Personality Traits, Ego Development, and the Redemptive Self

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Abstract

Life narratives are the internalized stories that people construct to provide meaning, purpose, and coherence in their lives. Prior research suggests that psychologically healthy and socially engaged adults generally narrate their lives in a prototypical fashion labeled *the redemptive self*, consisting of five themes: (a) a sense of childhood advantage, (b) empathy for others' sufferings, (c) moral steadfastness, (d) turning of negative events into positive outcomes (redemption sequences), and (e) prosocial goals. The current study examines trait correlates of the redemptive self in 157 late-midlife adults. Summing thematic scores across 12 life story interview scenes, the redemptive self was positively associated with four of the Big Five traits: extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability, but unrelated to cognitive features of personality, as assessed on openness and ego development. The findings suggest those with positive socio-emotional personality traits, but not necessarily a proclivity for sophisticated thoughts, tend to have redemptive life stories.

The past decade has witnessed an upsurge in research on the stories people tell about their lives. Researchers in personality (McAdams & Manczak, 2015), developmental (Fivush & Haden, 2003), social (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010), cognitive (Thomsen & Berntsen, 2008), cultural (Syed & Azmitia, 2010), political (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012), and clinical (Adler, 2012) psychology have turned their attention to these internalized life stories, as have certain sociologists and other social scientists (Polletta, Bobby Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011). A growing number of investigators now argue that autobiographical life stories are durable and qualitatively rich psychological phenomena, constituting integral features of self and identity (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2013b; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). For example, McAdams and McLean (2013) defined *narrative identity* as a person's evolving story of the self, a broad narrative that reconstructs the personal past and projects imaginatively into the future so as to provide a person's life with some degree of temporal continuity, thematic unity, and purpose. Along with dispositional traits and motivational constructs like goals and values, people's narrative identities—their internalized and evolving life stories—may be seen as critical components of personality itself (McAdams & Pals, 2006; Singer, 2005).

Many empirical investigations of life stories ask individuals to give narrative accounts of important episodes in their lives and then analyze the stories for individual themes, images, or features (e.g., Adler et al., 2015; Lilgendahl &

McAdams, 2011; McLean & Pratt, 2006). One notable line of research, however, has gone further, aiming to identify a broad narrative prototype that encompasses a full set of inter-related story themes. In *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, McAdams (2006/2013) described the *redemptive self* as an exemplary form of life narrative that has historically enjoyed high currency in American culture and literature, going back to the 17th-century Puritan settlements in Massachusetts (see also McAdams, 2006, 2011, 2015b). The redemptive self is a story about how a gifted protagonist encounters suffering in the world and, equipped with a sense of moral steadfastness, manages to overcome adversity to establish a long-term personal legacy toward aiding others in their community. Operationalizing this archetypal story in terms of five concrete themes coded in narrative texts, researchers have shown that contemporary American adults at midlife whose autobiographical narrative accounts more closely approximate the redemptive self exhibit higher levels of positive societal engagement and enjoy better psychological well-being, compared with adults whose life-narrative protocols show fewer instances of the

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themes comprising the redemptive self (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams & Guo, 2015; see also, Walker & Frimer, 2007). As an important psychological construct for midlife American adults, the redemptive self appears to be intricately tied up with leading a life of value and well-being.

The current study explores further the psychological nature of the redemptive self by attempting to situate this particular life-narrative prototype within the broad conceptual landscape of personality variables. The study examines relations between the redemptive self on one hand and the personality dimensions subsumed within the Big Five taxonomy and Loevinger's (1976) construct of ego development on the other. Four of the five traits within the Big Five—extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness—are viewed here to reflect socio-emotional features of personality. The fifth trait of openness to experience and the concept of ego development are viewed to tap more cognitive aspects of personality. Thus, the study aims to answer the following question: What are the dispositional traits and other features of personality that characterize midlife adults who narrate their lives in terms of the redemptive self?

Life Stories and the Redemptive Self

A growing body of literature connects individual differences in the content and structure of life stories to important dimensions of social and personal functioning (see McAdams & Manczak, 2015, for a recent review). For example, one line of research has examined the positive associations between themes of agency in life-narrative accounts—the story protagonist's ability to exert autonomous control over events—and important life outcomes such as subjective well-being and happiness among midlife adults (Adler et al., 2015). In a study that followed psychotherapy patients over time, Adler (2012) found that upticks in agency as expressed in narrative accounts obtained before each therapy session preceded and predicted improvement in mental health over the course of treatment.

Another set of studies has explored the extent to which narrators draw lessons, insights, and other positive meanings from key life-narrative scenes. Positive meaning making has been linked to emotion regulation (Cox & McAdams, 2014), higher levels of happiness and civic engagement (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001), and more mature expressions of identity (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Dunlop and Tracy (2013) discovered that recovering alcoholics who narrated the experience of their last drink in terms that suggested positive lessons learned tended to stay sober longer than those whose narrations featured other themes. Other dimensions of life narratives that have been subjected to empirical scrutiny include life-narrative coherence (Baerger & McAdams, 1999), themes of growth and integration (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005), transformative

processing (Pals, 2006), and contamination sequences, which refer to life story scenes wherein positive events turn suddenly bad (Adler, Kissel, & McAdams, 2006).

McAdams (2006/2013) launched a research program that combined historical and cultural analysis of canonical American texts with quantitative content analysis of the life stories constructed by especially generative American adults at midlife. As described by Erikson (1963), generativity is an adult's concern for and commitment toward promoting the well-being of future generations, as evidenced in parenting, teaching, mentoring, leadership, and other efforts to leave a positive legacy of the self for the future (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Empirical studies show that American midlife adults scoring higher on self-report measures of generativity, compared with those scoring lower, tend to construe their lives in terms of five interrelated themes that together comprise the redemptive self (McAdams, 2001; McAdams et al., 1997; McAdams & Guo, 2015; Walker & Frimer, 2007). Variations on these same five themes are highly prevalent in such classic sources as illustrated in 17th-century American Puritan testimonials, famous American autobiographies like that written by Benjamin Franklin, 19th-century narratives of escaped Black slaves, and 20th-century American motivational speeches, self-help books, and television talk shows (McAdams, 2006/2013).

In the redemptive self, the story begins with a gifted or blessed protagonist who encounters the suffering of others. This juxtaposition of having sensed an early advantage in life (Theme 1) while witnessing others' misfortune (Theme 2) sets up a moral challenge for the protagonist: *I am fortunate while others suffer; I should do something to help others, in gratitude for the blessings I have received*. As a result, the protagonist formulates a set of steadfast moral principles (Theme 3) to guide his or her life. As the plot develops, the protagonist repeatedly encounters setbacks and failures, but these often result in positive outcomes down the road (redemption sequences; Theme 4). As the protagonist looks to the future, he or she continues to envision personal goals aimed at benefitting others (Theme 5). McAdams (2006/2013) has argued that construing one's life in the manner described here may promote psychological well-being and prosocial engagement with the world. For example, the redemption sequences showcased in the story indicate that the difficulties one encounters in life and the obstacles that often seem to stand in the way of making a positive mark on the world may be overcome in the long run. The collocation of early advantage and the sensitivity to the suffering of others, moreover, may indicate to the narrator that he or she is especially well positioned, psychologically speaking, to be of service to others.

The five themes make up an (idealized) *redemptive self* narrative prototype. No person's life story is likely to conform to the redemptive self in a perfect way. Instead, individual life narratives may be viewed as differing from each other in the extent to which they approximate the idealized

form (McAdams, 2006/2013). In McAdams and Guo (2015), therefore, individual scenes within standardized life-narrative interviews were coded for the presence or absence of each of the five themes, and then, scores were aggregated across each interview to arrive at an especially robust and reliable measure of the redemptive self. Midlife adults showing higher levels of self-reported psychological well-being, civic engagement, and generativity constructed life stories that tended to score higher on all five themes of the redemptive self (and not on other themes) compared with the life stories constructed by midlife adults scoring lower on the self-report measures (McAdams & Guo, 2015).

The Big Five and Ego Development

Within the well-known five-factor taxonomy for dispositional personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 2008), four of the trait domains appear to capture broad individual differences in socio-emotional functioning. Extraversion taps into positive affectivity, social dominance, and other tendencies indicative of an enthusiastic and emotionally positive engagement with the social world. By contrast, neuroticism taps into negative emotions like anxiety and sadness, which may adversely affect social relationships. Conscientiousness and agreeableness speak to self-regulatory tendencies in instrumental and interpersonal pursuits. People high in conscientiousness are more disciplined, responsible, and persevering, compared with those lower in conscientiousness; people high in agreeableness are described as especially warm, caring, modest, and altruistic. Longitudinal studies suggest relatively clear normative trends in personality traits, with mean scores on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and social dominance (a facet of extraversion) tending to rise gradually, and scores on neuroticism tending to decline over much of the adult life span, from late adolescence through middle age (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Thus, developing toward lower levels of neuroticism and higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and, to a certain degree, extraversion is sometimes described as constituting an arc of socio-emotional maturation in personality development (McAdams, 2015a; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008).

Openness to experience differs from the other four traits in explicitly capturing particular cognitive features of personality. Individuals high on openness are seen as relatively intellectual, inquisitive, creative, and valuing innovation and change, compared with those scoring lower on openness (De Young, Grazioplene, & Peterson, 2012). Moreover, openness to experience is the only trait in the Big Five that shows significant associations with general cognitive ability (Westenberg, Blasi, & Cohn, 1998). In this regard, openness resembles Loevinger's (1976) concept of ego development, which has been described as an individual's overall framework for making sense of the self and the world. Assessed via a sentence completion test, ego development places individuals on a continuum running from simplistic egocentricity to principled and cognitively sophisticated understanding of human interdependence. At the lowest stages in Loevinger's scheme, people's one-dimensional interpretive frameworks are unable to take into consideration the perspectives of others; at the middle stages, people advance to a more socio-centric framework that relies on clichés, stereotypes, and conventional rules; at the highest stages, individuals show greater tolerance for cognitive complexity, advanced perspective taking, and an especially nuanced understanding of social reality (Westenberg et al., 1998). Scores on the standard sentence completion test for ego development tend to be positively and significantly associated with self-report scores of openness (McCrae & Costa, 1980).

Past studies have linked features of life stories to both the Big Five personality traits and ego development. For example, McAdams et al. (2004) found positive associations between self-report agreeableness and themes of interpersonal communion in narrative accounts of significant autobiographical events. People high in neuroticism tend to construct life stories with a more negative emotional tone, compared with individuals lower in neuroticism (McAdams et al., 2004; Raggatt, 2006). Both openness and ego development have been associated with composing more structurally complex life stories (McAdams, 1985; McAdams et al., 2004; McAdams, Ruetzel, & Foley, 1986) and narratives that exhibit higher levels of self-examination (King & Hicks, 2007; Pals & John, 1998).

No previous studies, however, have explored connections between personality variables and the broad narrative prototype of the redemptive self. In that the redemptive self is significantly positively associated with higher levels of overall psychosocial adaptation at midlife (McAdams & Guo, 2015), it is expected that it should track those socio-emotional traits that have been associated with greater maturity—in particular, higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, and lower levels of neuroticism. With respect to the more cognitive dimensions of openness and ego development, however, predictions are less straightforward. Ego development is theorized to capture a comprehensive maturational trend in personality development, but it is a trend that is mainly concerned with cognitive complexity and advanced perspective taking. It is not clear that the kind of life story represented in the redemptive self necessarily requires the level of cognitive sophistication, complex understanding of self and others, and the intellectual curiosity as associated with higher levels of ego development and scores on self-reported openness to experience.

We hypothesize that constructing life stories that closely approximate the redemptive self prototype should be related with higher levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness and lower levels of neuroticism. In particular, we suspect that subfacets within agreeableness (i.e., altruism and tender-mindedness) and conscientiousness (i.e., competence and dutifulness) can be drivers for especially strong associations between those socio-emotional traits and the redemptive

self narrative. We make no prediction with respect to openness and ego development, however, expecting that if there is an association with the redemptive self, it is not likely to be especially robust. Finally, because the current study employs a sample comprised of European American (White) and African American (Black) middle-aged adults, our analysis will pay close attention to any race differences that may be observed, as well as gender differences.

Method

The present study consists of intensive, cross-sectional case studies of 157 late-midlife adults collected as part of a longitudinal study of adult personality development (see Cox & McAdams, 2014; Manczak, Zapata-Gietl, & McAdams, 2014; McAdams & Guo, 2015). Each participant completed a 2-hr online self-report survey, including demographic information and two personality indices. Participants were also individually interviewed for 2 to 3 hr following a standardized life story protocol adapted from previous studies of narrative identity (e.g., McAdams et al., 1997).

Participants

A total of 157 individuals (64% female) ranging in age from 55 to 58 years (*M* = 56.4, *SD* = 1.03) in 2009-2010 were recruited by a social science research firm, aiming for a nonclinical sample of community adults from the Greater Chicago area. Accordingly, 55% of participants described themselves as White, 43% as Black, and 2% as interracial or "Other." Annual household incomes ranged from less than US$25,000 to more than US$300,000, with a median income of US$75,000 to US$100,000 in 2009-2010. The majority of the sample was college educated, with the distribution of highest educational attainment being 5% receiving a high school diploma only, 27% attending some college, 24% graduating college only, and 44% having a graduate education.

Measures of Personality

Big Five traits. The broad traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience were measured using the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; McCrae & Costa, 2004). Each trait was separately measured using a subscale of 12 self-report items. For example, the Agreeableness subscale includes the statement, "I try to be courteous to everyone I meet." Responses range from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The NEO-FFI is a highly reliable and valid, revised, 60-item version of the original 240-item NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI; Costa & McCrae, 1985; McCrae & Costa, 2004). In the current study, all five subscales had acceptable internal consistency: agreeableness, Cronbach's alpha = .72; conscientiousness, Cronbach's alpha = .85; extraversion, Cronbach's alpha = .76; neuroticism, Cronbach's alpha = .86; and openness to experience, Cronbach's alpha = .76.

Ego development. Ego development (ED; Loevinger, 1976) was measured using the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT; Hy & Loevinger, 1996). On the WUSCT, participants are asked to complete 18 sentence stems (e.g., "When I am criticized . . . ," "Raising a family . . . ," "A man's job . . . ," "When people are helpless . . . ," and "Rules are . . ."). All of the participants' responses are scored and aggregated according to guidelines. From the aggregated score, the participant is then assigned a total protocol stage rating from 1 to 9, which corresponds to different levels of ED. Beginning at Level 2 (Level 1 is reserved for the presocial infant who lacks an ego), the stages are as follows: 2 = *impulsive* (egocentrically dependent), 3 = *self-protective* (opportunistic and hedonistic), 4 = *conformist* (loyal to rules), 5 = *conscientious-conformist* (self-aware, consideration of exceptions to rules), 6 = *conscientious* (self-evaluated standards), 7 = *individualistic* (tolerance for others' standards), 8 = *autonomous* (understanding of interdependence), and 9 = *integrated* (cherishment of individuality).

Trained to achieve high levels of agreement with the test manual, a co-author of this study coded all of the sentence completions for ego development. The coder was blind to the study's intent and hypotheses and all other participant information during the coding process.

Life Story Interview

Participants were individually interviewed by a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow trained to administer the Life Story Interview. The current study examined lengthy narrative responses for 12 discrete segments of the full interview. These segments were chosen because they serve as salient landmark events from the autobiographical past and imagined future. In addition, the scenes provide insight into how or why a person has become the person he or she is today and how he or she is becoming the person he or she is becoming. In sequence, the segments were as follows: (a) a brief summary of the main chapters in their life story, (b) high point scene (the greatest or happiest moment in the story of your life), (c) low point scene (the worst or unhappiest moment in the story), (d) turning point scene (a moment of significant change in the story), (e) positive early memory, (f) negative early memory, (g) vivid adult memory, (h) experience of wisdom, (i) religious or spiritual scene, (j) the next chapter in life, (k) dreams or hopes for the future, and (l) an anticipated project or avocation for the future. For each narrative response, the participants were asked to describe what happened in the scene, what they were thinking and feeling, and what they thought the scene said about themselves or about their life story. While each key autobiographical scene does not necessarily capture the complete scope of what constitutes a person's overall narrative identity, taken in aggregation, the interview responses to these narrative prompts have proven to be exceptionally revealing of the main images and themes that characterize narrative identity (McAdams & Manczak, 2015).

All Life Story Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into typed Word documents. The length of the transcripts ranged from 5,050 to 25,070 words ($M = 11,512$, $SD = 3,788$). The 12 scenes were separately analyzed for the five main themes comprising the redemptive self. At least two independent coders, blind to the identifying information of participants, determined the presence (+1) or absence (0) of each theme in each of the 12 interview segments. Theme scores were separately aggregated across the 12 scenes to arrive at a total score (ranging from 0 to 12) illustrating the salience or density of the specific theme in the life story. For each thematic category, coders' scores were pooled and averaged for subsequent data analysis. To examine the redemptive self as a multithemed whole, a composite score was formed with unit-weighted z scores of the different themes. The five themes of the redemptive self were defined as follows:

1. Early advantage (EA): The narrator indicates having experienced an advantage or distinction (physical, material, psychological, or relational) that positively distinguishes them from others. The narrator suggests that the advantage was experienced early in life or reflects an inherent, long-term effect in life. Coding reliability: Cohen's kappa, $\kappa = .61$ for individual coding decisions (presence vs. absence of the theme per scene); two-way mixed model of intraclass correlation, ICC = .63.

2. Sensitivity to suffering (SS): The narrator expresses sensitivity or sympathy for the pains or problems that others experience, or shows an awareness of social injustice, inequality, or other perils, dangers, or broad problems in society. Coding reliability: $\kappa = .82$; ICC = .80.

3. Moral steadfastness (MS): The narrator indicates that religious, ethical, or political ideologies are especially strong and motivating factors in his or her life. The narrator may emphasize the importance of these values, their clarity and coherence, or their long duration. Coding reliability: $\kappa = .84$; ICC = .78.

4. Redemption sequences (RS): The narrator describes a movement from a demonstrably negative situation, typically involving fear, anxiety, sadness, or anger, to a positive outcome. The redemptive move may either (a) occur in the real-time sequence described in the original episode or (b) represent a positive interpretation of the original negative scene that the narrator formulated after the scene occurred. Coding reliability: $\kappa = .71$; ICC = .78.

5. Prosocial goals (PG): The narrator describes the pursuit of positive goals that aim to benefit others (beyond one's own family members), to advance society, or to do both. Coding reliability: $\kappa = .83$; ICC = .83.

Examples of each of the five themes are displayed in Table 1.

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for study variables. Nine participants did not finish the ego development sentence completions (WUSCT). Chi-square and independent t tests revealed that these nine participants, when compared with the rest of the participants who completed the WUSCT, were not significantly different on any study variables.

With respect to differences between the sexes, female participants ($M = 35.78$, $SD = 5.48$) scored higher than males ($M = 33.31$, $SD = 5.39$) on measures of agreeableness, $t(154) = 2.71$, $p < .01$, but showed no difference in other personality traits or ego development. In alignment with McAdams and Guo (2015), EA was more commonly found in the narratives of female than in those of male participants, $M_{women} = 1.92$, $SD_{women} = 1.11$; $M_{men} = 1.54$, $SD_{men} = 1.15$; $t(155) = 2.01$, $p < .05$. The theme of PG was also higher in women, $M_{women} = 1.52$, $SD_{women} = 1.16$; $M_{men} = 1.10$, $SD_{men} = 1.35$; $t(155) = 2.08$, $p < .05$. Summing the standardized scores of the five themes showed that the overall redemptive self life story was more prominent in female participants' narratives compared with male participants' narratives, $M_{women} = 0.08$, $SD_{women} = 0.56$; $M_{men} = -0.14$, $SD_{men} = 0.71$; $t(155) = 2.18$, $p < .05$.

In terms of race and ethnicity, Black participants scored higher on extraversion, $M_{Black} = 31.22$, $SD_{Black} = 5.39$; $M_{White} = 29.14$, $SD_{White} = 6.88$; $t(149) = 2.01$, $p < .05$, and lower on neuroticism, $M_{Black} = 13.61$, $SD_{Black} = 7.30$; $M_{White} = 17.74$, $SD_{White} = 8.12$; $t(152) = -3.26$, $p < .01$, than White participants. Black participants also scored significantly lower on openness to experience, $M_{Black} = 28.77$, $SD_{Black} = 7.20$; $M_{White} = 31.50$, $SD_{White} = 5.76$; $t(150) = -2.60$, $p < .05$, and on the stage of ego development, $M_{Black} = 5.46$, $SD_{Black} = 1.10$; $M_{White} = 6.25$, $SD_{White} = 0.89$; $t(143) = -4.83$, $p < .001$. For narrative themes, the presence of MS was more than twice as likely to appear for Black than for White individuals, $M_{Black} = 2.44$, $SD_{Black} = 1.51$; $M_{White} = 1.22$, $SD_{White} = 1.15$; $t(152) = 5.70$, $p < .0001$. The same trend emerged for the theme of PG, where Black participants scored nearly twice as high as White participants, $M_{Black} = 1.83$, $SD_{Black} = 1.47$; $M_{White} = 0.99$, $SD_{White} = 0.90$; $t(152) = 4.38$, $p < .001$. Also, the overall standardized redemptive self composite scores were significantly higher for Black than for White individuals, $M_{Black} = 0.21$, $SD_{Black} = 0.60$; $M_{White} = -0.18$, $SD_{White} = 0.58$; $t(152) = 4.11$, $p < .001$.

Education was highly positively correlated with income level, $r(155) = .31$, $p < .001$; openness, $r(153) = .34$, $p < .001$; and ego development, $r(146) = .29$, $p < .001$. However, it was slightly negatively associated with the theme of RS, $r(155) = -.16$, $p < .05$. In addition, income was positively associated with the theme of EA, $r(155) = .19$, $p < .05$.

NEO-FFI intercorrelations showed moderate to strong significant intercorrelations between the more socio-emotional traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and neuroticism. In contrast, there were generally nonsignificant associations between socio-emotional and

Table 1. Examples of Each Narrative Theme of the Redemptive Self.

Narrative theme	Synopsis of memory	Example
1. EA	Participant receives special treatment from his or her grandmother. The relationship is an impactful one.	"My grandmother was probably the closest person to me. Maybe even closer than my mother. And I was the first grandchild for her, so I could do no wrong. And she took me, almost every weekend that I can imagine. Especially after my brother was born, I remember being with my grandmother. Always wanting to be with my grandmother. My grandmother didn't know how to say no to me. And, like I said, I could do no wrong, so I just loved her so much."
	Participant is seen as special by others, and this is something inherently part of his or her identity.	"You know, I just always wasn't sure why people wanted to be with me. I didn't understand what made people kind of gravitate toward me. And I think I understood that actually I was a very good person. And always, I accept people, I believe, I accept them for the way they are. And I did that ever since I was a little kid. So I think that's what—you know, I think people see in me . . ."
2. SO	Participant expresses sensitivity or sympathy for those who may not help themselves.	"I just like to help. You know, you see somebody out on the street. I'm the one that—I really do. If it's not my girlfriend Ellen, it's me, throwing the dollar into the suitcase, or I remember wanting to take home a child one time, because I didn't think anybody really wanted to help this child, or finding a wounded little bird and taking that home."
	Participant describes seeing his or her brother's mental deterioration and subsequent death as the low point scene.	"I think one of the reasons I did not grieve like I should is because I think his life sucked. It was a terrible life and I think that—I do not believe in sanctuary of life, but if things are not going good, it is okay. It is okay not to be in such pain."
3. MS	Participant describes his or her son's bat mitzvah as the high point scene.	"Yes, and it's kind of a confirmation of your faith and you know everything that you've taught them, values and stuff and it just all comes out and oh boy, you know (laughing) and like I said and there you are, if you can imagine everybody, every, almost every single person you know I mean that you're able to invite or that's alive you sitting in that room with—feeling and witnessing what you know . . ."
	Participant demonstrates how important his or her political ideologies are in motivating his or her behavior.	"Ever since that moment I've been you know a political activist and stuff like that which itself like there's you know certain family and friends were all there without having taken the leap and I think that was the moment I just, I just said you know screw this. You know the war stinks. The government stinks. The school administration stinks. You know all the people stink, all this sort of '60s . . . And that became one of the key you know political organizing, I organized the first anti-war demonstration in my, you know in my home town and stuff like that and it hasn't stopped since then."
4. RS	Participant with depression (Negative Event A) attends therapy and learns coping mechanisms to benefit his or her life (Positive Experience B).	"I definitely had a depression, and also the whole—the unit was based on psychosomatic illness or some out-of-cycle illnesses. So everyone in the unit had problems dealing with mind and body, and so much of the therapy was educational. And it was really, really helpful. And, you know, it was a lot of coping mechanisms and acceptance strategies as well as . . . kind of separating, you know, you're not your illness . . . And emotionally, it took me out of my life, which I definitely needed, and it replaced it with all sorts of positive experiences that just had the best effect on me in every facet of my life."
	Participant goes through a break up (Negative Event A) and through meditation, learns how to like himself or herself again (Positive Event B).	"I had to, you know, really learn to like myself because I was feeling so low after our relationship broke up; I never thought I'd be able to see—I never thought that the hurt would ever stop. That's how the loss felt, but I realized until I could be by myself and enjoy my own company, that I don't think that anybody else could be with me and enjoy my company. I think I did a lot of meditating."
5. PG	Participant specifies his or her involvement in philanthropy.	"When I was [the director of a local philanthropic food kitchen], I gave food to the shelters, soup kitchens and, and food pantries. And that was such a turning point in my life because I was helping so many people."
	Participant emphasizes his or her involvement in helping his or her community.	"I mean I'm not a demonstrator but I do support organizations that help women that have problems, get them counseling and get them signed up to put the babies up for adoption if they are ill-equipped to handle it, so. Of course, to me, this is like—really life affirming . . ."

Note. EA = early advantage; SO = suffering of others; MS = moral steadfastness; RS = redemption sequences; PG = prosocial goals.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Word Count, Personality Characteristics, and Narrative Themes.

Variables	n	M	SD	Range
Word count	157	11,512.223	3,787.99	5,050-25,070
Self-report measures				
Agreeableness	156	34.91	5.56	20-46
Conscientiousness	156	34.98	7.01	17-47
Extraversion	154	30.02	6.33	7-45
Neuroticism	157	15.84	8.01	0-41
Openness to experience	155	30.39	6.51	12-44
Stage of ego development	148	5.91	1.06	3-8
Narrative measures				
EA	157	1.79	1.13	0-6
SO	157	1.48	1.12	0-5.5
MS	157	1.76	1.46	0-8
RS	157	2.72	1.51	0-7.5
PG	157	1.37	1.24	0-6.5

Note. Word count and narrative themes were tabulated over the 12 life story scenes. EA = early advantage; SO = suffering of others; MS = moral steadfastness; RS = redemption sequences; PG = prosocial goals.

socio-cognitive personality characteristics. There were only a couple of exceptions—one being openness to experience's relationship with extraversion, $r(152) = .25$, $p < .01$, and ego development's slight association with conscientiousness, $r(145) = -.17$, $p < .05$. As predicted, there was indeed a strong association between the more socio-cognitive characteristics of openness and ego development, $r(144) = .39$, $p < .001$.

As in McAdams and Guo (2015), the thematic construction of the redemptive self life story—EA, SO, MS, RS, and PG—showed statistically significant intercorrelations in eight out of 10 instances. The two instances of nonsignificant correlations were between EA and SO, $r(155) = .12$, $p = .13$, and EA and RS, $r(155) = .01$, $p = .86$. Otherwise, all other intercorrelations between themes ranged between EA and MS, $r(155) = .16$, $p < .05$, and the strongest correlation between SO and PG, $r(155) = .51$, $p < .001$. The length of the interviews was unrelated to narrative themes but significantly negatively associated with the trait of conscientiousness, $r(155) = -.17$, $p = .04$.

Table 3 displays the correlations between indices of personality dispositions and narrative themes, as well as results from a series of multiple regression analyses that controlled for education, income, sex, race, and interview length. For the regressions, each of the five Big Five traits from the NEO-FFI and stage of ego development were separately entered to predict each of the five themes as well as the redemptive self composite.

In support of the study's hypothesis, the socio-emotional traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and neuroticism showed robust correlations with the five narrative themes (16 out of 20 cases) and the composite (four out of four cases). More specifically, the redemptive self prototype was strongly related with the following traits: agreeableness,

$r(155) = .35$, $\beta = .34$, $p < .001$; conscientiousness, $r(155) = .29$, $\beta = .28$, $p < .001$; extraversion, $r(153) = .36$, $\beta = .32$, $p < .001$; and neuroticism, $r(156) = -.37$, $\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$. The significant findings between the redemptive self themes and socio-emotional traits tended to hold up within both male and female, and for Black and White subsamples, with a few exceptions. With respect to sex, the association between the composite narrative profile and neuroticism was much stronger for women than for men, $r_{female}(99) = -.52$, $p < .0001$; $r_{male}(54) = -.16$, $p = ns$; $z = 2.43$, $p = .015$. In terms of race/ethnicity, the composite was marginally more negatively correlated with neuroticism for Black than White participants, $r_{Black}(64) = -.47$, $p < .001$; $r_{White}(86) = -.20$, ns; $z = 1.85$, $p = .064$.

By contrast, the composite redemptive self was shown to have nonsignificant relationships with the more cognitively based trait of openness to experience, $r(154) = .01$, $p = .89$; $\beta = .08$, $p = .32$, and stages of ego development, $r(146) = .02$, $p = .85$; $\beta = .15$, $p = .09$. Looking at the individual themes, MS was only associated with openness, $r(154) = -.19$, $p < .05$, and had trending negative associations with ego development, $r(146) = -.15$, $p < .10$, though the relationship becomes significant in the regression analysis ($\beta = .24$, $p > .05$). SO was marginally positively associated with ego development, $r(146) = .15$, $p < .10$, with the association becoming nonsignificant in the regression analysis ($\beta = -.10$, ns).

Finally, Table 4 illustrates the results of exploratory multiple regression analyses, wherein all Big Five traits from the NEO-FFI were entered simultaneously (along with education, income, sex, race, and interview length) to examine each separate model's prediction of the composite redemptive self and each of the comprising five narrative themes. The composite redemptive self model indicated that higher scores, $F(10, 138) = 6.34$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .32$, were most commonly found among those participants who are Black ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$), higher in

Table 3. Correlations and Multiple Regression Results Between Thematic Categories in Life Story Interviews and Measures of Personality Dispositions.

	EA		SO		MS		RS		PG		Composite redemptive self	
	r	β	r	β	r	β	r	β	r	β	r	β
Agreeableness	.24**	.20*	.20*	.20*	.23**	.28***	.22**	.22**	.20*	.16*	.35***	.34***
	[.09, .38]	[.16, .24]	[.05, .35]	[.17, .24]	[.08, .37]	[.23, .32]	[.07, .37]	[.17, .27]	[.04, .34]	[.12, .20]	[.20, .48]	[.30, .38]
Conscientiousness	.21**	.19*	.12	.10	.12	.14†	.22**	.23**	.22**	.21**	.29***	.28***
	[.05, .35]	[.16, .22]	[-.04, .27]	[.08, .13]	[-.04, .27]	[.10, .17]	[.06, .36]	[.18, .27]	[.07, .37]	[.18, .25]	[.13, .42]	[.24, .31]
Extraversion	.22**	.18*	.24**	.23**	.15†	.13	.20*	.20*	.33***	.28***	.36***	.32***
	[.06, .36]	[.14, .21]	[.08, .38]	[.19, .27]	[-.01, .30]	[.09, .16]	[.04, .35]	[.15, .24]	[.18, .46]	[.24, .32]	[.22, .49]	[.28, .36]
Neuroticism	-.27***	-.26**	-.15†	-.14	-.20*	-.09	-.26**	-.27***	-.28***	-.21**	-.37***	-.31***
	[-.41, -.11]	[-.30, -.23]	[-.30, .01]	[-.17, -.11]	[-.34, -.04]	[-.12, -.06]	[-.40, -.10]	[-.32, -.23]	[-.42, -.13]	[-.24, -.17]	[-.50, -.22]	[-.34, -.27]
Openness	.04	.04	.10	.12	-.19*	-.10	.00	.07	.09	.15†	.01	.08
	[-.12, .19]	[.01, .07]	[-.06, .25]	[.08, .15]	[-.34, -.03]	[-.14, -.07]	[-.16, .15]	[.03, .10]	[-.07, .25]	[.12, .19]	[-.15, .17]	[.07, .10]
Stages of ED	.10	.11	.15†	.24*	-.15†	.03	.01	.06	-.06	.03	.02	.15†
	[-.07, .25]	[-.07, .32]	[-.01, .31]	[.06, .42]	[-.31, -.01]	[-.19, .26]	[-.15, .17]	[-.17, .35]	[-.22, .10]	[-.16, .24]	[-.15, .18]	[-.02, .19]

Note. For each set of findings, the first number is the Pearson correlation between the trait (Big Five NEO-FFI trait or stage of ED) and the particular theme (or thematic composite). The second number is the standardized beta of the particular personality variable as it is entered into a multiple regression equation—along with sex, race, education level, income, and length of interview—in the statistical prediction of the theme (or thematic composite). Numbers in brackets are values for 95% confidence intervals. Bolding indicates statistical significance at > .05. EA = early advantage; SO = suffering of others; MS = moral steadfastness;

RS = redemption sequences; PG = prosocial goals; ED = ego development; NEO-FFI = NEO Five-Factor Inventory.

†*p* < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 4. Regressions of All NEO-FFI Traits Upon Each Narrative Theme and the Redemptive Self Composite.

	EA	SO	MS	RS	PG	Composite redemptive self
	β	β	β	β	β	β
Descriptive data						
Sex	.13	.02	−.16*	.07	.11	.06
Race	.05	.07	.40***	−.04	.33***	.26**
Education level	.15	−.01	.02	−.23*	.15†	.03
Income	.13	−.13	−.11	−.06	−.08	−.07
Word count	.05	.09	.05	.13	.12	.11
Big Five traits (NEO-FFI)						
Agreeableness	.12	.16†	.27**	.11	.06	.23**
Conscientiousness	.11	.06	.10	.12	.14†	.17*
Extraversion	.05	.16	.10	.04	.19*	.16†
Neuroticism	−.17†	.00	.08	−.17†	−.03	−.09
Openness to experience	−.00	.07	−.14	.03	.10	.02
R	.44	.32	.53	.42	.52	.56
R^2	.19	.10	.29	.18	.27	.32
F	3.31***	1.52	5.50***	2.93**	5.05***	6.34***

Note. For each set of findings, beta is the standardized beta for the parameters (sex, race, education level, income, word count, and Big Five NEO-FFI traits) as they are entered into a multiple regression equation in the statistical prediction of each particular narrative theme and redemptive self composite. Ego development was not included in the regressions for reasons of multicollinearity between ego development and openness to experience. For sex, 0 = Male, 1 = Female; for race, 1 = White, 2 = Black. Bolding indicates statistical significance at > .05. EA = early advantage; SO = suffering of others; MS = moral steadfastness; RS = redemption sequences; PG = prosocial goals; NEO-FFI = NEO Five-Factor Inventory.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

agreeableness (β = .23, $p < .01$), higher in conscientiousness (β = .17, $p < .05$), and trending higher in extraversion (β = .16, $p < .1$). Upon closer analysis of each of the themes, neither models for EA or SO indicated significant demographics or personality traits associated with higher scores on each theme. For EA, $F(10, 138) = 3.31$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .19$, individuals higher in neuroticism had marginally lower cases of EA coded throughout their narratives, β = −.17, $p < .1$. In terms of SO, participants higher in agreeableness were marginally associated with having more instances of SO occurring throughout the 12 scenes (β = .16, $p < .1$), but the model fit was not significant, $F(10, 138) = 1.52$, $p = ns$, $R^2 = .10$.

However, similar exploratory modeling in Table 4 showed that coded MS, RS, and PG had certain significant associations with demographics and personality traits. For coded MS, $F(10, 138) = 5.50$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .29$, higher scores were associated more so with the Black participants in our sample (β = .40, $p < .001$), followed by individuals high in agreeableness (β = .27, $p < .01$), and male participants (β = −.16, $p < .05$). Higher coded instances of RS in life stories, $F(10, 138) = 2.93$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .18$, were related to participants with lower educational attainment levels (β = −.23, $p < .05$) and trending lower levels of neuroticism (β = −.17, $p < .1$). Finally, for PG, $F(10, 138) = 5.05$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .27$, higher scores tended to be associated with our sample of Black participants (β = .33, $p < .001$), highly extraverted individuals (β = .19, $p < .05$), and to a marginal degree, conscientious individuals (β = .14, $p < .1$). In sum, our exploratory analysis indicates that within our sample, Black participants and those who are highly agreeable or conscientious are most likely to tell narratives in alignment with the redemptive self prototype.

Discussion

Previous research on narrative identity has demonstrated associations between individual themes or tendencies in life stories (such as the single theme of an RS) and self-report measures of well-being, mental health, and the like (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005; Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). Beyond case studies (Colby & Damon, 1992), qualitative explorations (Tuval-Mashiach, 2006), and analyses of cultural and historical texts (McAdams, 2013a), however, no previous research in psychological science has cast an empirical eye on the *full* multifaceted narrative of a person's life—a particular kind of story about life with a particular kind of beginning, middle, and anticipated ending—and Big Five measurements of personality. Through careful content analyses of 12 discrete events within extensive life story interviews, this is the first large-scale study that has demonstrated a significant statistical linkage between individuals' personality traits and the thematic qualities of their life stories as coded using themes of the redemptive self.

The redemptive self is a highly valued form of life narrative in American society, often utilized as a narrative resource by socially engaged and psychologically healthy midlife adults. In the redemptive self prototype, the protagonist emphasizes having five themes: an early advantage in life

(EA), witnessed the sufferings of others (SO), moral steadfastness over time (MS), experienced repeated instances of redemption sequences (RS: negative events become positive), and formulations of prosocial goals (PG) for the future. The results of this study reveal that the psychosocially adaptive telling of such a narrative to be related alongside certain personality traits; socio-emotionally mature traits of high agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, and low neuroticism. These findings were maintained after controlling for sex, race, education level, income, and word count. By contrast, the more cognitively oriented traits of openness to experience and an individual's stage of ego development (the level of complexity an individual's framework is for making sense of the self and the world) were not significantly associated with the redemptive self.

Taking a closer look at the relationships between traits and specific redemptive self themes, both openness and ego development had a significant negative relationship with MS. For openness to experience, this negative correlation may be due to the inherent differences between openness, which involves a high willingness to experiment with new ideas and a tolerance for ambiguity, and MS, which is usually demonstrated through statements of compelling religious, ethical, or political ideologies. For ego development, the same argument may be made about the negative correlation to MS; lower stages place a heavier emphasis on loyalties to rules, while higher stages of ego development broaden to include tolerance for others' standards and the cherishing of individuality. On the other side of the coin, as individuals move into higher stages of ego development and away from egocentric perspectives, they may develop more sympathy for the difficulties of others' situations, as reflected in the positive association between ego development and the theme of SO. High levels of ego development are still significantly predictive of high scores on SO once placed in a multiple regression of demographic controls and the other four themes. Indeed, these positive correlations between (a) ego development and SO and (b) SO and the redemptive self may explain ego development's marginally significant standard beta in predicting the composite redemptive self.

Upon closer examination of the traits and the redemptive self, there were a few differences between male and female participants, and between Black and White participants. Female participants were higher on agreeableness, EA, PG, and the composite redemptive self, compared with their male counterparts. In general, sex differences in intercorrelations between traits and the redemptive composite were nonsignificant, except for the trait of neuroticism. Neuroticism was strongly negatively related to the redemptive composite for females, but the association fell short of statistical significance for males. The intercorrelational difference between the two sexes suggests that trait neuroticism had little to no relationship with whether males' narratives contain themes of the redemptive self. Comparatively for females, high levels of trait neuroticism were associated with a significant decrease in

the presence of the redemptive self over the course of 12 life story scenes. In terms of race/ethnic differences, Black participants scored lower on neuroticism, openness to experience, and ego development, and higher on extraversion, MS, PG, and the composite redemptive self. However, there were no significant differences between the intercorrelations between traits and the redemptive self composite among Black and White participants. The absence of such a difference suggests that the relationship between Big Five traits and the narration of a redemptive self life story does not look different among Black and White midlife adults. The higher presence of the composite redemptive self among both women and Black participants points to the possibility that this kind of story is particularly notable for these two populations residing in American society. As our sample of women and Black participants have experienced major historical events positioning them as marginalized groups (e.g., civil rights movement and the second-wave feminist movement in the late 60s and early 70s), it may be that those communities have a cultural engrainment of the importance of prosocial efforts and moral strivings in the face of hardships and institutional bias.

Exploratory findings from Table 4 suggest that certain combinations of traits are related to each theme once entered in a model controlling for demographic variables. For example, agreeableness emerged as the strongest trait predicting MS, indicating that individuals high on agreeableness tend to tell life stories containing scenes in which religious, political, or ethical ideologies serve as life guides. Among all the traits entered into the model predicting the composite redemptive self, agreeableness and conscientiousness (and to a marginal extent, extraversion) appear to be the traits most positively associated with the redemptive self composite.

As we examine the results of our findings, the following question arises: Among midlife adults, why are these specific socio-emotional traits related to the redemptive self life story while openness and ego development are not? The answer may be that the redemptive self prototype is one which suggests socio-emotional rather than socio-cognitive maturity. Researchers have found a universal upward trend in agreeableness, conscientiousness, social dominance, and emotional stability in participants from young adulthood continuing through at least 50 years of age, whereas openness and social vitality remained relatively unchanged (Roberts et al., 2006). This widespread pattern of personality trait development was attributed to the life lessons and adaptations resulting from tasks centered around living in a social world. In most Westernized cultures, the period of midlife adulthood is typically characterized by the solidification of nuclear families, career paths, and active citizen engagement. These life events may be the catalyst in promoting and, more importantly, maintaining higher levels of these positive socio-emotional traits. In addition, social disapproval may result from violations of the role expectations to uphold a good work ethic, interact in positive ways with others, and react in a temperate and mature manner to stress.

The narration of a redemptive self may reflect a similar maturational arc in personality development. Previous studies have shown a strong connection between the redemptive self and self-report indices of generativity, an adult's concern for and commitment toward promoting the well-being of future generations (McAdams, 2013b; McAdams et al., 1997; McAdams & Guo, 2015). As described by Erikson (1963) and others (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), generativity represents the central psychosocial focus of mature adulthood. Increases in conscientiousness, social dominance, and emotional stability can aid an individual in becoming a generative member of society even in the face of difficulty. In a parallel fashion, the redemptive self tells how socially contributing midlife adults tend to remain motivated while facing challenges that arise when working toward bettering society. The protagonist of the story, moreover, experiences special advantages (EA) while witnessing the suffering of others (SO), and remains steadfastly committed to animating life principles (MS).

Creating such a story for one's life does not appear to require high levels of cognitive sophistication or ego development, at least not in American society. Cultural and literary analyses of the redemptive self suggest that Americans are highly familiar with the kinds of life stories that capture the themes of the redemptive self (Kleinfeld, 2012; McAdams, 2013b). Historically, Americans have cherished cultural narratives that track redemptive moves from sin to salvation (atonement), rags to riches (upward social mobility; the American dream), and slavery to freedom (liberation). Furthermore, American television, film, and novels contain innumerable examples of redemptive selves wherein gifted protagonists encounter suffering in the world but manage to stick to their principles, overcome adversity, and ultimately give back to society. These stories are in the literary air that many Americans breathe as they grow up and imagine what their lives might be like in the future.

Meanwhile, conforming one's own life to the redemptive self is not easy. Life stories reflect life as it has been lived, even as they call upon the imaginative powers of the narrator. Socio-emotional traits like high extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness may provide the personality resources out of which a redemptive self may be fashioned. And the construction of a life story like this may help to sustain the development of positive socio-emotional traits. Qualities of expansive thinking, sophisticated perspective taking, and tolerance for ambiguity, however, may not be necessary for a redemptive self, even though these personality characteristics, which tend to be associated with trait openness and ego development, hold high value. As such, being a sophisticated thinker does not go against constructing a redemptive self life story, but it does not necessarily promote such a narrative construction either.

An important caveat must be mentioned regarding the accuracy of content within life narratives. The very nature of narrative research posits that life stories are inherently selective and biased reconstructions of the autobiographical past

and the imagined future (McAdams & McLean, 2013). For instance, while all individuals surely experience negative events that yield some positive benefit, not all individuals make sense of or give coherent meaning to their lives using RS. Life stories are not true biographies or even necessarily a reliable index of the episodic past. Rather, they serve as renderings of what the narrator believes to be important about the past (and the imagined future). Therein lies the importance of empirically analyzing life stories; as a subjective narrative, the redemptive self life story provides the narrator with a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and serves as a psychological resource for dealing with many of life's challenges in the adult years (McAdams & Guo, 2015).

It should be noted that the study's sample is restricted to late-midlife adulthood in America. A midlife sample is especially conducive to studying life stories—Developmentally, participants by this age have experienced enough life events to have coherent and qualitatively rich stories, and are therefore likely to show broad variations in thematic content. Theoretical writings on narrative identity have also suggested that the redemptive self is linked to traditional American understandings of how to live a good life (McAdams, 2013a). Thus, future research should investigate whether these thematic prototypes are found in other cultures, and if not, what corresponding themes are associated with these universally positive socio-emotional traits. Subsequent studies are also needed to determine whether current findings apply to other time periods of human development beyond late-midlife adulthood.

Finally, the current study is correlational in structure. We cannot determine whether participants' traits emerge to influence the thematic content of their life stories, or their life stories affect trait-like features of personality. Our research shows that the two constructs of specific traits and narratives are related but does not distinguish between two possible mechanisms: (a) Traits are relatively stable, and humans begin developing traits before gaining the ability to form and narrate coherent autobiographical memories of significant events. Presumably, our personality traits predispose us to construct our life stories in particular ways. (b) Traits and narrative themes may influence each other in the form of a reciprocal cycle, where characteristics of personality lead to the prevalence of certain themes in a life story, which prompts or reinforces the original traits. Thus, further studies are needed to determine the exact nature of the relationship between the development of traits and narrative themes.

Supplemental Material

The online supplemental material is available at http://pspb.sage-pub.com/supplemental.

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