

Background

Connectedness to something greater than oneself

Self-transcendence¹ may be experienced as a feeling of expansion:

- intrapersonally**—within the self
- interpersonally**—with all of humanity
- temporally**—across past, future, and present
- transpersonally**—with nature or the perceived divine

Increased self-transcendence is correlated with increased:

- age, perceived nearness to end of life²
- purpose, hope, positive affect, feelings of peace³
- psychological, social, physical well-being⁴
- elders’ quality of life and independence⁵


Narrative research captures the richness of the lived experience by investigating how individuals construct the stories of their lives, and exploring how these stories relate to various psychological outcomes.

Narrative identity theory⁶ understands life stories to be products of adult personality development. We strive to make coherent sense of our lives through storytelling.

Grounded theory is a qualitative data analysis technique. Researchers begin with no a priori hypotheses about the construct of interest. Instead, they use induction to generate theory directly from the data collected.

Study 1

Late-midlife adults



Is there a pattern of narrative differences which differentiate the life stories of adults who score high versus low on self-reported self-transcendence?

Method

- Participants completed the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (ASTI),⁷ Northwestern Ego Integrity Scale (NEIS),⁸ and the 2010 Life Story Interview.⁹
- We selected the top and bottom scorers for self-reported self-transcendence (ASTI + NEIS). Authors 1 and 3 used **grounded theory** to read participants’ life stories and look for **narrative themes** which differentiated the groups.

Participants

| | |
|------------------|---|
| <i>N</i> | 144 |
| Age | <i>M</i> = 56.4, <i>SD</i> = 0.95 |
| Sex | 64% female, 36% male |
| Race | 58% Caucasian/White, 40% African-American, 2% other |
| Median income | \$75,000–\$100,000 |
| Median education | College graduate |

Results

- We identified 5 narrative themes which differentiated high and low scorers in self-reported self-transcendence. These themes showed up within narrative “phases” of ***being***, ***becoming***, and ***participating***.

being

becoming

participating

secure attachment “I was kind of doted on when I was young. You know, the baby girl, and I was the apple of my father’s eye.”

interconnectedness “I believe in reincarnation ...in any one of my lives [I could’ve been] male or female, White, Asian, Latino, whatever. And so how can you have grievances with somebody who you could have been?”

closure “But I mean, you know, I can’t undo any of it. I can’t redo any of it. whatever I did, whatever mistakes I made was done with good intentions.”


self-actualization “I think for me the discovery has just been finding out who I really am and just moving towards that.”

spiritual pluralism “I couldn’t believe that a billion or hundred of millions of Chinese could be wrong just because they didn’t follow Christ. So I had to embrace a spirituality that included everyone.”

lifelong learning “I just couldn’t believe that I would go to college. I mean there was no script for me as a child to do that and I just was elated... by the prospect of being able to continue learning and to go.”

Study 2

Late-midlife adults



Do Study 1 narrative themes tell us something generalizable about self-transcendent lives?

Method


- Participants completed the ASTI, NEIS, and the 2014 Life Story Interview.
- “Secure attachment” was dropped during training
- Authors 1 and 2 coded 5 scenes of the Life Story Interview for remaining themes (*M*_{ICC} = .92).

Participants

| | |
|------------------|---|
| <i>N</i> | 134 |
| Age | <i>M</i> = 61.4, <i>SD</i> = 0.94 |
| Sex | 62% female, 38% male |
| Race | 58% White, 40% African-American, 2% other |
| Median income | \$50,000–\$74,999 |
| Median education | College graduate |

Study 3

Emerging adults



Do the narrative themes also predict self-transcendence for emerging adults?

Method

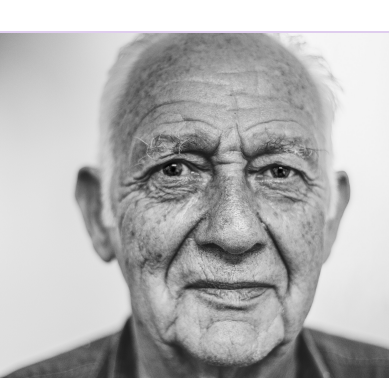
- Participants completed the ASTI, NEIS, and an abbreviated Life Story Interview (8 scenes)
- Authors 1 and 4 coded all scenes of the Life Story Interview (*M*_{ICC} = .79).

Participants

| | |
|------------------|--|
| <i>N</i> | 59 |
| Age | <i>M</i> = 18.75, <i>SD</i> = 0.83 |
| Sex | 54% female, 43% male, 3% genderqueer |
| Race | 52% White, 15% Asian, 8% Latinx, 8% multiracial, 5% African-American |
| Median education | Some college |

Study 4

Oldest-old adults



Do the narrative themes also predict self-transcendence for the oldest-old adults?

Method

- Participants completed the NEIS and the Life Story Interview.
- Authors 1 and 4 coded 8 scenes of the Life Story Interview (*M*_{ICC} = .69).

Participants

| | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>N</i> | 40 |
| Age | <i>M</i> = 84.76 , <i>SD</i> = 4.24 |
| Sex | 65% female, 35% male |
| Race | 100% White |
| Median education | Some college |

Results

Narrative themes & self-transcendence

- Consistent with the literature, age was related to self-reported self-transcendence (NEIS), $\beta = .51$, $p < .001$.
- While interconnectedness, closure, self-actualization, and spiritual pluralism all predicted self-reported self-transcendent scores for late-midlife adults, *only* self-actualization predicted self-reported self-transcendence scores for emerging adults and oldest-old adults.

| Narrative theme | Study 2 Late-midlife adults | Study 3 Emerging adults | Study 4 Oldest-old adults |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| closure | 0.51*** | 0.21 | 0.12 |
| self-actualization | 0.52*** | 0.34** | 0.40** |
| lifelong learning | 0.15 | 0.14 | 0.00 |
| interconnectedness | 0.31*** | 0.29 | 0.05 |
| spiritual pluralism | 0.42*** | 0.19 | 0.29 |
| **p<.01, ***p < .001 | | | |

Correlations between narrative themes and self-reported self-transcendence scores for each study.

Discussion

Provisional narrative prototype

being

becoming

participating

Our prototypical narrator gains an awareness of herself as an independent ***being***; at the same time she feels *securely attached* and embedded within the fabric of an *interconnected* community. To ***become***, she grows in interdependence as part of a new family unit, yet this unit is later strained and independence is needed to gain *closure*. She survives, even thrives, for some time before making a major life shift in pursuit of *self-actualization*. She’s ***participating***—she actively seeks increased congruence and meaning, reaffirms her commitment to *spiritual pluralism*, and looks toward her future as a process of *lifelong learning*.

¹Cloninger, 1994; Erikson, 1959; Frankl, 1966; Maslow, 1969; Reed, 1991; Tornstam, 1989

²Iwamoto, Yamawaki, & Sato, 2011; Jewell, 2010; Nakagawa, 2007; Williams, 2012

³Coward, 1996; Ellermann & Reed, 2001; Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005

⁴Haugan et al., 2013; James & Zarrett, 2005; Lamers et al., 2015; Sadler et al., 2006

⁵Klaas, 1998; Nilsson, Ekman, Ericsson, & Winblad, 1996

⁶McAdams, 1996; McAdams & McLean, 2013

⁷Levenson et al., 2005

⁸Janis, Canak, Machado, Green, & McAdams, 2011

⁹McAdams, 2008

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