events become good outcomes, and the pursuit of future goals aimed at benefiting others or society as a whole. Coding procedures for each of these five general themes were derived from and articulated, with respect to the 10 practice interviews mentioned above. For each coding procedure, two independent coders, unaware of participant classifications, performed the coding for the 70 cases. In Appendix B, we summarize the coding procedures used for each of the five features of the commitment story and for one additional coding system used to assess the overall affective tone of the story.

Early advantage. The first general theme of the commitment story refers to the protagonist's experiencing an early advantage or blessing. In the practice sample of 10 interviews, this theme manifested itself through descriptions of being favored or considered special in a positive way as a child, through descriptions of secure attachments to family and community as a child, and through the mentioning of gratuitous acts of kindness offered by strangers or acquaintances in the early part of the life story. Taken together, all three forms suggest a story featuring the young protagonist's favored status in a caring childhood milieu.

These three different expressions of early advantage were translated into three different coding systems. For the first, called family blessing, the coders read the entire interview for each participant, to detect any instances in which the participant described him- or herself as having received a special advantage, blessing, or positive identification that singled him or her out in a positive way in the family. Examples might include being viewed as having a special talent, assuming a unique and highly valued role, or being the long-awaited or favored child. Scoring each interview as a whole, the coders provided a score of 1 for the presence of such an expression or of 0 for its absence. Exact agreement across the 70 interviews was achieved in 65 cases (92.8%).

The second expression of early advantage was childhood attachments, the extent to which the participant reconstructed attachment to mother, father, grandparents, siblings, friends—school, and church—religion, in either secure or insecure terms (after Ainsworth, 1989; Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1990). Coders read the entire interview transcript for each participant and provided one overall rating for each of the six attachment domains listed above. For each domain, the coder rated the overall quality of childhood attachment expressed in the story on a 3-point scale. A score of 0 was given for anxious—ambivalent or avoidant attachment, in which the participant expressed considerable negativity or conflict in the given childhood domain. A score of 1 was given for intermediate, mixed, or vague responses that appeared to be neither especially secure nor insecure, or decidedly both. A score of 2 was given for secure attachment in the domain, wherein the participant expressed considerable feelings of trust, confidence, and interpersonal connection to the given person(s) (e.g., father or siblings) or institution (e.g., church—religion). (If no information on the given domain was included in the interview, then the participant received a score of 1 for attachment in that domain.) Total attachment security was the sum of the six ratings, ranging hypothetically from 0 (least secure) to 12 (most secure). Coding reliability for the overall total attachment index was .80.

The third expression of early advantage was helpers versus enemies, an indication of the extent to which other people in the story were described as helping and kind (helpers), on the one hand, or neglecting and oppositional (enemies), on the other. The coders read through the
opening life chapters section of each interview to identify the number of specific incidents in which the participant explicitly described a helper or an enemy. Helpers were nonrelatives in the story who assisted, aided, taught, advised, or influenced the participant in an especially positive way. By contrast, enemies were people in the story who seemed to block the participant’s aspirations and goals or whose actions were described by the participant as extremely detrimental to the participant’s well-being, as in characters described as abusive, hurtful, hateful, or deceitful. Interscorer reliability was .77 for helpers and .72 for enemies. Because the length of the life chapters section of the interview varied substantially across participants, total helpers and enemies counts were divided by the number of typed lines constituting the participant’s life chapters section, to correct for differences in protocol length.

Suffering of others. To capture what in the practice sample was a tendency in the stories of highly generative adults to incorporate an early awareness of the suffering of others into their reconstructions of the past, two independent and unaware coders read through the life chapters section, earliest memory, and significant childhood memory, to identify any incidents in which the participant (as a child) expressed sympathy, empathy, or awareness with regard to the suffering of other people. Targets of the participant’s concern might include the handicapped, mentally ill, elderly, sick, disabled, economically disadvantaged, or any of a number of other groups or individuals who might require special care or help. Coders provided a single score for each interview based on a simple 3-point scale, with a score of 2 indicating an explicit description of at least one specific and important encounter with other people who require special care, a score of 1 for minimal evidence, albeit vague, of an awareness of the special needs of others as a child, and a score of 0 for no awareness expressed. Interscorer reliability was .85.

Moral steadfastness. To code the extent to which the participant’s story suggested a steadfast commitment to a clear and detailed personal ideology, as suggested in the writings of Colby and Damon (1992) on moral exemplars, as well as in the 10 practice protocols, coders assessed the depth of degree, clarity, and continuity in personal ideologies, as manifested in the last two sections of the life-story interviews (sections dealing with values and beliefs), on three corresponding 4-point scales, ranging from 0 (very low) to 3 (very high). For depth, the coders assessed the strength of a person’s ideological convictions and the extent to which the participant framed his or her life story in such a way as to suggest that ideology was an especially significant factor or determining force. For clarity, the coders assessed the overall coherence, consistency, and articulateness of the participant’s expressed ideology. For continuity, the coders assessed the extent to which the participant’s story suggested that beliefs and values endured over time. A high score for continuity was given for accounts in which the participant emphasized the extent to which his or her past and present beliefs were continuous with, connected to, or meaningfully related to each other. Therefore, a participant who said that her or his beliefs changed significantly over time might still score high on continuity if she or he could document how these changes suggested an underlying continuity and predictability in perspective. By contrast, low scores on ideological continuity suggested that the person’s values and beliefs were not predictable in the long run. Interscorer reliabilities were .73 for depth, .67 for clarity, and .79 for continuity.

Redemption (versus contamination) sequences. A salient characteristic of the stories created by highly generative adults in the practice sample was the tendency to sequence affective scenes, so that especially negative events resulted in positive outcomes, a tendency described also by Tomkins (1987) as part of a commitment script. In the practice sample, the life stories of highly generative adults did not appear to be more positive in the overall, but they seemed to group negative and positive affect so that the former immediately preceded the latter. The nongenerative adults, by contrast, did not appear to sequence affects in any regular pattern. Out of this observation was developed a coding system for redemption sequences, to identify narrative forms in which decidedly bad events are subsequently redeemed or made better, resulting in good outcomes. A parallel coding system for contamination sequences was developed to identify the opposite form, wherein a decidedly good event becomes very bad.

For redemption sequences, coders scored the 70 protocols in three ways. First, the coders read each participant’s account of a nadir experience, to determine if the negative experience directly resulted in a positive outcome. If so, the participant received 1 point for redemption sequence in the nadir experience. If, in addition, the turning bad into good was a direct result of the participant’s active efforts to effect the change, then the nadir experience received a 2nd point. Second, the coders read each participant’s account of a turning point experience, to determine if the transformation described was from a decidedly negative to decidedly positive state (score 1 point) and, if so, whether the turning from negative to positive was a direct result of the participant’s active efforts (add 1 point). Across the two episodes, interscorer reliability was .92.

Finally, the coders read through the opening life chapters section of each interview and identified the number of explicit redemptive incidents (in which a bad scene was immediately followed by a good outcome). Interscorer reliability was .65. Because of the modest reliability coefficient, a third coder read through all of the examples identified by the two coders and made a final decision as to which ones should be included in the final score for each participant. The total number identified for each participant was divided by the number of typed lines in the life chapters section, to correct for protocol length.

Contamination sequences were coded in a parallel fashion, using four different methods. First, accounts of peak experiences were coded, to determine if the positive event resulted in a negative outcome (1 point). Second, accounts of nadir experiences were coded, to determine if the negative event was immediately preceded by a positive event (1 point). Third, accounts of turning point experiences were coded, to determine if the turn identified by the participant was from a decidedly positive to negative affect state (1 point). In all three cases, points were given only when there was explicit evidence of a direct move from a positive affect state to a negative affect state. Interscorer reliability for this sum across the three episodes was .81. Finally, coders read through the opening life chapters section for each participant, to identify explicit examples of contamination incidents, as under redemptive sequences. Interscorer reliability was .68; a third coder read through all the examples identified and decided which ones should be used for the final analysis, as with redemption sequences. Each participant’s total was divided by the number of typed lines in life chapters, to correct for protocol length.

Prosocial goals for the future. The future chapters section of the life-story interview was rated on three separate 4-point scales for the extent to which the participant articulated goals in three different domains: self (e.g., personal, professional and leisure time); family (e.g., marriage and children); and society (e.g., goals aimed at benefiting schools, church, or other extrafamilial groups or institutions deemed worthy of care). The score for societal goals was deemed to be a rough index of the participant’s investment in prosocial goals for the future. A score of 0 indicated no goals in the area, 1 indicated the presence of unarticulated goals in the area (goals mentioned but little detail given as to how they were to be accomplished), 2 indicated one well-articulated goal, and 3 indicated the presence of two or more well-articulated goals in the domain. Interscorer reliabilities were .71 for self goals, .80 for family goals, and .83 for society goals.

Overall affect tone. Although not predicted to be part of the thematic constellation characteristic of a commitment story, overall emotional tone in stories was coded, to determine whether the two groups differed in the general emotional quality of their life narratives. This was coded in two ways. First, the coders scored each of eight particular scenes described in the second section of the interview (peak, nadir, turning
point, earliest, childhood, adolescent, adult, and other memory) for the presence (1) or absence (0) of two distinct positive affects (i.e., joy and excitement–interest) and four distinct negative affects (i.e., distress–sadness, fear–anxiety, anger, and shame), following descriptions of Izard (1977). Across the eight scenes, interscorer reliabilities were \(.77\) for joy, \(.80\) for excitement–interest, \(.86\) for distress–sadness, \(.83\) for fear–anxiety, \(.79\) for anger, and \(.77\) for shame. Second, coders read the life chapters sections of the interviews and provided ratings for overall positivity, on a scale ranging from 5 (completely positive and optimistic) to 1 (completely negative and pessimistic), as manifested in the participant’s accounts of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Thus, each participant received three scores for positivity. Summing the three to make a single index of overall affective positivity, interscorer reliability for the total was \(.79\).

**Results**

**Constructing the Variables: The Commitment Story**

The commitment story was operationalized in terms of five general themes: (a) early advantage, (b) suffering of others, (c) moral steadfastness, (d) redemption versus contamination sequences, and (e) prosocial goals for the future.

The first theme, early advantage, was coded according to three separate systems: family blessing, childhood attachments, and helpers versus enemies. All three assessed the extent to which the participant had articulated a life story featuring the young protagonist’s favored status in a caring childhood milieu. Of the 70 participants, 21 showed evidence of a family blessing (score 1), whereas 49 received a score of 0. With respect to childhood attachments, ratings of security in each of the six domains (mother, father, grandparents, siblings, friends–school, and church–religion) were positively intercorrelated, with 6 of the 15 correlation coefficients reaching statistical significance. The intercorrelations of attachment ratings ranged from a low of .04 between sibling and grandparents to a high of .49 (\(p < .001\)) between mother and father attachment. Summing the six attachment ratings, total childhood attachment ranged from 3 (least secure) to 12 (most secure), \((M = 8.80, SD = 2.35)\). Incidents of helpers in the story ranged from 0 to 1.5 (per 100 lines of life chapters text), \((M = 0.20, SD = 0.32)\).

The second theme, suffering of others, was coded on a 3-point scale, with scores ranging from 0 to 2, \((M = 0.34, SD = 0.66)\). The modal score on the variable was 0; only 17 of the 70 participants (24%) scored 1 or 2, indicating that it was relatively rare for a life story to include references to the protagonist’s sensitivity to the suffering of others at an early age.

The third theme, moral steadfastness, was operationalized as ratings on (a) depth, (b) clarity, and (c) continuity over time of personal ideology. The three ratings were highly intercorrelated \((rs = .55\) between depth and clarity, .39 between depth and continuity, and .49 between clarity and continuity, \(ps < .001\)). A single index of moral steadfastness, then, was the sum of the three ratings for each participant, ranging from 0 to 9, \((M = 4.80, SD = 2.33)\).

The fourth theme, redemption versus contamination sequences, was coded within nadir experiences and turning point experiences and as the number of redemptive incidents per 100 lines of life chapters text, as described in the Method section. These three indices were positively correlated with each other \((r = .27, p < .05\), between nadir and turning point experiences; \(r = .34, p < .01\), between nadir experiences and life chapter incidents; and \(r = .31, p < .01\), between turning point experiences and life chapter incidents). To create a single index for redemption sequences, the three separate scores were each standardized \((Z\) scores) and then summed for each participant. Conceptualized as narrative sequences in which a bad (negative affect) scene was immediately followed by a good (positive affect) scene, redemption sequences appeared in five different forms: sacrifice, recovery, growth, learning, and improvement. Examples of all five are shown in Appendix C.

The fifth theme, prosocial goals for the future, was operationalized in a single rating of the number and the degree of articulation of personal goals aimed at the betterment of society and its institutions that the participant identified in the future chapters section of the interview. This score ranged from 0 to 3, \((M = 1.10, SD = 0.96)\).

Intercorrelations among the summary measures of the five general themes constituting the commitment story (three measures for early advantage and one for each of the other four themes) are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, almost all of the correlations are positive but rather low. Of the 21 correlation coefficients, 6 reach statistical significance, with the highest being between the themes of moral steadfastness and redemption sequences \((r = .39, p < .001)\).

**Group Differences: The Commitment Story**

To test the extent to which the life stories constructed by the high-generativity participants differed from those constructed in the contrasting group with respect to the salience of themes constituting the commitment story, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed, with sex and generativity group serving as the two categorical independent variables and the seven coding systems operationalizing the five themes of commitment stories serving as the correlated dependent variables. The results of the MANOVA showed a highly significant overall effect for generativity group, \(F(7, 54) = 11.93, p < .001\), but no significant multivariate effects for sex or for the interaction of generativity group and sex. Across the seven coding systems, adults in the high-generativity group scored significantly higher on the commitment story thematic constellation than did the adults in the contrasting group.

Examination of the univariate \(F\) tests revealed that the highly generative adults scored higher than the contrasting group on the four indexes of suffering of others, \(F(1, 60) = 7.70, p < .01\); moral steadfastness, \(F(1, 60) = 19.06, p < .001\); redemption sequences, \(F(1, 60) = 19.99, p < .001\); and prosocial goals for the future, \(F(1, 60) = 25.42, p < .001\). With respect to the fifth theme of early advantage, however, only one of the three coding systems showed a significant difference. Highly generative adults scored significantly higher on family blessing, \(F(1, 60) = 10.60, p < .01\). Group differences on childhood attachments, \(F(1, 60) = 1.24\), and number of helper incidents, \(F(1, 60) = 0.94\), were not statistically significant.

**Other Group Differences**

For two of the five general themes constituting the commitment story constellation, indications of the opposite idea were
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Family blessing</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Childhood attachments</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Helpers</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Suffering of others</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Moral steadfastness</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Redemption sequences</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Prosocial goals for the future</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.30*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Family blessing, childhood attachments, and helpers are each scoring systems designed to tap into the more general life-story theme of early advantage. Sample sizes for the correlations ranged between 66 and 70 because of occasional missing data. Family blessing was coded as a categorical (yes/no) variable, but for these correlations, it was treated as an interval-level variable, with 1 = yes and 0 = no. *p < .05. ***p < .001.

also coded. With respect to the helpers coding system (characters help the protagonist), therefore, coders also scored the number of incidents of enemies (characters hinder the protagonist) in the life story. In conjunction with redemption sequences (bad scenes turn good), the coders also scored the interviews for contamination sequences (good scenes turn bad). Examples of some contamination sequences obtained in the data appear in Appendix D. Contamination sequences were coded in peak experiences, turning point experiences, nadir experiences, and as incidents in the life chapters section of the interview. As in the case of redemption sequences, the four indexes of contamination sequences were standard scored and summed, to provide a single composite index.

Although neither enemies nor contamination sequences were considered features of the hypothesized commitment story, both themes showed significant differences as a function of generativity group. The high-generativity group scored significantly lower on number of enemies of enemies per 100 lines of life chapters text (M = 0.08, SD = 0.22) than did the contrasting group (M = 0.26, SD = 0.30), t(68) = -2.96, p < .01. Likewise, the high-generativity group (M = -0.96, SD = 1.60) scored lower on the summary index of contamination sequences, compared with the contrasting group (M = 1.28, SD = 2.64), t(68) = -4.40, p < .001. As can be seen in Table 3, the high-generativity group scored lower than the contrasting group on contamination sequences as shown in turning points, nadir experiences, and life chapter sequences, but not in narratives of peak experiences. With respect to sex differences, men tended to score higher on contamination sequences in peak experiences (M = 0.15, SD = 0.37) than did women (M = 0.03, SD = 0.16), t(68) = 1.96, p < .05.

In addition to number and articulation of personal goals oriented to bettering society, the future chapters sections of the interviews were also coded for number and articulation of personal goals oriented toward self and toward family. Participants in the high-generativity group manifested fewer and less well articulated goals oriented exclusively toward the self (M = 1.54, SD = 0.94), compared with participants in the contrasting group (M = 2.13, SD = 0.93), t(67) = -2.61, p < .05. No significance difference was observed for goals oriented toward family.

To assess overall emotional tone of the narratives, accounts of the eight significant scenes in the story were coded for the positive affects of joy and excitement—interest and the negative affects of distress—sadness, fear—anxiety, anger, and shame. Inter correlations among these six affect scores tended to be low and nonsignificant, with the exception of the significant positive association between joy and excitement—interest (r = .31, p < .01). In addition, the life chapters section was coded for overall emotional positivity in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Inter correlations among these three ratings were high (r.s of .53 for childhood—adolescent, .36 for childhood—adult, and .35 for adolescent—adult; all ps < .001). Group differences for both affect measures, however, were uniformly nonsignificant. The highly generative adults scored no higher than the contrasting group on the positive or negative affects, nor on overall positivity in the life stories. One significant sex difference did emerge. In their accounts of eight particular life scenes, women (M = 1.55, SD = 1.20) were more likely than men (M = 0.94, SD = 0.88) to report experiences of fear—anxiety, r(68) = 2.41, p < .05.

Within the high-generativity group, differences on story themes between teachers (n = 22) and nonteachers (n = 18) were also examined. Only two measures showed statistically significant differences. The 22 elementary and secondary teachers in the high-generativity group tended to score higher on societal goals (p < .05) and on childhood attachments (p < .05), compared with the 18 community volunteers in the high-generativity group. Therefore, whereas the 40 highly generativity adults, as a group, tended to articulate a greater number of goals designed to promote the well-being of society than did the 30 adults in the contrasting sample, it was the 22 elementary and secondary teachers in the high-generativity group that were especially focused on societal goals in their visions of the future. In addition, the teachers tended to reconstruct their childhood attachments in more secure terms than did the highly generative nonteachers.

Finally, the typed interview protocols ranged in length from 17 to 52 single-spaced pages (M = 30.32 pages, SD = 7.78). The average length of interview for participants in the high-generativity group was 29.75 pages; for the contrasting group, the average was 31.10. The mean difference between the two groups was statistically nonsignificant, t(68) = -0.72.

**Discussion**

The current study identifies a set of narrative themes that significantly differentiate the life stories of a group of highly
Table 3
Redemption and Contamination Sequences Scores by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative theme</th>
<th>High-generativity group</th>
<th>Contrasting group</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redemption sequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning points*</td>
<td>1.13 0.85</td>
<td>0.63 0.76</td>
<td>2.49*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadir experiences*</td>
<td>0.73 0.78</td>
<td>0.17 0.38</td>
<td>3.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life chapters*</td>
<td>0.34 0.33</td>
<td>0.09 0.16</td>
<td>3.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contamination sequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak experiences*</td>
<td>0.05 0.22</td>
<td>0.13 0.35</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning points*</td>
<td>0.02 0.16</td>
<td>0.20 0.41</td>
<td>1.90*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadir experiences*</td>
<td>0.20 0.41</td>
<td>0.43 0.50</td>
<td>2.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life chapters*</td>
<td>0.13 0.29</td>
<td>0.48 0.45</td>
<td>3.94***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mean scores on a 3-point scale (0–2). * Number of incidents per 100 lines of text in the life chapters section in interview.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Generative adults from those life stories constructed by a matching group of their less generative peers. Although every life-story account collected in the study has its own unique features, the differentiating themes converge on a particular patterning of life-story material that may be called a commitment story. The commitment story resembles Tomkins's (1987) commitment script and shares similarities with what Colby and Damon (1992) observed in their exploratory study of adult moral exemplars. In general thematic terms, the study identified a story in which the protagonist comes to believe early on that he or she has a special advantage (family blessing) that contrasts markedly to the pain and misfortune suffered by many others (suffering of others). Experiencing the world as a place where people need to care for others, the protagonist commits the self to living in accord with a set of clear and enduring values and personal beliefs that continue to guide behavior throughout the life span (moral steadfastness). Moving ahead with the confidence of early blessing and steadfast belief, the protagonist encounters an expectable share of personal misfortune, disappointment, and even tragedy in life, but these bad events often become transformed, or redeemed, into good outcomes (redemption sequences), sometimes because of the protagonist’s own efforts and sometimes by chance or external design. Thus, bad things happen, but they often turn into good, whereas when good things happen, they rarely turn bad. Looking to the future with an expanded radius of care (Peterson & Klohn, 1995), the protagonist sets goals that aim to benefit others (prosocial goals for the future), especially those of the next generation, and to contribute to the progressive development of society as a whole and to its more worthy institutions.

Note that this prototypical story of commitment is not a Panglossian tale of mindless cheer, nor a conventional fairy tale in which everybody lives happily ever after in the end. The results suggest, by contrast, that highly generative adults construct stories that are no more optimistic in narrative tone and contain no greater number of positive, or lower number of negative affect experiences, than those life stories created by less generative adults. Furthermore, as the coding of childhood attachments reveals, highly generative adults do not reconstruct their childhoods as any more secure in key interpersonal relationships than do less generative adults. Virtually all of the life-story accounts contain a mixture of positive and negative affect. In the affective realm, what distinguishes the accounts of the generative adults from those of the contrasting sample, however, is the sequencing of affective scenes. Bad scenes tend to precede and eventually give birth to good. Put another way, good scenes often have their origins in bad scenes. Thus, one important function of negative-af ect scenes in the life stories of highly generative adults may be to set up or prepare the way for the emergence of good scenes, accentuating the good scenes through narrative contrast. Adults in the contrasting sample rarely set their stories up this way. Indeed, they often use the reverse strategy: a contamination sequence, in which a good scene functions to set up an eventual negative outcome. Yet, the stories of the less generative adults are not more negative overall.

Note also that this study's thematic analysis identifies an abstracted, generic story type, the commitment story, that does not correspond in all its details to any actual storied account collected in the study. Because the analysis is based on differences in group means, some of the life stories constructed by the highly generative adults may be viewed as variations on the prototype sketched here, but certain other stories within the same group may share little or no similarity to the generic type. Given the modest intercorrelations among themes constituting the commitment story, moreover, different accounts may approach the generic type from very different thematic angles. The theme of family blessing, for example, may be much more salient and highly developed in one highly generative adult's story, compared with the story of another highly generative adult, for whom, say, moral steadfastness is an especially central theme. Likewise, some stories in the contrasting group may resemble the prototypical commitment story described herein, even more so than many of the stories in the high-generativity group. The group comparisons merely show that on the average, the life stories of highly generative adults manifest themes in accord with the generic type of commitment story more often than do
the life stories constructed by less generative adults. Beyond commitment stories, other story types that use different interpretive frames might indeed be identified; other themes may indeed differentiate these two groups of stories. The kind of commitment story identified herein is hardly a necessary or sufficient narrative form for a highly generative adult. One does not actually need to see one's life in this way—in terms of family blessing, suffering of others, moral steadfastness, redemption sequences, and prosocial goals for the future—to be generative in contemporary society. But on the average, highly generative adults in the current sample tended to draw on these themes in making sense of their lives in time, to a greater extent than did their less generative counterparts.

Nonetheless, a commitment story would appear to be a highly effective life-narrative form for supporting an adult's generative efforts—an efficacious match up of identity (the commitment story) and behavior (generativity). The adult who works hard to guide and foster the next generation may make sense of his or her strong commitment in terms of a story that suggests that he or she has been "called," or summoned, to do good things for others, that such a calling is deeply rooted in childhood, reinforced by a precocious sensitivity to the suffering of others, and bolstered by a clear and convincing ideology that remains steadfast over time. Perceiving one's own life in terms of redemption sequences, furthermore, provides the hope that hard work today will yield positive dividends for the future, a hope that may sustain generative efforts as private as raising one's own child (Kotre, 1984) and as public as committing oneself to the advancement of one's own society or even one's own people (Erikson, 1969). Stories in literature, myth, and folklore that celebrate generativity often display the kinds of themes identified here as part of the commitment story (McAdams, 1993).

Although this study may, then, have garnered reasonable empirical evidence for the commitment story as one identity form characteristic of some especially generative adults, one should not forget the considerable limitations and ambiguities of the present investigation. Following a quasi-experimental logic, the study used two relatively small groups purported to differ on the independent variable of generativity. But unlike a true experiment, the researchers were unable to randomly assign participants to conditions or even to control for other differences that may unwittingly be associated with the independent selection variable. One such difference is marital status. The sampling procedures resulted in a higher percentage of married participants in the generativity group, compared with the less generative group. From an Eriksonian standpoint, one might view being married as a proxy for resolution of the psychosocial stage immediately preceding generativity: intimacy versus isolation. Thus, one might expect that generative people would tend to be married or at least involved in long-term, intimate relationships. However, previous research has not indicated a clear-cut relation between marital status and generativity in adults (McAdams et al., 1993). In any case, the unforeseen group difference in marital status remains a mild confound for the study.

Relatedly, although the two groups were matched on certain demographic characteristics, they differed significantly, and by design, on occupational status, with over 50% of the participants in the high-generativity group coming from the teaching profession. Using multiple classification criteria for generativity, the study is premised on the idea that generativity cannot be fully captured as a single score on a personality scale and that in the current sample, being a teacher was, in a sense, an aspect of the teacher's generativity. Yet one would not wish to equate teaching with generativity, nor to argue that all teachers, even all good teachers, are necessarily high in generativity. Nor does the study intend to compare the life stories of teachers with those adults in contrasting professions. To support the claim that the differences between the two groups, high generativity versus low generativity, cannot be simply reduced to those between teachers and other professionals, within-group comparisons on the commitment story themes that differentiated the high- and low-generativity groups yielded only one significant difference between teachers and nonteachers within the high-generativity group: Teachers tended to score higher on societal goals. In envisioning the future chapters of their life story, teachers may be more likely to specify those kinds of professional goals—for example, improving their teaching or learning more about education and its impact on society—that would expressly suggest a desire to improve society in some manner. Teachers also reconstructed their childhood attachment relationships in more secure terms than did highly generative nonteachers, but the overall group differences (high generativity vs. low generativity) on attachment were statistically nonsignificant. With respect to the themes of family blessing, suffering of others, redemption sequences, and moral steadfastness, highly generative teachers and nonteachers showed no significant differences. Nor were significant differences observed on contamination sequences, helpers versus enemies, or the various affect codes used in the study.

Why This Kind of Story?

Perhaps the life-story account that most closely approximates the prototypical commitment story described above is that of Participant 45 in the current study, Diana C. She is a 49-year-old fourth-grade teacher and mother of three grown children. Diana's life story is one of the 18 out of 40 from the highly generative adults that begins with a kind of family blessing. Born in Iowa to a Methodist minister and his wife, she was "the first baby ever born in this Methodist parsonage" and therefore a favorite among the adults in that tiny community. People marveled at the toddler's prodigious ability to remember everybody's name. Diana remarked that families of church ministers rarely accumulate material wealth, but they still often enjoy an exalted social status by virtue of the respect accorded them by parishioners, some of whom themselves may be wealthy, famous, or especially accomplished. When Diana's family moved to the Chicago area, her father became associated with a wealthier congregation and with a seminary. As a result, "many famous people I know are my friends and that gave me a different feeling about who I was and who I could be in life."

Shortly after the move to Chicago, however, tragedy struck. When 8 years old, Diana was watching her younger brother one summer afternoon as her mother worked in the kitchen. The boy darted into the street and was run over by a car. The driver scooped the child up and drove him to the hospital even before Diana's mother could come running out of the house. The boy
died shortly thereafter. At the same time, Diana was enduring a very difficult second-grade year. Her teacher was emotionally unstable, and at the end of the school year the teacher was "institutionalized." Diana remarked, "I think we were both [the teacher and Diana] having a very bad year, and the combination was horrible. But after that things picked up."

Diana's account of her brother's death and of her troubled second-grade teacher hint at two features of Diana's story especially characteristic of those constructed by highly generative adults. First, in the death of her brother is the suggestion of her awareness of the suffering of others. Although this example is not strong enough itself to be coded for "suffering of others" (Diana was not explicit about her sympathy for her brother's suffering, and it is her family, not outside others, who in fact suffer), the story later provides clear evidence for the theme. For example, she described as a significant childhood memory her interaction with a severely disabled boy named Dick. "I would always read my books and my stories that I learned to Dick, and he enjoyed them."

Second, in ending her account of these two very negative incidents by stating that "after that things picked up," Diana appears on the verge of constructing a redemption sequence. She came back twice to the death of her brother later in the story, and in both instances, she concluded the account with a positive outcome. In one instance, she remarked that her college education was financed by the insurance money that came from her brother's death. In a second, she described again the day her brother died as the nadir experience in her life, couching it as a classic contamination sequence in which a beautiful summer day suddenly turns horrible. But then Diana went on to tell how she tried for years to be the son her father lost, to make amends for the guilt she felt after her brother was killed. She took up sports and thought she would grow up to be a doctor, as "good sons" might, she reasoned. Although these efforts failed, she ultimately experienced a redemptive success in marrying her high school sweetheart, who came to be treated by her father as his own son.

As the daughter of a Methodist minister, Diana internalized strong religious values from an early age onward, she told. Indeed, she expressed a good deal of moral steadfastness at various points in the interview, although her score on ideological clarity was low because her actual descriptions of her beliefs and values were vague and disconnected. Nonetheless, she suggested that her religious values motivate much of what she does and that they inspire her to make her best contributions as a teacher, even though she teaches in a public school. Her religious development was described in terms of continuity rather than dramatic change. Although she has occasionally experienced doubts about her faith, these have never managed to undermine her fundamental beliefs.

Diana's goals for the future include becoming a grandmother, moving to Kentucky to be near her daughters when she retires, doing some writing, incorporating more drama and storytelling in her teaching methods, and working for the betterment of the educational system because "I'd like to give something back" to society. Invoking the most generative rhetoric in her interview, she said that the most important value in her life was "to grow and help others grow." Her interview was filled with metaphors of growth, development, and progress.

Why does Diana's life story take this form? The obvious answer is that this is indeed how her life has been, in reality. She really was a minister's daughter; her brother really was killed when she was 8 years old; she really did read stories to a disabled boy in a wheelchair. Furthermore, her goals for the future are realistic aspirations that a woman in her station in life would sensibly hold. Assuming that Diana and the other participants in this study are more-or-less credible informants about their life, this obvious answer is difficult to repudiate. Indeed, it need not be repudiated at all. Life stories are and should be based on what really happened and on what is likely to happen in the future (McAdams, 1985). Highly generative adults may indeed experience childhood itself, at the time of being a child, as a time in which they are singled out in a positive way. They may indeed change their beliefs and values less over time than do less generative adults. The retrospective data in the current study cannot settle any issues of causation in this regard. But unless one believes that life stories have little connection to the lives people live and have lived (a position that seems quite untenable), then one would be remiss in ignoring the possibility that the life experiences of these two groups of adults studied here have actually followed somewhat different paths.

Having said this, one would also be remiss in discounting the extent to which life stories are artful, selective, and imaginative narratives that bear some relations to myth, folklore, and fiction. As imaginative reconstructions of what was and narrated anticipations of what is to come, life stories are much more than fact-based chronicles, as well, and somewhat less. They are somewhat less, because retrospective reports are not synonymous with either objective reality or lived experience and thus cannot be fully trusted to get all the facts "right." And they are much more, in that individuals choose what to remember and how to tell it in ways that serve a variety of psychological functions, revealing insights into the working of identity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; McAdams, 1985, 1993). In the case of highly generative adults like Diana C., commitment stories emphasizing family blessing, the suffering of others, moral steadfastness, redemption sequences, and prosocial goals for the future function to sustain and reinforce their generative efforts. These kinds of stories constitute one especially useful identity format for adults who are committed to doing good work for the next generation. According to this logic, Diana C. might have been motivated to find redemptive significance in her brother's death, so that she could keep the kind of faith, or what Erikson (1963) called a "belief in the species" (p. 267), that she would need, to carry on the difficult work of nurturing, guiding, and promoting the next generation during increasingly troubling times. Believing that she was blessed at an early age as one called to serve others may help to sustain her teaching and her commitment to youth.

To a certain extent, Diana chose to construct this kind of identity for herself, to tell her life to an interviewer, and to herself, through a commitment story: There are many other stories she might have constructed. The kind she chose, however, appears to be one especially suitable identity form for some contemporary American adults whose lives are animated by generativity (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) and perhaps more generally by a strong sense of social responsibility (Andrews,
1991; Colby & Damon, 1992; Inchausti, 1991). As such, a life story of commitment provides a language or discourse for the self that supports a caring, compassionate, and responsible approach to social life. In Acts of Compassion, a study of American volunteerism, Wuthnow (1991) wrote the following:

The possibility of compassion depends as much on having an appropriate discourse to interpret it as it does on having a free afternoon to do it. To ask whether compassion is possible, therefore, is to ask about the language in which its very conceivability depends.

(p. 45)

**Psychosocial Constructionism**

Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest among psychologists and sociologists in the stories people create, to provide their lives with meaning and purpose (e.g., Cohler, 1982; Giddens, 1991; Herskovits & Kempen, 1993; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; McAdams, 1985, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Singer & Salovey, 1993). Many different theoretical and methodological approaches have been offered, but two very general camps seem to have emerged. In one camp are positivists and postpositivists, who use narrative methods to measure conventional scientific constructs. In the other camp are some social constructionists, who reject many of the conventions of traditional social science and view stories instead as fluid and culturally determined forms of discourse whose “real” meanings can never be known.

Representatives of the first camp typically use rigorous content analysis systems for assessing the real motives, values, stages, schemas, norms, roles, and so on that are revealed by a particular narrative methodology (e.g., Baumeister, 1994; Smith, 1992). From this perspective, narratives are, in principle, no different from any other social science methodology—for example, behavioral observations, self-report questionnaires, peer ratings—in providing quantifiable indexes for measuring constructs. The special value of stories lies in their sensitivity to certain forms of expression that are especially revealing of constructs. Using this logic, McClelland and his colleagues have argued for over 40 years that TAT narratives are an especially sensitive methodology for assessing individual differences in social motives of achievement, power, and intimacy—affiliation, because these measurement formats tap into domains of functioning that simple self-reports routinely miss (McClelland, 1951; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). By contrast, the second camp offers a strong challenge to conventional social and behavioral science in arguing, to put it baldly, that human lives are constituted by stories, stories are forms of discourse embedded in culturally determined language games, all language is indeterminate, and therefore little can ever really be “known”—few reliable meanings can ever be gleaned, about persons or, indeed, about social life. According to theorists like Gergen (1992) and Sampson (1989), the contemporary self is deconstructed into a swirl of fleeting stories and postures, expressed in the ever-changing discourse of postmodern life and in the particular cultural contexts within which selves are constituted.

The current study seeks a methodological and an epistemological middle ground. Between the orthodoxy of narrative methodologies aimed to measure objective constructs and the radical perspectives offered by some social constructionists who see in narratives a rejection of the canons of Western social science lies a compromise position, which might be termed psychosocial constructionism. From this standpoint, life stories are jointly constructed by the person whose story it is and the culture within which that story has its constitutive meanings. As McAdams (1985, 1993) argued, such stories constitute human identities. Identities themselves are psychosocial constructs, but unlike most other constructs in personality psychology, such as personality traits, identities come in narrative form, fully contextualized in culture. Like other constructs, identities can be measured, as the current study shows. But they must be measured in ways that are appropriate for what they are, that is, ways that fit the fact that identities are themselves stories. The coding schemes used in the current study, therefore, are couched in terms that make sense for stories, and their results speak directly to the qualities of stories themselves and only indirectly to the tellers of the stories. Thus, family blessings and redemption sequences are characteristics of life stories, not of people. A main goal of the current study was to identify a certain kind of story, a story of commitment that seemed to support adult generativity, but not a certain kind of person per se.

In quantifying thematic categories, using contrasting samples, and aggregating scores across participants, the current study adopted many of the conventions of traditional social science. From the standpoint of social constructionism, therefore, such an approach may seem wooden and reductionistic. Furthermore, in taking so seriously the discourse produced in the life-story interview, the study may overlook the “fact” that all discourse is culture bound, ephemeral, and indeterminate. From the standpoint of psychosocial constructionism, however, life stories have a substantive integrity that invites the kind of scrutiny shown herein. The current study was based on the conviction that some social constructionists have overplayed their hand in emphasizing how stories may be interpreted from a myriad of different points of view, all more-or-less credible. There is indeed room for many different interpretations. But careful research can shed light on what kinds of interpretations are especially useful for life stories, and interpreters can be trained to code narratives according to consensually validated themes, images, and so forth, operating within a culture of shared meanings, on the one hand, and a critical eye to alternative meaning systems, on the other.

In conclusion, the current study invites those psychologists with positivist leanings to consider the possibility that narratives are more than mere methods for getting at other more tangible things. Narratives are themselves the psychosocial constructions of human identities in modern societies, worthy of study on their own terms. Similarly, the study invites those with a more social constructionist bent to consider the possibility that life stories are forms of discourse that although culture bound and likely to change over time, have a substantive integrity that renders them more-or-less interpretable and a psychological reality that enables them to shape and direct human lives. The current study brings to empirical daylight one generic type of life story that appears to organize well the lives of some contemporary American adults who are strongly committed to generativity. Within the circumscribed realm of generativity (McAdams & de St. Auber, 1992), social responsibility (Colby &
Damon, A. (1992). Volunteerism (Wuthnow, 1991), and the like, there doubtless exist other common narrative forms that people use to make sense of their lives. Beyond this realm lies a vast and virtually uncharted terrain for researchers seeking to collect, describe, and analyze the psychosocial constructions of human lives in narrative terms. Certain kinds of life stories may be associated, for example, with certain age groups and historical cohorts, representatives of certain socioeconomic strata and niches, certain professions, religious and political groups, subcultures, personality types, and so forth. Should this kind of research proliferate in the future, psychologists and other social scientists would begin to catalogue the many prevalent forms of identity constructed by contemporary adults within a given society and across cultures.

References
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Appendix A

Outline of the Life-Story Interview

I. Life chapters
   II. Specific scenes
      A. Peak experience (high point)
      B. Nadir experience (low point)
      C. Turning point experience
      D. Earliest memory
      E. Significant childhood memory
      F. Significant adolescent memory
      G. Significant adult memory
      H. Other significant memory

III. Important persons (4)
IV. Future chapters
V. Tension and conflicts (2)
VI. Personal ideology
      A. Religion
      B. Politics
      C. Important values
VII. Dominant theme or message of the story
VIII. Other

Appendix B

Summary of the Coding Systems

Early Advantage

*Family Blessing*

Whether the story protagonist, as a child, was singled out in his or her family as somebody with special talents or roles or was provided with a unique resource that reinforced the idea that he or she was special in a positive way.

*Childhood Attachments*

A series of ratings of how securely attached the protagonist was, as a child, to (a) mother, (b) father, (c) grandparents, (d) siblings, (e) friendship or school, and (f) church.

*Helpers versus Enemies*

The number of incidents in the story in which an ancillary character acts in an especially kind and caring way toward the protagonist (helper) versus the number of incidents in which a character intentionally blocks the protagonist’s efforts or works to undermine the well-being of the protagonist (enemy).

*Suffering of Others*

The extent to which the protagonist, as a child, expresses an awareness of the need to care for others who suffer or who are disadvantaged in some way.

Moral Steadfastness

The degree to which the protagonist expresses moral steadfastness in the story, as manifested in ratings of the depth, clarity, and continuity over time of the protagonist’s personal ideology.

*Redemption versus Contamination Sequences*

A series of codes to determine the extent to which affective negative scenes lead to positive outcomes (redemption sequence) versus the extent to which affectively positive scenes lead to negative outcomes (contamination sequences).

*Prosocial Goals for the Future*

The degree to which the future chapters of the story articulate detailed personal goals aimed at the betterment of extrafamilial groups or society at large. The extent of goal articulation is also coded for personal goals oriented mainly toward self and mainly toward family.

*Affect Tone*

The overall emotional quality of the story in terms of positivity versus negativity and the expression of the discrete positive affects of joy and excitement–interest, on the one hand, and the discrete negative affects of distress–sadness, fear–anxiety, anger, and shame, on the other.

*Note.* The five themes making up the commitment story cluster are early advantage, suffering of others, moral steadfastness, redemption sequences, and prosocial goals for the future. Coding schemes for contamination sequences, enemies, and goals for self and family are also described, even though they are not part of the commitment story cluster per se. In addition, stories were coded for the affect tone procedures, though again not considered part of the commitment story.

(Appendices continue)
Appendix C

Examples of Redemption Sequences: Condensed Accounts

Sacrifice
Pain of delivery → birth of beautiful baby
Difficult years working in "service club" → Participant sets a positive example for others
Participant leaves husband because he wants her to have abortion, poverty → joy of loving son

Recovery
Bout of severe depression → regained positive mood for good
Near-fatal injuries → surprising recovery
Severe anorexia → therapist saves life

Growth
Father’s death → family becomes closer
Loneliness of childhood becomes resilient adult
Failed love affair → Participant becomes more assertive and confident
Mother’s death → Participant experiences enhanced power and now feels closer to mother
Episode of anger and crying about father’s death → Participant no longer stutters, decreased anxiety
Gets fired from job → Participant comes to see self as whole person
Divorce → Participant develops better relationship with son
Husband has sexual affair → Participant experienced enhanced strength of ego
Seizure disorder → Participant experiences enhanced courage and independence
Drugs, deliriousness → Participant moves to new place, changes name, gets life together

Learning
Exhausting workload → Participant realizes that life needs more balance
Family poverty means Participant cannot go to prom → learns lessons about honesty and money
Severe criticism from coworker → Participant becomes better employee
Tough neighborhood fights → Participant learns a lot
Mother-in-law hates Participant → Participant learns how to be a good mother-in-law herself

Improvement
Period of chaos → happiest time in life
Very bad marriage → very good marriage
Bad year of teaching → Participant moves to new school where she finds success, affirmation
Traffic accident → "all of a sudden it started to become a cool experience"
Divorce, anger → Participant becomes successful to prove self to ex-spouse
Terrible first semester in college → Participant ends up getting all As

Appendix D

Examples of Contamination Sequences: Condensed Accounts

Participant gets a stable job → gets fired because of racial discrimination
Participant falls in love with woman → she rejects him
Participant is leading the pack in 1-mile race → body gives out, finishes last
Sex is great before marriage → no sex after marriage
Participant is at peak of career success → financial ruin
Participant gets double promoted because of academic achievement → fails the new class
Participant gets three good hits in the baseball game → strikes out fourth time up, father angry
Participant gets a musical instrument for birthday present → instrument is immediately stolen
Participant builds model airplane → class bully breaks the airplane in school
Participant’s wife was a perfect mother → she decides she no longer wants to be a mother, leaves
Masturbation feels good → Participant becomes a recluse out of shame
First year of college is wonderful → parents divorce
Participant becomes best friends with man → man becomes drug addict, violent
Enjoying life in the city → attacked by mugger, now Participant doesn’t trust people
Participant enjoys sexual experience → father breaks into room and beats him
Participant loses weight, looks good → cannot handle the change, gets depressed
Looking forward to speaking engagement with mentor → mentor is killed
Good adventure in Europe → Participant returns to United States depressed and disappointed
Participant enjoys kindergarten, most popular kid in class → life-threatening kidney ailment
Participant experiences 3 wonderful years of motherhood → is seriously injured after falling out of window preparing to go back to paid work

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