

The Redemptive Self: Generativity and the Stories Americans Live By

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Generativity is an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the development and well-being of future generations. A growing body of research has shown that individual differences in generativity are associated with particular patterns of parenting, social support, and religious and civic involvement. Research has also suggested that highly generative American adults tend to construct self-defining life stories (narrative identities) that feature the psychological theme of redemption—the deliverance from suffering to an enhanced status or position in life. Through stories of redemption, narrators often articulate how they believe they experienced a “second chance” in life. Redemptive life stories told by highly generative American adults may also incorporate themes of (a) childhood advantage, (b) early awareness of the suffering of others, (c) moral clarity and steadfastness, (d) the conflict between power and love, and (e) future growth and fulfillment. Redemptive narratives function to support and justify a highly generative approach to life in the middle-adult years. At the same time, these individual life stories told by highly generative American adults affirm, work through, and sometimes call into question broader cultural narratives in American history and heritage.

In a famous quote, F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that there are no second acts in American lives; but Fitzgerald could not have been more wrong. From the time of the Puritan settlements to the present day, Americans have reveled in stories of self-transformation. The self-proclaimed land of opportunity, America has been imagined as a place where people can start over, pursue a new dream, and make a life whose many scenes spell out second and third acts and even more. Americans have been reinventing themselves ever since Benjamin Franklin (in 1771) showed

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them how he did it in his *Autobiography*. Since then, “rags-to-riches” stories about “the American dream” have assumed a privileged position in the canon of those most cherished cultural myths for Americans along with transformative stories about being “born again,” “escaping from slavery to freedom,” and fully actualizing that good and innocent inner self so enthusiastically affirmed by no less than Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oprah Winfrey, affirmed to be each person’s individual manifest destiny. Americans love redemptive stories of the self, and some Americans even believe that they live them.

The redemptive self is a particular kind of life story that is often told and lived by midlife American adults who score high on psychological measures of generativity. *Generativity* is an adult’s concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations (Erikson, 1963; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Over the past 15 years, my students and I have conducted a series of empirical studies showing that especially generative American men and women, compared to their less generative counterparts, tend to describe their own lives as expressing variations on a set of themes comprising the redemptive self (McAdams, 2001a, 2004, 2006; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Ruetzel, & Foley, 1986). Similar kinds of life-narrative forms have been described in qualitative studies of political activists (Andrews, 1991), moral exemplars (Colby & Damon, 1992), and reformed criminals who have dedicated their lives to helping others stay away from crime (Maruna, 2001). The redemptive self represents a common way that especially productive and caring American adults, in their midlife years, tend to understand their own development. The developmental story they tell provides a coherent narrative explanation for how they came to be who they are and where they believe their life is going. As it celebrates the possibilities of second chances in the life course, this kind of life story also functions to reinforce and sustain the strong generative commitments that many adults have made.

For many highly generative American adults today, the redemptive self functions as their self-defining personal myth (McAdams, 1993). To explain how this is so, in this article, I consider, in turn, four key ideas: (a) the meaning of generativity as a central developmental challenge in adulthood; (b) the role of the life story in the construction of adult identity; (c) the different expressions of redemption, and a set of associated themes, that run through the life stories told by many American adults; and (d) the role of culture and heritage in the construction of adult selves.

GENERATIVITY AND ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Erikson (1963) identified generativity as the psychosocial centerpiece of the seventh stage in his famous eight-stage model of human development. In the ideal Eriksonian scenario, the adolescent constructs an identity (Stage 5), the young

adult finds intimacy in a long-term committed relationship (Stage 6), and the man or woman in the middle-adulthood years seeks to make a positive contribution to the next generation through parenting, teaching, mentoring, leadership, and creating and caring for various products and outcomes aimed at leaving a positive legacy of the self for the future. The midlife adult focuses time, energy, and psychological resources on raising children, building communities and organizations, teaching skills, passing on traditions, working for positive social change, and engaging in a wide range of endeavors to promote the development and well-being of the next generation and the quality of the world within which the next generation will live (de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004; Kotre, 1984). Generative adults become stakeholders and destiny shapers in society (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). By contrast, those adults who are unable to rise to the challenges of generativity may experience what Erikson called "stagnation" or "self-preoccupation." They may feel that they cannot generate good products and outcomes, that they are unable to leave a positive mark on their world. Their struggle to tend to and maintain themselves may be so taxing that they cannot find the resources to care for those who will eventually survive them.

Although Erikson (1963) viewed generativity to be a discrete stage through which all midlife adults pass, he recognized that generativity waxes and wanes within that stage, sometimes in unpredictable ways, and that all adults are not equally generative. In recent years, researchers have focused attention on individual differences in generativity. They have developed and validated structured interviews, Q-sort procedures, coding systems for imaginative productions, behavioral checklists, and self-report scales to assess variations in the strength of adults' motivations for and inclinations toward generativity. Many of these measures have been used to evaluate the hypothesized stage-like properties of generativity. For example, are adults indeed most generative during their midlife years? Results from both longitudinal and cross-sectional investigations provide a mixed picture, but the overall tendency seems to suggest an increase in generative behaviors and self-descriptions from early adulthood (20s) into the middle-adulthood years (30s, 40s, and 50s) and a possible decrease thereafter (60s, 70s; Keyes & Ryff, 1998; McAdams, 2001a; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993; Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004). However, developmental trends depend on how generativity is measured, and substantial evidence suggests that a wide variation in generativity scores can be found in any age cohort among adults from late-adolescence to old age. Rather than viewing generativity, then, as a discrete stage, a judicious reading of the empirical literature suggests that generativity may be a multifaceted developmental task for adults expressed unevenly across life domains and over time and contoured by a wide range of contextual variables (MacDermid, Franz, & De Reus, 1998; McAdams, 2001a).

At any given point in the life course, an adult may express a constellation of motivations, concerns, beliefs, and commitments related to generativity. Well-

validated measures of these individual differences have proven to be predictive of a broad array of socially consequential behaviors and outcomes.

In the realm of parenting, for example, mothers and fathers with strong generativity concerns tend to be more involved in their children's schooling than are parents whose scores on generativity measures are lower. Nakagawa (1991) found that after controlling for demographic predictors, those parents who scored high on a short generativity scale were more likely than those scoring low to attend parent-teacher meetings, to monitor their children's homework, and to invest time and energy in school activities. In a study of African American and White parents, researchers found that high levels of generativity were associated with valuing trust and communication with one's children and viewing parenting as an opportunity to pass on values and wisdom to the next generation (Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001).

Studies also suggest that generativity, at least among middle-class White parents, may be associated with authoritative parenting styles. Peterson, Smirles, and Wentworth (1997) found that middle-aged parents of college students expressed more authoritative attitudes about their parenting if they were high in generativity. Pratt, Danso, Arnold, Norris, and Filyer (2001) found that generativity among mothers of teenaged children predicted authoritative styles, but generativity among fathers was unrelated to parenting style. Authoritative parents provide their children with a good deal of structure and guidance, but they also give their children a strong voice in making family decisions. In studies done primarily with White families in the United States, authoritative patterns of parenting have been consistently associated with higher levels of moral development and greater levels of self-esteem. In Peterson et al. (1997), authoritative parenting predicted attitudinal similarity between parents and their college-aged children, and it was negatively associated with parent-child conflict.

High scores on generativity measures are positively associated with indexes of prosocial behavior and productive societal engagements. For example, research has shown that generativity is positively associated with prosocial personality characteristics (Peterson & Klohnen, 1995), strong social support networks (Hart et al., 2001), interest in political issues and involvement in the political process (Cole & Stewart, 1996; Hart et al., 2001; Peterson et al., 1997), church attendance and involvement in religious/spiritual activities (Dillon & Wink, 2004; Hart et al., 2001), and community voluntarism (Rossi, 2001). Self-reported generativity is also positively associated with ratings of subjective mental health and life satisfaction (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moscovitz, 2000; Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Vandewater, Ostrove, & Stewart, 1997). It is important to note that generativity measures themselves do not directly tap into the content expressed in these reported correlates. Generativity measures mainly assess an adult's expressed concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations. They are not mere proxies for assessments of societal in-

volvement and psychological well-being. Therefore, findings showing that individual differences in generativity predict outcomes such as civic engagement, voluntarism, and subjective mental health ~~and~~ support the construct validity of generativity and its assessment.

In sum, generativity is a central developmental challenge for adults, especially in the midlife years. Shaped by family, work, civic, religious, and friendship roles, generativity can be expressed in and through a wide range of activities and commitments. Researchers have developed measures to assess individual differences in various expressions of generativity. Across the different measures, the overall strength and salience of generativity in an adult's life has been shown to predict authoritative parenting styles and active involvement in children's schooling, broad friendship networks and high levels of social support, participation in the political process, religious involvement, community voluntarism, prosocial personality characteristics, and higher levels of subjective well-being. Generativity would appear to be one index and predictor of a caring and productive engagement of the world during the adult years.

THE LIFE STORY

What kinds of life stories do highly generative adults tell? To address this question, one needs first to ask why such a question is indeed important for the study of human development. Why might a social scientist interested in understanding human development want to know about any person's life story? The first answer that is likely to come to mind goes something like this: Because life stories tell you how people actually came to be who they are. With respect to highly generative adults, then, life stories might shed light on the developmental factors and forces that "lead to" generativity. Life stories might speak to the particular childhood experiences, for instance, that may be instrumental in producing a highly generative life. Yet most social scientists (and many lay people) who are familiar with the literature on autobiographical memory (or have thought much about their own lives) know that memory is reconstructive and fallible. Autobiographical narratives are not reliable vehicles for learning what "really" happened (Schacter, 1996). It is surely better to study lives prospectively and longitudinally, most developmentalists would say. From this perspective, then, retrospective life-history accounts might offer hypotheses about human development that could be tested in more rigorous, prospective studies—more conventional, quantitative studies wherein developmental factors that may be instrumental in the making of generativity are traced over real time.

A second reason that might be invoked for studying life stories suggests that the stories themselves may say less about what really happened in the past and more about what is really going on right now. Stories are about personal meanings

rather than objective facts. From this second perspective, life stories exist in the here and now as internalized and evolving narratives of the self that portray how a person in the here and now understands who he or she is, was, and may become in the future. The internalized and evolving story—the personal myth—provides the person with what Singer (2004) called a “narrative identity.” Over the past two decades, a growing number of psychologists (Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1985), sociologists (Giddens, 1991), and cognitive scientists (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) have argued that people make sense of their own lives by constructing and internalizing self-defining life stories. Psychologically speaking, life stories serve to reconstruct the past and imagine the future in ways aimed at providing life with some measure of unity, purpose, and meaning. Sociologically speaking, life stories integrate a person within a range of social niches and societal venues, each with its own narrative traditions and expectations. Narrative conceptions of human development view people as evolving storytellers who give their lives shape and meaning within the narrative parameters presented by culture (Fivush & Haden, 2003; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). From this second standpoint, then, life-narrative accounts provided by highly generative adults speak to how these especially caring and productive men and women make sense of their lives in contemporary society. Their narrative identities explain who they believe they are and how they believe they came to be, and their narrative identities help to reinforce, sustain, and justify the significant life commitments and investments they have made.

Narrative identity begins to take shape in late adolescence and young adulthood. Habermans and Bluck (2000) showed that it is not until late adolescence that people have the cognitive skills required for construing their own lives as thematically organized and causally coherent narratives. As Erikson (1963) and many other theorists have argued, furthermore, emerging adults living in modern societies are expected to integrate the disparate elements of their lives into an organized whole—a dynamic arrangement of talents, beliefs, values, motivations, roles, and memories linked to new life commitments within recognizable niches in the social world. My own life-story model of identity suggests that this dynamic arrangement may be seen, in part, as an internalized and evolving self-narrative (McAdams, 1985, 2001b). A central feature of what Erikson (1963) imagined as “ego identity,” therefore, is the story that people begin to construct for their lives in emerging adulthood. However, the story—the narrative identity—does not simply emerge full-blown, out of thin developmental air. Instead, individuals implicitly collect material for the life stories they will someday make even as they move through infancy, childhood, and early adolescence (McAdams, 1993). Early experiences in the family, in school, and in many other contexts may subtly influence the tone, imagery, and themes that will eventually come to characterize a particular life story. By the time he or she reaches emerging adulthood, the individual has at his or her disposal a wealth of psychological

“material” out of which to construct narrative identity. As the individual moves through the adulthood years, furthermore, the construction and reconstruction of narrative identity continues apace. People continue to work on their stories as they move across the adult life course in accord with various on-time and off-time life events, new developmental demands, and changing roles and relationships (Elder, 1995).

My own research on narrative identity has focused mainly on individual differences in structural and content features of life stories and the relations between these differences on one hand and various indexes of personal and social functioning on the other. Life stories may be categorized and classified in many different ways, and these differences can be linked to personality traits and motives, demographic characteristics, and important life outcomes. For example, research has shown that depressed individuals tend to construct narrative identities that accentuate variability among negative life scenes while accentuating similarities among positive scenes as if to suggest that life holds many options for misery but only a few for happiness (McAdams, Lensky, Daple, & Allen, 1988). The trait of neuroticism is associated with life stories accentuating the emotions of sadness and fear; agreeableness correlates with more emotionally positive stories emphasizing interpersonal communion (McAdams et al., 2004). Individuals at high stages of ego development tend to construct complex narrative identities with multiple plots and conflicts, whereas those scoring lower in ego development have simpler life stories to tell (McAdams, 1985; McAdams, Booth, & Selvik, 1981). People high in intimacy motivation tend to tell life stories filled with scenes of love and friendship, whereas those high in power motivation tell more heroic narratives of the self, emphasizing self-mastery, status, and human agency (McAdams, 1985; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). Psychological well-being is associated with life narratives animated by strong intrinsic motivations, whereas psychosocial maturity tends to be associated with more integrative and self-reflective life narrations (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; King & Hicks, this issue; Pals, this issue).

Research has suggested that individual differences in adults' life stories are related to important features of their personalities, their lives, and the worlds within which they live. What kinds of narrative identities, then, do highly generative adults, living in the United States today, construct to provide their lives with unity, purpose, and meaning?

STORIES OF REDEMPTION

Rob McGowan scored especially high on a series of self-report measures assessing individual differences in generativity. He is a 45-year-old screenwriter, married with two children. Rob McGowan grew up in a grubby West Virginia mining

town. "If you give the world an enema, the syringe goes straight into this town," he tells. In Rob's life story, his father is a gambler and a rogue and his mother, histrionic and suicidal. Rob recalls her grabbing a handful of pills and threatening to swallow them as "her five little kids kept tugging at her dressing gown, trying to get her to stop." On another occasion, she draws an outline of their father on the laundry room door and throws a bread knife through it. Yet Rob is the lucky one, as he recalls it all today. The five kids are farmed out to an orphanage, but Rob is fortunate enough to spend considerable time with a loving and stable foster family. A teacher recognizes and encourages Rob's writing talent. Many of the other kids seem barely able to read, and some come from families even more dysfunctional than Rob's.

Over the course of the story, Rob advances steadily. He becomes editor of his high school newspaper. He moves to New York to write copy for an advertising agency. Eventually, he writes scripts for commercials and later, television shows and movies. He also finds success in acting. Setbacks include problems with drugs and women, but he beats the drug problem and settles down with a woman in his mid-30s. Complications from a failed pregnancy almost end her life, but she recovers, and they eventually adopt two children.

The low point in the story occurs shortly after the adoption of their second child. At age 2, the boy rants and screams and still cannot talk. Doctors diagnose him as autistic. Rob and his wife spend 3 days in the hospital looking at brain scans and hearing how their son will never lead a normal life. However, a second opinion—the big second chance in Rob McGowan's narrative understanding of his own life—suggests a rare seizure disorder, which is readily treated with medication. The boy improves, begins to speak, now seems normal. "We still call him our miracle baby." Today both children are doing well in school. Their parents are active in local politics. Rob hopes to find continued success in screenwriting. At the same time, he harbors a fantasy of moving his family to Ireland and enjoying a simpler and more balanced life. The life-story interview in which Rob participates ends with this question: "Looking back on this story, do you see a central theme?" Rob says, "Um, I guess for me, if you had to distill it into a nutshell, it would be redemption."

Stripped to its psychological essence, redemption is the deliverance from suffering to an enhanced status or state. In life stories, redemptive sequences begin with the protagonist's experience of a negative emotional state such as fear, guilt, shame, or despair. The negative scene, however, gives way to the experience of happiness, joy, excitement, growth, or some other positive emotional state. In one life story told by a highly generative African American man, the protagonist is repeatedly faced with daunting negative experiences related to racial discrimination, personal failures, and bad luck. However, many of these negative scenes are salvaged or redeemed by subsequent positive events. He tells that the racial slurs toughened him up, and the personal failures helped to build his character. As a result, the plot for his story continues to move forward, and the story's protagonist

continues to grow. In a moving story told by a highly generative woman who works as a nurse, her good friend's illness and death constitute the terrible string of events that trigger the redemptive sequence. She ministers to her friend during the 8 months leading up to the death. In one startling scene, she helps to collect her friend's hair as it falls out and into a colander in the kitchen sink, following a tough regimen of chemotherapy. Although devastated by the loss of her friend, she emerges from the experience with renewed confidence in her abilities to help people and a revitalized vocation in life.

In a series of studies, McAdams and Bowman (2001) and McAdams et al. (1997, 2001) administered a standardized life-story interview to men and women between the ages of 35 and 65 years who had scored either especially high (typically in the top quartile of the distribution) or particularly low (bottom quartile) on self-report measures of generativity. To the extent possible, the high-generativity and low-generativity groups were matched on age, social class, and other demographic indexes. The life-story interview (McAdams, 1993) asks the participant to think about his or her life as if it were a book and to divide the book up into chapters. After the participant describes the general contents of each chapter, he or she is asked to recall eight key scenes in the story including a high point, low point, and turning point. Each scene is described in detail—what led up to the scene, what happened in the scene, who was involved, what the participant was thinking and feeling in the scene, and what significance the scene has for the overall life story. The interview moves on to consider important characters in the story, key conflicts or challenges in the plot, where the story may be going in the future, and the participant's most basic religious and moral values, which provide an ideological setting for the story (McAdams, 1985). The interview requires about 2 hr to complete. It is audiotaped and later transcribed into typed text. The text is then coded according to different content-analysis systems, each of which is designed to assure high intercoder reliability.

In coding for redemption sequences, the scorer identifies specific passages in the narrative wherein a negative scene is transformed by a positive outcome. In general, two different forms of redemption sequence have been observed. In the first, the participant describes an event that begins in a very negative way ("my husband divorced me," "I was flunking sixth-grade math") but then turns very positive ("but then I met a wonderful new man"; "but then we moved to a new town and a new school, and my new teacher helped me improve, and I got really good in math"). In the second form, the participant describes a negative event that leads, in the long run, to some kind of benefit for the self or others: The poverty of his early years builds a young man's character; the death of a loved one teaches the survivor that she should slow down and enjoy life more. The key consideration in coding for redemption sequences is the meaning that the narrator makes out of the negative scenes rather than what might have literally happened in the person's life. Redemption sequences are not real events in people's lives. They

are instead ways of telling stories about the self, narrative strategies for self-making (McAdams & Bowman, 2001).

Research has suggested that highly generative adults use more redemptive imagery in their life-narrative accounts than do their less generative peers. Although most life-story interviews contain at least one or two redemption sequences, midlife adults scoring high on self-report measures of generativity employ the narrative strategy of redemption significantly more often than do those scoring low in generativity. Of course, there are many exceptions to the general finding: Some highly generative people show few redemption sequences in their accounts, and some individuals low in generativity will tell many redemptive sequences. However, in samples of midlife American adults, the overall correlation between self-report scores of generativity on one hand and the density of redemptive imagery in life narrative accounts on the other is strong and consistent. Indeed, for one study (McAdams & Bowman, 2001) of generativity among African American adults, the theme of redemption was so pervasive in the life stories of highly generative Black men and women that it seemed to serve as something of a life credo. One participant concluded her interview by stating "the negativeness and the badness and the things that my husband said, um, it made me a better person, a stronger person; it sort of toughened me up." In her story, redemption comes through hard-won struggles and considerable pain at the hands of abusive antagonists in her life. "That's not the way I would have chosen to get here, but it did force a lot of growth," she remarked. Another participant concluded that "any person with a little knowledge can turn their life around." For yet another's life story, life begins (literally) as a kind of redemption scene: His conception and subsequent birth are the results of his mother's being raped. What follows from childhood through midlife is one harrowing scene after another, culminating in his recovery from a near-fatal stab wound: "I was dead, but the doctors brought me back alive." "My philosophy of life," he said, "has always been to be positive instead of negative on any circumstances you deal with." "If you go with the positive ideas, you'll progress; if you get involved in the negative, you'll drown."

Research also shows that redemptive imagery is positively associated with measures of psychological well-being both for midlife adults and college students. McAdams et al. (2001) coded written life-story scenes provided by 125 college students for redemption sequences and for overall emotional tone (the extent to which the subject told a "happy story"). Indexes of redemption and happy stories were only modestly correlated, suggesting that redemption sequences are not synonymous with simply telling positive stories about the self. More important, redemption sequences proved to be a much stronger predictor of well-being than did happy stories. In this study, people who showed high levels of life satisfaction and other indexes of well-being did not necessarily construct life-narrative accounts that were especially happy or emotionally positive in the overall. However, they were much more likely, compared to those scoring low in well-being,

to describe redemption sequences in their lives. Their stories did not avoid accounts of suffering, but they often construed suffering as leading to benefit.

HOW DOES THE STORY BEGIN? HOW DOES IT END?

Every person's life story is unique, but across different stories, common patterns may be discerned. Some stories are especially agentic; others are especially communal. Some feature ambivalent and conflicted protagonists; others avoid the issue of conflict altogether. Some stories are more tragic, more comic, more romantic, or more ironic than others. Highly generative adults in their midlife years tend to tell stories that share an emphasis on redemption; their life stories tend to be more redemptive than stories told by less generative adults. However, the life stories constructed by highly generative adults also share other thematic emphases as well. The theme of redemption is at the center of a more general type of life story—a life-narrative prototype—that I call the *redemptive self*. Beyond redemption, what is this story about?

Cardinal features of the redemptive self are readily illustrated by considering both how the story typically begins and how it ends. The story typically begins with a blessing. In the beginning, the protagonist is chosen for a special status. He or she enjoys an early advantage that others do not enjoy. Highly generative adults are over three times more likely than those scoring lower in generativity to highlight a scene from their early childhood years in which they experienced a special advantage that separated them from others less fortunate (McAdams, 2006; McAdams et al., 1997). Perhaps mom liked me the best. Perhaps I knew from an early age that I was smarter than all the other kids. Perhaps my parents' social activism taught me that I need to make a difference in the world. Perhaps, like Rob McGowan, a teacher recognized my talents early on and nurtured my ambition. One highly generative adult in McAdams (2006) highlighted his name as the advantage he enjoyed. In his family (going back generations), the first-born boy was always named "David." With that name came special privileges but special responsibilities, too. It is not that highly generative adults romanticize their childhoods to suggest that they lived in bliss and innocence. They are as quick as any midlife adult to describe poverty, domestic conflicts, childhood indignities, and a wide range of frustrations and failures in their early years. However, they often, nonetheless, highlight a scene or circumstance through which they learned that they enjoy some kind of physical, mental, psychological, social, economic, ideological, or spiritual advantage.

At the same time, highly generative adults are four times more likely than those scoring lower in generativity to highlight scenes from childhood in which they witnessed and/or were troubled by the misfortune of others (McAdams, 2006; McAdams et al., 1997). They will tell stories recalling other children's pain

and humiliation. They will remember incidents of discrimination, prejudice, and injustice. They suggest that early on in life, they were aware that the world is not safe and that life is not fair. Of course, most anybody can recall incidents in their lives that match these kinds of experiences, but highly generative adults are much more likely than other people to recall these kinds of scenes without prompting and to underscore the importance of these scenes for their own development.

The juxtaposition of these two themes—an early advantage and recognition of the suffering of others—sets up a kind of moral contrast in the life stories of highly generative adults: I was blessed; but others suffered. I enjoyed a special status early on in life, but many people around me did not enjoy the same advantages I did. As a result, I may feel some obligation to translate my fortunate status into good works. Highly generative adults often describe their generative efforts in terms of “giving back” to society for the good things that have befallen them. The beginnings of their stories mirror the same sentiment. Because I was fortunate and because others were/are not, I should make the most of my good status and work hard to make the world a better place. The hero of the redemptive self is a blessed protagonist who ventures forth into a dangerous, unredeemed world. The protagonist in this story is good and innocent, but the world cannot be trusted.

More so than their less generative counterparts, highly generative American adults in their midlife years describe how as older children and adolescents, they internalized a set of moral values, often rooted in a religious tradition, that has guided their actions ever since (McAdams, 2006; McAdams et al., 1997). They will say that these values may have grown and deepened over the years but that they have not changed in dramatic, qualitative ways. They will suggest that they have rarely doubted or struggled with these values. Like the moral exemplars interviewed by Colby and Damon (1992), highly generative adults tell life stories that underscore the power of moral clarity and steadfastness. Their narrative identities rarely give the starring role to the searching, self-doubting existentialist hero. They rarely talk of times in which they woke up in the middle of the night wondering what the meaning of life is, wondering if the moral decisions they have made are indeed the right ones. They rarely doubt the correctness of their views, even as they remain open to opposing views from others.

Although the life stories constructed by highly generative adults typically show little evidence of ideological conflict, the stories do portray conflicts in motivation (McAdams, 1985; McAdams et al., 1986). The protagonist of the redemptive self strives hard to realize goals linked to achievement, power, and other agentic concerns. At the same time, the protagonist strives just as hard to realize interpersonal goals of intimacy, love, and communion. The conflict between power and love, agency and communion is probably universal, but it seems to be especially resonant in the life stories told by highly generative adults. Given the complex nature of generativity, this conflict may not be surprising. Generativity is about both agency and communion—about generating people, things, and out-

comes in one's own image, as extensions of the self, and about caring for, nurturing, and eventually letting go of those products of one's own generative efforts in a selfless way for the good of a community within which one's generative efforts make sense (Kotre, 1984; McAdams, 1985). Highly generative adults tell life stories that mix shades of both narcissism and altruism—stories about strong protagonists who push hard their own agendas but who also want to love and be loved by others, to care and be cared for. In many life stories told by highly generative adults, the tension between power and love drives the plot forward and provides the narrative with the kind of energy and suspense that audiences and listeners expect in good stories.

How does the story end? Highly generative adults look to the future in their life stories with hope and optimism regarding their own legacies even when they are less sanguine about the future of the world in general. They believe that the products of their generative efforts will continue to flourish and grow. They see themselves as continuing to make a positive mark on the world. They know that they will die one day, but their stories suggest that the good work they have done or will do will live on through their children, their students, the family business, or through other venues wherein they have invested and continue to invest their generative efforts.

Figure 1 sums up and displays the key themes comprising the redemptive self. The story begins (in childhood) with the juxtaposition of the protagonist's blessing and the suffering of others. As the protagonist moves into adolescence, he or she consolidates a value system to provide a sense of moral clarity and steadfast-

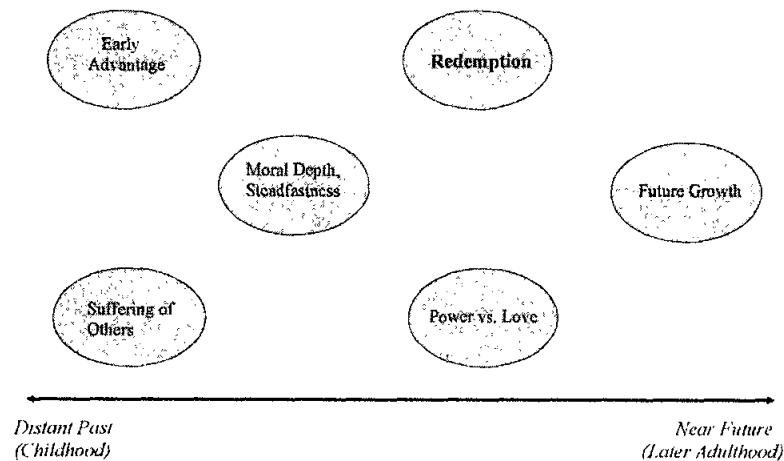


FIGURE 1 The six life story themes of the redemptive self.

ness. The protagonist will encounter hardships and setbacks, but bad things will usually be redeemed by positive outcomes. Desires for power and for love will continue to motivate behavior through the adult years, often leading to conflicts and frustrations, but the future is bright. The protagonist will continue to give birth to and nurture many good things, planting seeds that will grow into healthy plants, which will in turn produce new seeds such that the protagonist's legacy lives on.

GENERATIVITY, NARRATIVE, AND CULTURE

Narrative identity provides adult life with meaning and purpose while explaining and justifying through stories the most distinctive commitments, decisions, and investments that a person makes during the adult years. Many different forms of narrative identity—different kinds of life stories—can make meaning out of life. One especially compelling form, found in the life stories of highly generative American adults, is the redemptive self. For highly generative adults, the redemptive self—with its affirmation of life's second chances—helps to explain, justify, reinforce, and sustain a generative approach to life. Taking care of the next generation is hard work, and delay of gratification can seem endless. Highly generative adults invest considerable time, money, and energy into ventures whose long-term payoff is hardly a sure bet. Raising children, teaching Sunday school, agitating for social change, working to build up valued social institutions—these kinds of generative efforts often involve as much frustration and failure as fulfillment. Yet, if one's internalized and evolving life story—one's narrative identity—shows again and again that suffering can be overcome, that redemption typically follows life's setbacks and failures, then seeing one's life in redemptive terms would appear to be an especially adaptive psychological thing to do, a valuable kind of narrative identity to make if one indeed wishes to take on the daunting challenges of generativity. Believing that one has been blessed with an early advantage in life and that one's duty is to use that blessing for good in a world that is in need of good works is sure to reinforce a generative attitude about adult life. Sticking steadfastly to a set of strong moral convictions may provide a framework wherein one's good works can always be justified as good even when others scoff. It may also provide the kind of confidence needed to be a good role model for young people and, more broadly, an active and influential stakeholder in society. Imagining the future as a time when the people and things to which one has devoted the lion's share of one's adult life will indeed reach their full and positive actualization is itself a generative way to think about life.

It makes good psychological sense, then, that highly generative adults would narrate their lives as variations on the redemptive self. Being highly generative in the first place may increase the likelihood that a midlife adult might see his or her

own life in redemptive terms, and constructing one's life as a redemptive narrative may itself increase the likelihood that one will make and follow through on generative commitments in life. Put simply, generativity may make it easier to tell a redemptive story about life, and telling a redemptive story about life may help pave the way for being highly generative. That said, it is quite possible to lead a highly generative life and not see that life in redemptive terms; conversely, constructing a narrative identity around the theme of redemption does not guarantee generativity. There are many kinds of stories to tell about life, some of which may prove highly effective in sustaining generative commitments in life. Furthermore, some people may simply be able to show high levels of generativity no matter what—even when the stories they tell themselves about their lives are, well, not very good stories at all or even in the face of tremendous hardships, dysfunction, and failure. It would be naïve to expect that high levels of generativity in midlife absolutely require a particular way of narrating the story of one's life. Therefore, the connection between generativity and the redemptive self is an empirical, probabilistic, and statistical one—and exceptions can always be found.

Although redemptive life stories may support generativity for many midlife adults, the life stories they tell may also say as much about the social worlds within which they live as they do about the narrators themselves. Social and cultural forces shape narrative identity (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). The authorship of a life story is, in a deep sense, joint—shared by the narrator whose life it is and the social world within which the story is made and told. Put differently, life stories are “psychosocial constructions” (McAdams, 2006; Thorne, 2000). As such, they reflect much more than the narrator's own efforts to make sense of his or her own life. They reflect social norms, gender stereotypes, historical events, cultural assumptions, and the many and conflicting narratives that people grow up with and continue to hear, experience, appropriate, and reject as they move through the life course; and life stories continue to change as the narrator's social world changes and as new stories about how to live come to replace old ones.

Among the most influential stories in any society are those that come to be seen as canonical within a society's distinctive heritage. Among the most compelling narratives in the American heritage are the life stories told in Puritan conversion experiences, upward-mobility narratives like Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, narratives of escaped slaves, Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories, immigrant stories, and the modern discourse of self-help and recovery—all quintessentially American narratives that bear striking resemblance to the redemptive self (McAdams, 2006). All of these are stories about second chances in life. Turning this observation around, it would appear that highly generative American adults in their midlife years construct self-defining life stories that expand on some of the most cherished and contested social themes in American cultural history. Their personal experiences of redemption mimic Christian stories of atonement, economic stories of upward mobility, political stories of emancipation

and liberation, and psychological and medical stories of recovery from illness, dependency, addiction, and the like. Their early childhood blessing recalls the Puritan belief, echoed widely among the founding fathers and the African American slaves, that they are the chosen people in an unredeemed world, favored with an opportunity to actualize their own manifest destiny. Their moral clarity and steadfastness reinforce an exceptionalist psychology of the self akin to what cultural observers since the time of Tocqueville (early 19th century) have described as American exceptionalism—a deep-seated belief that Americans are different from the rest of the world (blessed while others suffer) and that their simple values and lack of guile will always serve them well (McAdams, 2006). Of course, each of these themes has its dark side. The belief that one is chosen to do good in an unredeemed world can suggest arrogance and self-righteousness. Redemption itself can seem simplistic, unrealistic, naïve. No story is perfect. No storyteller can completely transcend the biases, limitations, and shortcomings of the cultural frames and narratives within and through which the self is made. Even the most productive and caring adults—the paragons of generativity—tell life stories that fall short, as human lives always do.

Generative adults are the norm bearers and destiny shapers in their society (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). They are the people in society most involved in the business of defining, critiquing, and passing on their society's norms, values, and canonical narratives to the next generation. It should make sense, then, that their individual narrative identities would appropriate and grapple with their society's most important cultural stories. Redemptive narratives hold a special place in American cultural history. In telling their lives in redemptive terms, highly generative American adults work through and live out stories that are as much about their heritage as Americans as they are about themselves. Rarely, however, do they think about them in this way. Rarely do they step back from their own lives to imagine how their narrative identities might be different if they grew up, say, in Japan or in France.

All societies have their share of generative adults. Americans are likely to be no more or less generative than any other people. However, the stories that generative American adults tend to tell to make sense of their own lives and to support their own generative efforts are probably not likely to match those told by highly generative adults in other cultural traditions. Of course, the extent to which generativity lines up with narrative identity in similar and different ways across cultures is a wide-open empirical question; but every cultural tradition has its own stories. In constructing their own life stories, people draw from whatever they have at their narrative fingertips. They take their lived experience and they assimilate it to the stories they know and even as they know them unconsciously. Over the course of human development, individuals come to terms with their culture through life narrative. People tell and live out stories that they often imagine as

their own, but if they were thinking more clearly and more expansively, they would see that the meaning individuals make through their own life stories is a cultural meaning: told and understood in culture, critiqued and amended according to cultural standards, and lived in a social and cultural environment whose narratives are as much as they can ever know.

In conclusion, generativity is a human universal. All societies count on the generative inclinations of adults to make a caring world for children and to assure societal continuity and progress. However, different societies may offer different narrative prototypes for the making of a generative life. The redemptive self is one such prototype, revealed in the life stories of many highly generative American adults in their midlife years. It is a story about an advantaged hero who moves forward with confidence and moral certitude in a dangerous world, trying to make a positive difference for the long run, encountering many obstacles but expecting that deliverance from suffering—the transformation of bad into good—will make for second and third chances in life. It is a story that prioritizes the redemptive discourses of Christian atonement, upward economic mobility, freedom from political and psychological constraint, recovery from dependency and addiction, and the full actualization of the exceptional individual self. The redemptive self is the mom and apple pie of American narrative identity. The story plays well in New York and in Peoria, but maybe not in Tokyo, Paris, or Lesotho. Across the life course, narrative identity is told and made in culture, and different cultures have different stories to tell.

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