

Psychology and Aging

“A Continuous Opening of Life”: Perspectives on Aging Across Time, Gender, and Race

Kristen M. Johnson, Bidushi Bhowmik, Noor M. Al-Khaouli, and Hollen N. Reischer

Online First Publication, July 3, 2025. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pag0000913>

CITATION

Johnson, K. M., Bhowmik, B., Al-Khaouli, N. M., & Reischer, H. N. (2025). “A continuous opening of life”: Perspectives on aging across time, gender, and race. *Psychology and Aging*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pag0000913>

“A Continuous Opening of Life”: Perspectives on Aging Across Time, Gender, and Race

Kristen M. Johnson¹, Bidushi Bhowmik², Noor M. Al-Khaouli², and Hollen N. Reischer²

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Chicago

² Department of Psychology, University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Research on narrative identity—the ongoing process of shaping and being shaped by life stories—provides rich insights into personality development and can predict psychosocial well-being. However, narratives about aging remain underexamined, limiting our understanding of narrative identity processes over the life course. We explored individuals’ narratives on aging, examining how narrative themes vary across age, gender, and race and relate to four domains of self-reported well-being (psychological well-being, generativity, physical health, body image). We analyzed narrative scenes from 143 late midlife adults (62% women, 38% men; 58% White, 40% Black, 2% interracial/other) twice, first at $M_{age} = 60.37$ ($SD = 0.90$; $n = 135$) and again at $M_{age} = 64.5$ ($SD = 0.95$; $n = 136$). Participants responded to questions about stability versus change in personal identity and feelings about the aging process. We coded five narrative themes: agency, communion, closure, self-actualization, and exploratory processing. Results showed that exploratory processing was the only narrative theme to show significant mean-level change (increase) over time. Black participants scored higher than White participants on agency, self-actualization, and closure; no gender differences were found. Most narrative themes predicted well-being measures in models controlling for race. In particular, self-actualization predicted all four measures, and agency predicted all but generativity. Psychological well-being was predicted by four of five themes, and physical health/fitness was predicted by three. We interpret these findings in the context of the interplay of race, gender, and master narratives and highlight the importance of narrative identity processes to well-being in late midlife, with implications for understanding diverse aging experiences.


Public Significance Statement


Among late-midlife adults narrating personal stories of aging, robust narrative themes of self-actualization and agency predicted enhanced well-being, pointing to the value of interpreting aging experiences with a sense of self-determination and self-fulfillment. Black participants’ stories were significantly more agentic, self-actualized, and emotionally resolved than those of White participants. Contrary to previous findings on younger populations, there were no thematic differences by gender. The science of “successful aging” must be nuanced and grounded in the lived experience of diverse adults.


Keywords: narrative identity, aging perceptions, race, psychological well-being, gender

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000913.supp>

David Weiss served as action editor.

Kristen M. Johnson  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3757-5795>

Bidushi Bhowmik  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2412-4804>

Noor M. Al-Khaouli  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3978-8060>

Hollen N. Reischer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6538-0265>

Bidushi Bhowmik is now at Department of Psychology, State University of New York Plattsburgh.

Portions of this study’s findings were presented at the 2024 Society for Personality and Social Psychology Annual Convention, the 2024 Midwestern Psychological Association Conference, and the 2024 Northwestern Undergraduate Research and Art Exposition. Quantitative data, analytic code, and research materials are publicly available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/y98nc/?view_only=123d76c92dd84fba6b321d6176fa07e. A preprint is at <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/8r7we>.

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose. This study was supported by a Summer Undergraduate Research Grant from Weinberg

College of Arts and Sciences, Northwestern University, awarded to Kristen M. Johnson. Data collection was supported through a grant from the Foley Family Foundation awarded to Dan P. McAdams.

Kristen M. Johnson played a lead role in conceptualization, data curation, funding acquisition, visualization, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing, a supporting role in formal analysis, and an equal role in investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, and validation. Bidushi Bhowmik played an equal role in investigation and validation. Noor M. Al-Khaouli played an equal role in investigation and validation. Hollen N. Reischer played a lead role in formal analysis, resources, and software, a supporting role in investigation, validation, and writing—review and editing, and an equal role in data curation, methodology, project administration, and supervision.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kristen M. Johnson, Department of Psychology, University of Chicago, 5848 South University Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637, United States. Email: kmjohnson25@uchicago.edu

"I don't look at aging as [a] coming to an end, but as a continuous opening of life." This portrait of getting older from a participant in the present study stands in contrast with the common depiction of aging in the United States (Kluger, 2023). Rather than framing aging within a context of loss—a life process to be dreaded—this participant alludes to a self-understanding and self-expansion that may result from a lifetime of exploring and extracting meaning from experiences. Another study participant shared: "I'm better than I were [*sic*] as far as knowing who I am, the history of who I am, what it means to be ... in this world. ... I'm more astute and more educated," reflecting on the benefits of increased knowledge and wisdom that come with the accrual of lived experiences. For this participant, too, the widespread narrative of aging as loss fails to capture their lived experience. With regard to aging, there appears to be a fuller and more nuanced personal narrative available for individuals.

Understanding the needs of aging individuals is increasingly critical as populations around the world grow older (U. S. Census Bureau, 2023; World Health Organization, 2024). Studies on aging populations have revealed both challenges and opportunities associated with longer lifespans on individual and societal levels (Buecker et al., 2023; Corwin et al., 2009; Fried et al., 2022; Rowe & Kahn, 2015). While many studies focus on health concerns and pharmacotherapeutic treatments, research centered on aging adults' lived experiences is essential. Without this perspective, an incomplete model of "successful aging" could inform policy and treatment decisions, leading to disconnects between aging adults and the institutions meant to serve them.

Additionally, research on aging must adopt an intersectional lens to accurately capture how multiple dimensions of identity shape older adults' experiences. For example, Black Americans report lower rates of depression despite experiencing more stressors and worse physical health outcomes than White Americans (Levine & Crimmins, 2014; Reischer et al., 2024). This paradox may reflect both genuine resilience and culturally distinct manifestations of distress that do not align with standard diagnostic criteria (Pamplin & Bates, 2021; Wilkins, 2012). Similarly, the *strong Black woman* archetype—a cultural ideal emphasizing self-reliance, caregiving, and emotional strength—shapes how Black women navigate aging. While this archetype can be culturally affirming and provide coping resources, it can also mask psychological distress and create barriers to help seeking (Baker et al., 2015; Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009; Wilkins, 2012). The intersection of age with other forms of inequality produces unique forms of disadvantage that cannot be reduced to the simple addition of separate oppressions; rather, age represents a distinct political location that transforms how other identity categories are experienced (Calasanti et al., 2006; Crewe, 2019). Furthermore, dominant models of "successful aging" can perpetuate both ageism and ableism, particularly disadvantaging those who experience multiple forms of marginalization (Langmann & Weßel, 2023). A better understanding of how individuals perceive and make meaning of their own aging processes, particularly the most challenging and most rewarding, is important both epistemologically and pragmatically. Rigorous research on the lived experiences of diverse aging individuals is therefore vital to meet the needs of an increasingly older population.

The Lived Experience of Aging

Some previous literature has explored aspects of the lived experience of aging. Existing qualitative work has highlighted

themes in personal stories of aging such as adaptation to physical changes, shifts in social roles, and reflections on purpose and legacy (e.g., Blawert & Wurm, 2021; Burns & Leonard, 2005; Shellman, 2004; Washburn & Williams, 2020; Xiao et al., 2024). Other studies have quantified concerns about aging, such as loneliness, appearance changes, and declining health (Allen et al., 2024; Lytle et al., 2018; Menkin et al., 2017; Nikitin et al., 2024). Few studies have traced the meaning that individuals extract from their experiences of aging or quantified such findings in ways that may be compared across demographics or correlated with well-being outcomes. No research to date has specifically examined how individuals "story" the aging process using a *narrative identity* framework.

Narrative identity is the study of the internalized and evolving story of the self that reflects individual meaning-making and personal coherence in one's life story (McAdams, 2015). Narrative identity methods typically entail translating qualitative data (interviews with individual participants telling stories of key personal experiences and beliefs) into quantitative ratings of narrative "themes," which are often then examined in relationship to personality or clinical variables of interest (Adler et al., 2017). Given its ability to both deeply explore and quantify perceived meanings of life's events, narrative identity is an ideal lens through which to explore aging individuals' lived experiences and how narratives of these lived experiences may pattern across groups and relate to indicators of well-being.

Within the narrative identity research literature, culturally shared stories that provide frameworks within which individuals locate and story their own experiences are referred to as *master narratives* (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2016). Master narratives serve as templates for what is considered appropriate, valued, and expected in a given society, and they are particularly powerful in shaping how individuals understand experiences of aging. These narratives are characterized by their ubiquity, utility, invisibility, rigidity, and compulsory nature—those whose personal narratives do not align with these master narratives may be marginalized. As individuals age, they negotiate their personal narratives within existing master narratives about what it means to age "successfully" (Reischer, 2021).

Successful Aging

In the United States, the dominant "successful aging" narrative emphasizes maintaining physical health, cognitive function, and social engagement (Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 2015). However, this view of successful aging does not align with the lived experiences and values of all individuals; this may be especially true across dimensions of race, gender, and age (Åberg et al., 2020; Buecker et al., 2023; Martinson & Berridge, 2015; McLean, 2008; Menkin et al., 2017).

Where master narratives typically center the qualities ascribed to young, White, nondisabled, cisgender, heterosexual males, the lived experiences of marginalized groups will often necessarily deviate from such narratives (Adler et al., 2021; Fivush & Grysman, 2022; McLean et al., 2023; Reischer, 2021). This may in turn lead individuals to struggle with well-being or the creation of satisfying alternative narratives. At the same time, these "necessary deviations" often give rise to alternative narratives that become dominant within specific groups or subcultures. Individuals with intersectional

identities may find they must contend with multiple narrative constraints, further complicating their sense of self (McLean et al., 2024).

Understanding potential discrepancies between individual life stories and master narratives on aging can reveal ways in which society is failing to meet the needs of diverse aging populations. For example, resources may be misdirected toward services that do not align with what older adults themselves view as most important for well-being. Moreover, promoting narrow or inaccurate portrayals of successful aging could contribute to unhealthy environments that increase stress and stigma for those who do not fit prescribed ideals (McLean et al., 2018; Syed & McLean, 2022).

Narrative Identity and Aging

A more comprehensive and inclusive depiction of successful aging is both necessary and possible. By analyzing personal stories, a narrative identity approach can provide insights into how diverse individuals healthfully integrate their experiences of aging into their evolving sense of self. The mixed-methods nature of narrative identity research allows for statistical analysis of demographic differences in perceptions of aging as well as associations between aging narratives and well-being outcomes. Additionally, the emphasis on meaning-making in narrative identity development provides a window not only to how an individual experiences aging but also to what effect the experience of aging has on their understanding of themselves. In this way, narrative identity research invites aging individuals to participate in the study of their own aging.

Previous literature suggests that narrative identity continues to evolve throughout adulthood, with narrative themes such as redemption, self-actualization, and closure associated with developmental priorities that become more salient with age, such as generativity and ego integrity (McAdams, 2008; McAdams & Guo, 2015; Reischer et al., 2025). Importantly, numerous narrative themes have been shown to positively correlate with measures of well-being (e.g., Adler, 2012; Adler et al., 2016; Booker et al., 2022; Cowan et al., 2019; Eriksson & Frisén, 2024; Sheldon & Cooper, 2008). This indicates that the ways in which a person narrates their experiences may reflect and even influence aspects of their personal well-being.

Using the narrative identity approach, we examined life story interviews (LSI) of late-midlife adults as they transition to older adulthood, primarily through analyses of five narrative identity themes especially relevant to aging experiences.

Narrative Identity Themes

The narrative themes of agency, communion, self-actualization, closure, and exploratory processing each offer unique assessments of how individuals make sense of their lives as they age. Together, these themes provide a multidimensional understanding of the aging process: how late-midlife adults entering older adulthood perceive their ability to influence their lives (agency), experience fulfillment in social connections (communion), pursue personal growth (self-actualization), integrate life experiences (closure), and engage in self-reflection (exploratory processing). By examining perceptions of aging through these narrative themes, we seek to capture a diversity of aging experiences across demographic groups, exploring how factors such as race and gender intersect with narrative identity processes throughout the lifespan.

Agency refers to an individual's sense of control and autonomy in effecting change in their life, whereas *communion* measures feelings of connectedness to others (McAdams et al., 1996). Previous research has found gender differences in these themes, which are often measured in tandem. Specifically, men tend to score higher in agency, while women more commonly score higher in communion (Fivush & Grysman, 2022; Hsu et al., 2021). Limited research has investigated whether narrative agency and communion evolve as individuals age (Grysman & Booker, 2024), but there is reason to think they may given the implications of changes in physical capabilities, social roles, and social connections (Corwin et al., 2009; Nikitin et al., 2024; Plácido et al., 2022). Little research has explicitly explored race differences in agency and communion, which does show mixed results (Andreoletti et al., 2015; McAdams, 2001; Sheldon & Cooper, 2008).

Self-actualization involves awareness of and action toward meeting one's positive potential (Reischer et al., 2021). This theme may be particularly pertinent in later life stages, as individuals may have more opportunities to pursue personal growth and fulfillment freed from certain societal expectations (Reischer et al., 2021; Washburn & Williams, 2020). *Closure* refers to the ability to reconcile or accept difficult past events (Reischer et al., 2021), an increasingly relevant task as aging adults engaging in the natural process of "life review" seek to integrate experiences into a coherent life story (Butler, 1974). In a longitudinal study of adults aging from their mid-50s to mid-60s, Reischer et al. (2025) found that participants scored higher on measures of self-actualization and closure over time. There is also evidence that race, but not gender, groups score significantly different in self-actualization and closure, with Black individuals scoring higher than their White counterparts (Reischer et al., 2021).

The psychosocial process of "life review" also highlights the importance of the theme *exploratory processing*, which denotes the depth of self-reflection in one's narrative and, among other meaning-making themes, has been shown to increase over time (Fivush et al., 2017; Lodi-Smith et al., 2009; Pals, 2006; K. Turner et al., 2024). Some evidence suggests that women may be more inclined toward processes of accommodative integrative meaning-making (McLean, 2008), but no studies have explicitly compared exploratory processing across gender or race.

The Present Study

The present study aimed to address gaps in understanding the lived experience of aging by examining narrative identity over a 4-year span in a sample of 143 White and Black men and women. Our research questions were:

1. What topics do participants discuss when prompted to reflect on personal change and stability as they have aged and the aging process in general?
2. Do mean levels of agency, communion, closure, self-actualization, and exploratory processing change over a 4-year period?
3. Are there significant race and gender differences in these narrative themes?
4. How do these narrative themes predict various aspects of well-being?

5. To what extent does the content of narratives, and their relationships with well-being, align with or diverge from the American master narrative of “successful aging”?

Hypotheses and Planned Exploratory Analyses

We predicted that scores on self-actualization, closure, and exploratory processing would increase between narratives collected at each time point. We predicted that Black participants would score higher than White participants on measures of self-actualization and closure. Finally, we predicted that men would score higher on agency than women, women would score higher on communion than men, and no gender differences would be found in closure and self-actualization. Due to limited literature, we did not make predictions about changes over time in agency and communion; race differences in agency, communion, or exploratory processing; gender differences in exploratory processing; or Race \times Gender interactions for any theme.

The present study also explores how narrative theme use in discussions of aging may correlate with four self-report measures: psychological well-being, generativity, physical health and fitness, and body image. Because we developed our research questions regarding well-being after reading narratives, we considered these analyses exploratory. Finally, given the lack of narrative identity research related to perceptions of aging, we made no hypotheses about narrative topical content.

Method

Transparency and Openness

We report the process for sample size determination and describe all data exclusions, manipulations, and measures in the study, following the Journal Article Reporting Standards (Appelbaum et al., 2018). All quantitative data, analysis code, and research materials are publicly available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/y98nc/?view_only=123d76c92dd84fbcab321d6176fa07e. Narratives are not available due to participant privacy issues; de-identified narratives may be available upon request with appropriate data-sharing agreements. Quantitative analyses were performed in R Version 4.3.1 (R Core Team, 2023), using packages tidyverse (Wickham et al., 2019), broom (Robinson et al., 2023), and lm.beta (Behrendt, 2023). The narratives used in the present study have not been examined previously; however, related narratives from this data set have been studied and reported in other publications (see Adler et al., 2015; Mayukha et al., 2025; McAdams & Guo, 2015; Reischer et al., 2025; A. F. Turner et al., 2022). Neither the study design and hypotheses nor the analytic plan were preregistered.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Northwestern University Office for Research Institutional Review Board (STU00001801) and carried out in compliance with ethical standards in treatment of human subjects. Participants signed an informed consent document annually when completing self-report measures and were reminded of the key consent information prior to LSIs.

Participants

Participants ($n = 143$) were recruited by a social science research firm in 2008–2009 to be part of an intensive 9-year longitudinal study on narrative identity and personality development, the Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood (FLSA). The sample size was determined, and data were collected prior to this study; therefore, we did not conduct an a priori power analysis. The original community sample included 163 adults from a large metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States. Participants were included in the present study if they had responded to the LSI (McAdams, 2007) prompts on aging in the Time 5 (T5) and/or Time 9 (T9) interviews.

The full sample of participants ($n = 143$) included 135 participants at T5 (2012–2013) and 136 participants at T9 (2017–2018). There were 128 participants who participated at both time points, and 15 who participated in only one. At T5, the 135 included participants were approximately 60 years old ($M = 60.37$, $SD = 0.90$); 62% women and 38% men; and 40% Black, 58% White, and 2% other/interracial. At T9, the 136 participants were approximately 65 ($M = 64.55$, $SD = 0.95$); 63% women and 37% men; and 42% Black, 57% White, and 1% other/interracial. The median income of participants was \$75,000–\$99,999 at T5 and \$50,000–\$74,999 at T9.

Procedure

One-on-one interviews were conducted at a major research university by trained faculty members, postdoctoral researchers, and graduate students. Well-being measures were completed individually as part of a large battery of self-report measures. Participants received \$75 for each survey and each interview. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional service.

Narrative Measures

LSI

The LSI (McAdams, 2007) is a 2-hr semistructured interview about the story of the participant's life. It includes questions about life milestones, challenges, values, and reflections, as well as prompts for explicit articulated meaning-making. The LSI was administered at study times T1, T5, and T9, with a minority of questions added or subtracted each year. As T1 did not include aging-related questions, the present study focuses exclusively on T5 and T9. The prompts selected for analysis, as published in the semistructured interview protocol, are reproduced below:

- T5: You've just been talking about historical events that have affected your life. You may think about how you've changed or how you've stayed the same, either as a result of these events or any of many other things that affect how people develop. Now I'm going to ask you to think about the ways in which you think you've stayed the same or the ways in which you've changed throughout your life. Would you please tell me the main ways you think you've changed or stayed the same since you were around 18–20 years old? What would you say are the biggest changes in how you think of yourself? What are the major ways you think you're still the same?

T9: In this last section [of the interview], I'm going to ask you to reflect a little on your participation in FLSA. You've been in this project for nine years, starting around age 54 or so, and now you're in your mid-60s. How have you changed as you've gotten older? How do you feel about it? How do you feel about aging in general?

Qualitative Topical Content Coding. A combination of inductive and deductive approaches was used to identify the most common narrative interview content. Following coding for narrative identity themes, all researchers drafted a list of topics (e.g., parenting, personality change, body image) deemed likely to be found in narratives based on impressions of recalled transcripts and the developmental literature. Two independent raters both reread a subset (37%) of transcripts, tracking topical content and amending the initial list as appropriate through consensus. Each rater then independently coded half of the remaining narratives for the presence or absence of each topic; topic categories were not mutually exclusive. Finally, a third independent rater distilled the topic categories into nine overarching content domains. Content domains informed the selection of well-being measures thought to be most salient for participants. With regard to positionality, all authors self-identify as cisgender women with racial/ethnic backgrounds including White, Lebanese American, and South Asian. In order of authorship, the authors were a postbaccalaureate student, undergraduate student, and a professor at the time of the study. Following guidelines by Lincoln and Guba (1985), authors practiced self-reflexivity and collaborated in bracketing existing biases or assumptions through the course of research.

Narrative Theme Coding. Narratives were quantitatively coded using validated methods for narrative identity research (Adler et al., 2017; Syed & Nelson, 2015) and coding manuals on each narrative theme (Adler, 2008; Pals, 2006; Reischer et al., 2021), by three trained research assistants. See https://osf.io/y98nc/?view_only=123d76c92dd84fbcab6b321d6176fa07e for the codebook used. Coders were blind to participant self-report measures, demographics (other than those disclosed by participants during interviews), and any other interview responses. Following an intensive training process led by the first and senior authors, coders reached good to excellent interrater reliability across themes: agency (intraclass correlation coefficient [ICC] = .79), communion (ICC = .85), self-actualization (ICC = .84), closure (ICC = .84), and exploratory processing (ICC = .81). See Table 1 for descriptions of each theme.

Self-Reported Well-Being Measures

Psychological Well-Being

The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) is a 42-item measure of six facets of psychological well-being: positive relations, environmental mastery, personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy, and purpose in life. Items are rated on a scale of 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating greater well-being. PWB was measured in both T5 ($\alpha = .92$) and T9 ($\alpha = .93$).

Loyola Generativity Scale

The Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) is a 20-item measure of generativity—an individual's concern

for and active involvement in future generations' well-being. Generativity is rated on a scale of 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater generativity. LGS was measured in both T5 and T9. Cronbach's α is .89 for both years.

Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire

The Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Cash, 1990) is a measure of evaluative, cognitive, and behavioral dispositions toward one's own body. Three subscales are used: appearance evaluation (seven items), fitness evaluation (three items), and health evaluation (six items). Subscales are rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating more positive self-evaluation. The MBSRW was measured in T9 only.

"FitHealthEval" ($\alpha = .87$) is a mean score of the fitness evaluation and health evaluation subscales (Cash, 2000) representing personal assessments of physical fitness and health.

Appearance evaluation ("AppearanceEval"; $\alpha = .87$) measures personal evaluation of physical appearance.

Analysis Plan

We employed a mixed-methods approach to capture the characteristic ways participants narrated their perceptions of aging and to examine relationships among narrative identity themes, demographic factors, and well-being measures across two time points.

Confirmatory Analyses

We used two-tailed paired t tests to test for differences over time and between race and gender groups. To correct for three comparisons (time, race, gender) within each narrative theme, we used the Bonferroni correction to set significance levels at $p < .017$. For the change over time analysis, only the participants who responded to both T5 and T9 aging-related prompts ($n = 128$) were included.

Exploratory Analyses

Multiple linear regression was used to test race by gender differences in narrative themes and predictive relationships between narrative themes and well-being measures. For each well-being measure (PWB, LGS, FitHealthEval, AppearanceEval), five models were run, with each model predicting the given measure from one narrative theme, controlling for race. To account for five comparisons for each well-being measure, we used the Bonferroni technique to set a significance threshold of $p < .01$.

To examine rank-order stability in narrative identity themes from T5 to T9, we calculated correlation coefficients for each theme (agency, communion, self-actualization, closure, and exploratory processing), allowing us to determine the extent to which participants maintained their relative positions on each narrative identity theme over time. We used the Holm method to correct for multiple comparisons.

Results

We examined 143 Black and White late-midlife participants' perceptions of aging through narratives collected approximately 4 years apart. Below, we describe the topical content of participants' narratives; participants' narrative theme use across time, race, and

Table 1
Narrative Theme Definitions and Score Anchors

| Theme | Definition | High anchor | Low anchor |
|------------------------|--|--|--|
| Agency | Narrative conveys a sense that one is fundamentally concerned with their own autonomy. Narrator believes that they can successfully affect their own lives and have positive control over the course of their experiences. | Protagonist is either completely or almost totally in control of plot outcomes. The protagonist may describe a situation in which they successfully produced their desired result. | Protagonist is completely powerless, at the mercy of circumstances. All action and outcomes are due to external powers. |
| Communion | Narrative reflects a sense that one is fundamentally concerned with connection, intimacy, love, belonging, union, friendship, and caring. | Protagonist is highly connected to others, and the narrative is rich with connection language. | Protagonist is completely disconnected, isolated, or rejected, and strong disconnection language is prominent. |
| Self-actualization | Narrative reflects a sense that one is aware of one's positive potential and is on a path toward meeting that potential. Narrator has a general sense of satisfaction with their life course. | Protagonist has a strong sense of congruence with their self and a feeling of fulfillment with their life. | Protagonist has very weak self-esteem and a dissatisfaction with their life. |
| Closure | Narrative reflects a sense that past regrets, disappointments, or confusions have been acceptably integrated into the narrator's present life. | Protagonist does not believe in regret—it is not a useful construct that serves them. Beyond regrets being “healthfully incorporated,” they have nearly been forgotten. | Protagonist is full of regret, and regret is a prominent theme in describing past experiences. |
| Exploratory processing | Narrative evidences an articulated analysis or exploration of the meaning of events described in order to understand their impact on narrator as a person. | Protagonist uses very superficial narration with minimal to no exploration of meaning in life events. | Protagonists' narration is highly exploratory in both style and content, positioning life events as central to self-understanding. |

Note. Agency and communion (Adler, 2008), possible range = -2 to 2 ; self-actualization and closure (Reischer et al., 2021), possible range = -2 to 2 ; exploratory processing (Pals, 2006), possible range = $1-4$.

gender; and the relationships between narrative themes and well-being.

Topical Content of Narratives

Coders identified 49 topics discussed across narratives, grouped into nine overarching content domains (see Figure 1). Topics ranged between personal processes (e.g., search for identity), external circumstances (e.g., political climate), interpersonal relationships (e.g., marriage and divorce), developmental milestones (e.g., becoming grandparents), and physical changes (e.g., coping with acquired disability).

Across both years, participants' narratives included an average of 2.90 topics ($SD = 1.72$) across an average of 2.4 content domains ($SD = 1.37$). The number of content domains discussed was significantly fewer in T5 ($M = 2.10$; $SD = 1.11$) compared with T9 ($M = 2.74$; $SD = 1.47$), $t(251) = -3.98$, $p < .001$. There were no significant differences by race or gender with regard to the total number of content domains addressed in each narrative. There were, however, significant differences in the individual content domains discussed in participant narratives by year, by gender, and by race (see Table 2).

Content domains informed our selection of well-being measures for use in analyses. PWB captures content related to personal growth and change in relating to oneself, others, and the world (i.e., identity development, family, friendships, romantic relationships, society domains); FitHealthEval captures content related to the health/fitness domain; AppearanceEval captures content focused on personal appearance (i.e., body image domain); and LGS captures content related to concerns and hopes for one's legacy and future generations (i.e., death and generativity domains).

Narrative Themes

We analyzed five narrative themes: agency, communion, self-actualization, closure, and exploratory processing. Table 3 contains excerpts of participant responses that exemplify high and low scores in each of the five themes.

Longitudinal and Demographic Differences in Narrative Themes

Narrative Change Over Time. Paired t tests showed that of all five narrative themes, only exploratory processing changed over time, increasing from $M = 2.36$ ($SD = 0.76$) in T5 to $M = 2.74$ ($SD = 0.72$) in T9, $t(127) = -4.24$, $p < .001$. Results of all tests are shown in Supplemental Table S1.

Race and Gender Differences in Narrative Themes. Because there were no significant differences between narrative themes across years for four of five themes, we averaged participant scores across years prior to testing for race and gender differences.¹ Means and standard deviations of narrative theme scores for the overall sample and by race and gender groups are displayed in Table 4. We conducted two-tailed, independent-samples t tests to test for race differences and gender differences for each narrative theme. We found significant differences by race in agency, $t(132.43) = 3.24$, $p = .001$; self-actualization, $t(136.77) = 4.66$, $p < .001$; and closure, $t(132.03) = 3.46$, $p < .001$. In all cases, Black participants scored higher than White participants on average. No significant gender

differences were observed for any theme. Results for all tests are shown in Supplemental Table S2.

We also tested race, gender, and their interaction in models predicting each narrative theme and found that the interaction term was significant for agency, $\beta = 0.23$, $t = 2.24$, $p = .027$. In this model, the race term was no longer significant, $t = 0.142$, $p = .887$. Black women scored the highest of all four race by gender groups ($M = 1.19$, $SD = 0.64$), followed by Black men ($M = 0.88$, $SD = 0.79$), White men ($M = 0.85$, $SD = 0.78$), and White women ($M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.92$). No other interaction effects were found; see Supplemental Table S3.

Rank-Order Stability in Narrative Themes

Our primary interest in this investigation was mean-level change over time. However, we tested rank-order stability for narrative identity themes across measurement occasions (Table 5). After adjusting for multiple tests, none of the narrative themes demonstrated significant rank-order stability from T5 to T9.

Narrative Themes Predicting Well-Being

Well-Being Differences Across Time, Gender, and Race.

Time. We checked for differences in the two well-being outcomes collected at both T5 and T9. Because paired t tests showed no differences by year, PWB, $t(137) = 1.69$, $p = .093$; LGS, $t(141) = -1.19$, $p = .236$, we averaged PWB and LGS scores across years for subsequent tests.

Race and Gender. We tested for systematic differences in well-being outcomes by gender and race using independent-samples t tests. There were no significant gender differences: PWB, $t(102.86) = -1.12$, $p = .266$; LGS, $t(103.44) = -1.04$, $p = .303$; FitHealthEval, $t(102.77) = 0.18$, $p = .860$; and AppearanceEval, $t(101.52) = -1.21$, $p = .228$. We found that Black participants scored significantly higher than White participants for all four measures: PWB, $t(137.37) = 4.62$, $p < .001$; LGS, $t(124.54) = 4.13$, $p < .001$; FitHealthEval, $t(131.54) = 3.36$, $p = .001$; and AppearanceEval, $t(130.43) = 3.79$, $p < .001$.

Relationships Between Narrative Themes and Well-Being. We collapsed narrative theme scores across years in models testing well-being outcomes to reduce the number of tests performed.² The a priori significance level was set at $p < .01$ to correct for multiple tests.

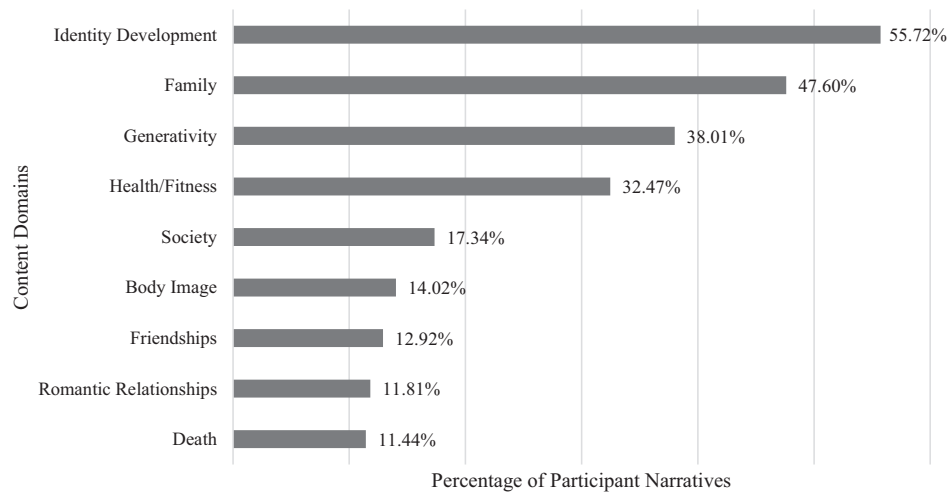
We modeled the relationship between each narrative theme and each well-being measure using multiple linear regression. Because there was a significant difference between races for every well-being outcome, we chose to include race as a covariate in all models. Models excluded "interracial/other" ($n = 3$) participants; we provide a correlation table of the first-order relationships between variables for the entire sample by year in Supplemental Tables S4 and S5.

Table 6 shows several significant relationships between narrative themes and well-being controlling for race (see Supplemental

¹ Because of differences across time for exploratory processing, we did examine possible race and gender differences within each year to ensure we were not obscuring findings; no race or gender differences were found within either year.

² As before, we also tested models of exploratory processing controlling for race predicting each well-being outcome for just T5 and for just T9; the results remained nonsignificant for all narrative theme terms.

Figure 1
Frequency of Narrative Content Domains Across All Narratives



Note. Percentage of narratives across both Time 5 and Time 9 that included discussion of each content domain.

Table S6 for *p* values to four decimal places). PWB was predicted by agency, communion, self-actualization, and closure. Only self-actualization predicted LGS. FitHealthEval and AppearanceEval were each predicted by both agency and self-actualization. Exploratory processing did not predict any well-being measures. Race remained a significant predictor of PWB and LGS in all models and in some models predicting AppearanceEval and FitHealthEval.

Discussion

This study explored late-midlife adults' lived experiences of aging using a narrative identity lens. We sought to understand what topical content individuals in our sample narrated as salient when

reflecting on their personal aging processes; how narrative theme use might vary across time, gender, and race; and how narrative themes might predict well-being outcomes. Our findings offer several insights into the narrative construction of aging experiences and their relationships to well-being in this developmental period.

Topical Content of Narratives

Qualitative coding of narratives revealed that participants covered a wide range of topics when discussing the aging process and personal continuity/change over time. From most to least frequent, the topical content domains were identity development, family, generativity, health/fitness, society, body image, friendships, romantic

Table 2
Chi-Square Tests of Independence for Narrative Content Domains by Year, Gender, and Race

| Content domain | Year | | Gender | | Race | |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|
| | $\chi^2(1, 143)$ | <i>p</i> | $\chi^2(1, 143)$ | <i>p</i> | $\chi^2(1, 140)$ | <i>p</i> |
| Identity development | 5.72 | .017 | 6.75 | .009 | 7.09 | .008 |
| | 63% T5, 49% T9 | | 62% W, 46% M | | 66% BI, 49% Wh | |
| Family | 2.32 | .128 | 0.27 | .601 | 8.01 | .005 |
| | | | | | 37% BI, 54% Wh | |
| Generativity | 3.35 | .067 | 4.97 | .026 | 1.37 | .241 |
| | | | 33% W, 47% M | | | |
| Health/Fitness | 29.23 | <.001 | .046 | .831 | 0.81 | .367 |
| | 17% T5, 48% T9 | | | | | |
| Society | 15.89 | .015 | 1.33 | .247 | 0.14 | .712 |
| | 23% T5, 12% T9 | | | | | |
| Body image | 16.09 | <.001 | 1.31 | .252 | 1.29 | .255 |
| | 7% T5, 21% T9 | | | | | |
| Friendships | 1.55 | .213 | 1.30 | .254 | 0.32 | .568 |
| Romantic relationships | 7.55 | .006 | 7.66 | .006 | 1.59 | .207 |
| | 10% T5, 14% T9 | | 8% W, 8% M | | | |
| Death | 15.89 | <.001 | 0.03 | .860 | 3.59 | .058 |
| | 4% T5, 19% T9 | | | | | |

Note. This table illustrates the chi-square and *p* values for each narrative content domain by year, gender, and race. The respective percentages for each variable are given below the significantly different values (presented in bold). *N* = 143, except for race (*n* = 140), which excludes three participants who identified as other/multiracial. W = women; M = men; Wh = White; BI = Black; T = time.

Table 3*Participant Narrative Excerpts Illustrating High and Low Narrative Theme Scores*

| Theme | High score | Low score |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Agency | "I just am not going to give up or give in to age you know. I think a lot of that's in your mind. ... I'm going to fight it. You know, I'm going to be active and be able to do things as long as I can." | "In earlier years I wouldn't have [stayed at my job] being as unhappy as I am sometimes... I've definitely grown ... jaded. I ... no longer have the idealistic I-can-save-the-world mindset anymore. ... Life has just probably disappointed me in some ways. ... There are certain experiences I've had in living and certain ways people have treated me that have changed the way I feel" |
| Communion | "I'm seeing [that there's] more understanding of people. I'm seeing that there are a lot of people that care. ... Everybody got their hands out. And it's not just to be taking, it's accepting ... Brotherhood, friendship, it's all out there. " | "Aging is just part of life—but if I would have had my family support system—like a husband, my children around, my granddaughter— it wouldn't have been so bad. But to be alone and to be ousted and [told] you're not good enough is a big difference in aging. ... Knowing ... you've got to go through it alone. ... To see my friends with their families and to ... see them being accepted is a big difference." |
| Self-actualization | "You're not about impressing anybody anymore. You're who you are. And it really gives you a lot of freedom in a way. ... I mean it's like I don't have to prove myself. ... I'm going to do what I'm going to do, and I'm going to, you know, make my point. ... I can make things happen 'cause I don't have to worry about other things. [Aging] is kind of empowering. " | "How I stayed the same, I'm still scared of my own shadow. <i>[Laughing]</i> I'm better now that I'm older but I've always been kind of—I always say I'm my own worst enemy so and that hasn't changed too much you know? I always look down on myself. " |
| Closure | "I have become a lot wiser and a lot of it has to do with the experiences that I've had. I love all of the experiences that I have had. " | "It's like all downhill from [forty]. My fiftieth birthday, I couldn't sleep. ... Sixty is worse. ... Yes, I'm retired and make the best of it. Because you know, like every year it's probably going to get worse now so it's, it's really not fun. It's scary, it's sad, you know, knowing there's only so little time. " |
| Exploratory Processing | "I thought of myself first as a woman, and then African American. Had I stayed on the South Side of Chicago I would have been Black first, and then a woman. ... That's made a huge difference on how I viewed my life and the choices that I made. " | "I just live my life. I don't feel particularly introspective. So that—so I don't fully buy into the whole thing that you interpret your life through these stories. ... I don't think of my life as a story; I just do it. " |

Note. Phases presented in bold signify portion of the excerpt that is especially emblematic of the narrative theme score. Agency and communion (Adler, 2008), self-actualization and closure (Reischer et al., 2021), and exploratory processing (Pals, 2006).

relationships, and death. Individual participants' narratives tended to include numerous overlapping topics, reflecting the complex nature of narrative identity development. In many cases, aging processes directly altered several aspects of participants' lives. For example, at T9, Roger (all names and identifying details have been changed) reported that as he aged, he was no longer able to play tennis regularly due to his physical decline and the deaths of peers/opponents (domains: death, health/fitness, friendships). Participants' perceptions of aging also shaped their behaviors. For instance, at T5 Sharon equated getting older with becoming more herself and less concerned with the opinions of others; she started dressing to please herself rather than a romantic partner (domains: identity development, body image, romantic relationships). These examples underscore the manner in which narrative identity formation is an ongoing process of selves shaping stories and stories shaping selves. As individuals age, this reciprocal process continues to develop and deepen their narrative identity.

These topical content domains also interacted meaningfully with the narrative themes that structured participants' accounts of aging. The prominence of identity development as the most frequently discussed topic aligns with the narrative theme of self-actualization, suggesting that for many participants, aging involved ongoing efforts

to fulfill their potential and achieve a coherent sense of self. Sharon at T5 exemplifies high self-actualization as she describes aging as a process of becoming more authentically herself and taking greater agency over her personal choices. This intersection of identity development content with self-actualization and agency themes illustrates how the topics participants discussed were often vehicles for expressing broader narrative patterns of meaning-making.

Family and generativity, the second and third most frequent content domains, corresponded closely with the communion theme, revealing how participants positioned themselves within networks of care and connection. Participants' discussions of their roles as parents, grandparents, or mentors sometimes resulted in positive communion scores (e.g., benefits of interpersonal connections) and sometimes in negative scores (e.g., estrangement from loved ones).

The topics of health/fitness and death frequently resulted in nonzero scores for narrative agency and closure. For instance, at T9, Roger reveals the complex interplay between diminished agency in physical capabilities and the psychological work of closure—accepting the limitations and losses that accompany aging. Participants who scored high in closure often discussed health limitations or mortality in ways that demonstrated acceptance and integration of these realities into their life narratives.

Table 4*Participant Mean Scores by Race and Gender for All Variables (Collapsed Across Time Points)*

| Measure | Full sample | | Race | | | | Gender | | | |
|------------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| | Total | | Black | | White | | Women | | Men | |
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Narrative themes | | | | | | | | | | |
| Agency | 0.91 | 0.65 | 1.10 | 0.59 | 0.76 | 0.66 | 0.94 | 0.65 | 0.86 | 0.65 |
| Communion | 0.45 | 0.68 | 0.45 | 0.69 | 0.43 | 0.66 | 0.48 | 0.66 | 0.42 | 0.71 |
| Self-actualization | 0.95 | 0.71 | 1.25 | 0.58 | 0.73 | 0.73 | 0.97 | 0.66 | 0.92 | 0.81 |
| Closure | 0.69 | 0.73 | 0.92 | 0.66 | 0.51 | 0.74 | 0.76 | 0.61 | 0.58 | 0.89 |
| Exploratory processing | 2.54 | 0.56 | 2.53 | 0.59 | 2.56 | 0.54 | 2.52 | 0.57 | 2.58 | 0.53 |
| Well-being | | | | | | | | | | |
| PWB | 4.90 | 0.60 | 5.14 | 0.48 | 4.71 | 0.62 | 4.94 | 0.58 | 4.82 | 0.63 |
| LGS | 2.08 | 0.45 | 2.25 | 0.42 | 1.95 | 0.42 | 2.11 | 0.44 | 2.03 | 0.47 |
| FitHealthEval | 3.44 | 0.69 | 3.65 | 0.61 | 3.27 | 0.71 | 3.43 | 0.69 | 3.45 | 0.71 |
| AppearanceEval | 3.41 | 0.77 | 3.68 | 0.68 | 3.21 | 0.77 | 3.47 | 0.75 | 3.31 | 0.78 |

Note. Significantly different scores are presented in bold (all $p \leq .001$). Agency and communion (Adler, 2008), possible range = -2 to 2; self-actualization and closure (Reischer et al., 2021), possible range = -2 to 2; exploratory processing (Pals, 2006), possible range = 1-4; PWB = Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), possible range = 1-6; LGS = Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), possible range = 0-3; FitHealthEval = mean of fitness evaluation and health evaluation subscales of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Cash, 1990, 2000), possible range = 1-5; AppearanceEval = appearance evaluation subscale of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Cash, 1990), possible range = 1-5.

Aging Narratives Over Time

Exploratory Processing

Consistent with our hypothesis, exploratory processing increased significantly over the 4-year study period. As participants aged into their 60s, they engaged in more active analysis and meaning-making when narrating their aging experiences. This change could reflect a normative aspect of evolving narrative identity development, with the salience of certain narrative themes shifting in later life stages (McAdams et al., 2022; Reischer et al., 2025). The content domains that significantly increased from T5 to T9—health/fitness, body image, romantic relationships, and death—may be particularly conducive to exploratory processing, while the decrease in society as a content domain suggests that participants shifted focus from broader societal concerns to more personal experiences of aging, which may necessitate greater exploratory processing.

Additionally, participants may have been thinking about two forms of “endings” in T9, which could encourage exploratory processing. Death is more proximal at 65 and thus may more readily

come to mind, as evidenced by the nearly fivefold increase in death as a content domain. Additionally, the T9 prompt asks individuals to reflect on their experience in the entire longitudinal study—9 years of participation in a study developed, in many ways, to encourage exploratory processing.

Finally, the T9 prompt specifically asked participants how they *feel* about aging, potentially priming them to discuss and exhibit more instances of exploratory processing, while the T5 prompt explicitly asked about change and stability, which was associated with more frequent discussion of identity development. Ostensibly, this might be expected to encourage more exploratory processing; if this were the case, our finding that exploratory processing increased from T5 to T9 would be all the more interesting.

Self-Actualization and Closure

Our finding that self-actualization and closure did not change over time contrasts with our hypotheses and with Reischer et al.’s (2025) results. This discrepancy suggests that our study’s questions about

Table 5*Correlation Coefficients of Narrative Identity Themes From T5 and T9*

| Narrative identity theme (timepoint) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|
| 1. Agency (T5) | — | .16 | .26 | .07 | .74 | .21 | .46 | .12 | .16 | .07 |
| 2. Agency (T9) | | — | -.03 | .34 | .12 | .59 | .03 | .5 | -.02 | .13 |
| 3. Communion (T5) | | | — | .02 | .36 | .02 | .29 | .02 | .13 | .06 |
| 4. Communion (T9) | | | | — | .05 | .33 | .08 | .26 | .07 | .11 |
| 5. Self-actualization (T5) | | | | | — | .22 | .55 | .13 | .15 | .05 |
| 6. Self-actualization (T9) | | | | | | — | .04 | .71 | .08 | .15 |
| 7. Closure (T5) | | | | | | | — | .09 | .22 | .06 |
| 8. Closure (T9) | | | | | | | | — | .01 | .11 |
| 9. Exploratory processing (T5) | | | | | | | | | — | .07 |
| 10. Exploratory processing (T9) | | | | | | | | | | — |

Note. Agency and communion (Adler, 2008); self-actualization and closure (Reischer et al., 2021); exploratory processing (Pals, 2006). For T5, $n = 135$; for T9, $n = 128$. All $p > .37$. T = time.

Table 6*Multiple Linear Regressions for Well-Being Measures Predicted by Narrative Themes and Race*

| Theme | PWB | | LGS | | FitHealthEval | | AppearanceEval | |
|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| | β_{theme} | β_{race} | β_{theme} | β_{race} | β_{theme} | β_{race} | β_{theme} | β_{race} |
| Agency | 0.36*** | 0.26** | 0.15 | 0.29** | 0.30** | 0.19 | 0.22* | 0.24* |
| Communion | 0.24* | 0.35*** | 0.20 | 0.33*** | 0.13 | 0.27* | 0.12 | 0.30** |
| Self-actualization | 0.33*** | 0.24* | 0.22* | 0.25* | 0.27* | 0.17 | 0.24* | 0.21 |
| Closure | 0.32*** | 0.27** | 0.17 | 0.29** | 0.21 | 0.21 | 0.19 | 0.25* |
| Exploratory processing | 0.18 | 0.36*** | 0.13 | 0.34*** | 0.03 | 0.27* | 0.07 | 0.31** |

Note. Models predicting PWB and LGS use scores averaged across T5 and T9; FitHealthEval and AppearanceEval were only collected at T9. For each well-being measure, the first column indicates the standardized beta for the given narrative theme term, and the second column indicates the standardized beta for race in that same model. Agency and communion (Adler, 2008); self-actualization and closure (Reischer et al., 2021); exploratory processing (Pals, 2006); Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995); Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992); FitHealthEval = mean of fitness and health subscales; AppearanceEval = appearance evaluation subscale of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Cash, 1990). Race was coded as Black = 2, White = 1; interracial/other race participants ($n = 3$) were not included. T = time.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$. *** $p < .0001$.

personal continuity, change, and the aging process may reveal more stable self-actualization and closure than Reischer et al.'s (2025) questions related to regrets, low points, spiritual experiences, hopes for the future, and central life themes. The increased discussion at T9 of death—one of the more challenging of life's realities for which to find emotional resolution (Wong et al., 1994)—might also raise the stakes when evaluating one's life satisfaction, dampening expected increases in closure and self-actualization.

Agency and Communion

We observed no change over time in communion or agency, which could align with the common tenets of “successful” aging, which stress maintaining rather than expanding social relationships and personal independence (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 2015). However, we could also expect to see decreases in both themes due to the increasing frequency in deaths of loved ones and a decline in physical and cognitive capabilities. This reflects the conflicting master narratives of *successful aging* (maintenance while aging) and *typical aging* (loss while aging). The lack of change may be due to one or a combination of interpretations: On average, participants in our sample (a) are aging “successfully” by the master narrative rubric and are outliers from the general populace, (b) meet successful aging standards because the master narrative of typical aging is inaccurate, or (c) have been influenced by and are conforming with the master narrative of successful aging, either in the personal interpretation of their lived experience or in the content chosen to share with interviewers (Pasupathi & Adler, 2021). This last interpretation is an example of the way in which master narratives directly impact personal narratives and may be self-reinforcing (McLean et al., 2018).

In summary, participants' mean scores for the majority of narrative themes did not change between mean ages 60 and 65, suggesting that many narrative themes may exhibit stability as late-midlife Americans narrate their experiences of aging into older adulthood. However, given that exploratory processing was the only theme of five to change, this finding may also be a false positive. Together, our results and plausible interpretations suggest a clear need for further research into how narrative themes may change or remain stable over time.

Gender and Race in Aging Narratives

Comparing Themes by Gender

We found no significant gender differences among the five narrative themes. This aligned with our hypotheses for self-actualization and closure but was contrary to our hypotheses about agency and communion. Our findings suggest that in late midlife, men and women may construct their aging narratives in more similar ways than previously thought. For instance, women and men discussed body image and fitness/health in equal measure, challenging the master narrative of women being more preoccupied with aging's physical effects (Calasanti et al., 2006; Martin, 2012; Richards et al., 2012; Singleton, 2023).

As our participant illustrated, rather than aging being framed solely in terms of loss, for many women it can be an experience of gain (of confidence, independence, freedom). This shift in perspective may help explain why we found no gender differences in our sample of late-midlife adults' agency and communion theme scores, in contrast with previous studies on younger men and women (Hsu et al., 2021). In our study's interviews, many women spoke of their newfound ability to focus on their own needs and their increase in civil liberties over time. This shift is reflective of a cohort born in an era when women's roles in society were rapidly shifting, but it is also likely representative of systemic issues still relevant today. Moreover, as Calasanti et al. (2006) described, older women's experiences differ from those of younger women. Our study's lack of gender differences, therefore, may reflect the “transformative” effects of aging on gendered experiences, where certain gender-based constraints and expectations may shift in later life.

While there were no significant differences across genders in narrative themes, there were some differences in content domains. Women discussed identity development and romantic relationships significantly more often, and generativity significantly less often, than men. These trends are exemplified in Sharon's story as she discusses her journey of self-discovery taking precedence over concerns with romantic partners; she seems more interested in exploring the present than projecting into the future with explicit legacy building. These findings further challenge the master narrative of aging as something to be dreaded, especially for women.

Comparing Themes by Race

In contrast to the lack of gender differences for narrative themes, we found several significant differences across race, with Black participants scoring higher than White participants on self-actualization, closure, and agency. Black participants also discussed identity development significantly more than White participants, whereas White participants discussed family significantly more often. The higher scores on self-actualization and closure, along with more frequent discussion of identity development, suggest that Black participants were more likely to describe their aging process as a journey of growth and fulfillment of potential, with a greater sense of acceptance and integration of past experiences. These findings were consistent with those of Reischer et al. (2025), as hypothesized. The higher agency scores, which were not hypothesized, suggest that Black participants narrated their experiences of aging with a stronger sense of control and self-determination compared with the White participants. Interestingly, White participants' greater focus on family did not correspond with higher communion scores, suggesting that discussion of family did not necessarily reflect positive interpersonal connection.

As with our female participants, there may be cohort effects for Black participants who grew up during the Civil Rights Movement and witnessed substantial changes for their community achieved through individual and collective agency. The experience of being Black in America may foster a unique form of self-actualization, closure, and agency in the aging process, possibly resulting from navigating and overcoming systemic challenges throughout the life course (Fabius, 2016; Mayukha et al., 2025; A. F. Turner et al., 2022). Notably, Black women—who face systemic challenges associated with their intersectional identity (Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991)—drove women's higher-than-expected agency scores in our study.

These findings align with Hamilton-Mason et al.'s (2009) observation that Black women, despite facing multiple sources of discrimination, often demonstrate resilience through various coping strategies including the development of alternative narratives. Similarly, Baker et al. (2015) noted that the cultural ideal of strength for Black women can serve as a mechanism for promoting positive aging experiences despite adversity, though this emphasis on strength and resilience can also create pressure to maintain a facade of strength even when facing significant challenges.

Relationships to Well-Being

The associations between narrative themes and well-being measures provide insights into the potential adaptive value of certain narrative constructions of aging. Agency, communion, self-actualization, and closure in aging narratives were positively associated with psychological well-being, supporting previous research on the benefits of these and similar narrative themes for mental health (Adler et al., 2016; Bauer et al., 2015). Interestingly, agency and self-actualization were also associated with more positive evaluations of physical health/fitness and appearance, suggesting that narrating one's aging story with themes of personal control and sense of fulfillment may influence or reflect a more positive physical self-concept in late midlife.

Though communion was associated with psychological well-being, it did not significantly predict the other three well-being

measures. This was unexpected given the extensive research demonstrating the importance of social connections for well-being in older adulthood (Carstensen, 2006; Kannan & Veazie, 2023), particularly surprising for generativity, which is centered on interpersonal relationships (Erikson, 1959). However, communion did predict generativity (controlling for race) at $p = .011$, just above our significance threshold, suggesting that we may have been underpowered to detect an effect.

Similarly, closure was only associated with psychological well-being, though its relationship with physical health/fitness ($p = .012$), appearance ($p = .023$), and generativity ($p = .045$) had p values suggesting possible underpowered effects. Exploratory processing was not associated with any well-being measures, consistent with previous literature showing that affective and motivational themes of a narrative are more consistently predictive of well-being than themes of accommodative integrative meaning (Adler et al., 2016).

Black participants scored significantly higher on all well-being outcomes, underscoring the importance of considering racial and cultural contexts in aging research and highlighting the need for culturally tailored approaches to promoting well-being in diverse aging populations. These findings challenge the implicit "Whiteness" of the successful aging narrative and suggest that alternative narratives of aging may be more adaptive for some groups. Individuals whose narratives and identities often fall outside the master narrative (e.g., Black individuals) may benefit most from crafting alternative narratives for aging, whereas individuals who are more frequently expected to align with the master narrative (e.g., White individuals) may struggle when their personal narratives deviate from the larger cultural story.

Successful Aging

Our findings suggest a more complex picture of successful aging, one emphasizing physical and cognitive maintenance, avoiding disease, and engaging in productive activities (Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). While participants' narratives aligned with this picture in some ways (discussing loved ones, physical health, and mortality), they deviated in others. Society was a prominent content domain, highlighting the continued impact of sociocultural factors on aging individuals, beyond the successful aging master narrative's focus on the individual and their proximate relationships.

Additionally, the frequent discussion of identity development at both time points suggests continued interest in self-development with the approach to older age. The predictive value of self-actualization and agency for well-being emphasizes that individuals' efforts toward achieving their personal potential continue to be important over late midlife. A more accurate depiction of successful aging would include continued identity growth and expansion rather than merely reinforcing cognitive and physical maintenance. As a person ages, they may continue to explore, amend, and edit their definition of self and that more fluid mindset may correlate with overall well-being. Further, these findings support alternative models of successful aging that emphasize self-acceptance and self-transcendence as key tasks of older adulthood.

Our findings have important implications for conceptualizing "success" in aging. Conventional measures of successful aging often fail to account for the experiences of people who have faced intersectional discrimination throughout their lives (Jones, 2022; Langmann & Weßel, 2023; Pfaller & Schweda, 2019). Our results are consistent with findings that different racial groups may have

different experiences of aging (e.g., Crewe, 2019) and different adaptive strategies for coping with the changes and challenges of older adulthood. This calls for further research grounded in more nuanced, culturally informed understandings of what constitutes success in the aging process.

Limitations

Though substantial for a longitudinal study of narrative identity, our sample size was relatively small, which may have limited our ability to detect smaller effects. Generalizability is constrained to metropolitan Midwest-dwelling cisgender Black and White Baby Boomers in late midlife.

Given the sample size and the large number of tests, we elected not to run further tests on the longitudinal associations between narrative identity themes and well-being measures, a valuable direction for future studies.

The lack of rank-order stability for the narrative themes between T5 and T9 suggests significant within-person heterogeneity across measurement occasions. Future studies should examine whether this heterogeneity results from variations between interview questions or the passage of time itself.

Regarding study design, we were limited to previously collected data, with two of our four well-being measures available at only one time point. Additionally, our two narrative prompts overlapped in content, and underlying concern differences between them make it impossible to determine if aspects of our findings might relate to the prompts themselves.

Future Directions

Fruitful future directions include conducting longer longitudinal studies that span more life stages and exploring additional relevant narrative identity themes such as redemption and contamination. Given our consistent findings of race differences in both narrative themes and well-being measures, research might explore whether there are patterns in how participants interpret the narrative prompts or self-report measure by race.

We suggest exploring aging experiences among individuals with and without disabilities or chronic health conditions, especially given the conceptions of successful aging, which center on health maintenance and therefore exclude increasing numbers of adults with age. Older adults and disabled individuals constitute enormous, overlapping swaths of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2023), and growing interest in these populations among narrative identity researchers (Adler et al., 2021, 2022) provides a promising foundation for this research. As the U.S. population becomes more diverse while aging (Goldstein, 2023), there is a growing need for similar studies across diverse cultural contexts and identity characteristics.

Conclusion

The present study contributes to understanding how adults construct narratives about their aging experiences as they move from late midlife to early older adulthood and how narrative identity predicts well-being in this context. To promote individual well-being, clinicians and others working with aging adults might attend to how certain narrative themes—especially self-actualization and

agency—are employed by aging adults; promoting positive narration of these themes may be beneficial for individuals' psychological, developmental, and physical well-being. Organizations portraying narratives of late midlife and older adulthood as part of policy and service aims might take care to learn more about stories associated with well-being, both from the research literature and from their own constituencies. Our findings highlight the importance of both participant diversity and methods diversity in aging research to develop more inclusive approaches to promoting healthy aging.

If psychologists and evidence-driven institutions are to serve and support people through the aging process, it is vital to encourage societal and individual narratives that frame aging “not as coming to an end, but as a continuous opening of life.” Our findings suggest that individuals may find a path toward greater flourishing in older adulthood when they continue to focus on turning the pages of their life story rather than preparing simply to close the book.

References

- Åberg, E., Kukkonen, I., & Sarpila, O. (2020). From double to triple standards of ageing. Perceptions of physical appearance at the intersections of age, gender and class. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 55, Article 100876. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100876>
- Adler, J. M. (2008). *Revised coding system for agency and communion*. Retrieved on May 1, 2023 from <https://sites.northwestern.edu/studyofflivesresearchgroup/instruments/>
- Adler, J. M. (2012). Living into the story: Agency and coherence in a longitudinal study of narrative identity development and mental health over the course of psychotherapy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(2), 367–389. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025289>
- Adler, J. M., Dunlop, W. L., Fivush, R., Lilgendahl, J. P., Lodi-Smith, J., McAdams, D. P., McLean, K. C., Pasupathi, M., & Syed, M. (2017). Research methods for studying narrative identity: A primer. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 8(5), 519–527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617698202>
- Adler, J. M., Lakmazaheri, A., O'Brien, E., Palmer, A., Reid, M., & Tawes, E. (2021). Identity integration in people with acquired disabilities: A qualitative study. *Journal of Personality*, 89(1), 84–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12533>
- Adler, J. M., Lodi-Smith, J., Philippe, F. L., & Houle, I. (2016). The incremental validity of narrative identity in predicting well-being: A review of the field and recommendations for the future. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 20(2), 142–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868315585068>
- Adler, J. M., Manning, R. B., III, Hennein, R., Winschel, J., Baldari, A., Bogart, K. R., Nario-Redmond, M. R., Ostrove, J. M., Lowe, S. R., & Wang, K. (2022). Narrative identity among people with disabilities in the United States during the Covid-19 pandemic: The interdependent self. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 101, Article 104302. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2022.104302>
- Adler, J. M., Turner, A. F., Brookshier, K. M., Monahan, C., Walder-Biesanz, I., Harmeling, L. H., Albaugh, M., McAdams, D. P., & Oltmanns, T. F. (2015). Variation in narrative identity is associated with trajectories of mental health over several years. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108(3), 476–496. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038601>
- Allen, J. O., Moïse, V., Solway, E., Cheney, M. K., Larson, D. J., Malani, P. N., Singer, D., & Kullgren, J. T. (2024). How old do I look? Aging appearance and experiences of aging among U.S. adults ages 50–80. *Psychology and Aging*, 39(5), 551–564. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000800>
- Andreoletti, C., Leszczynski, J. P., & Disch, W. B. (2015). Gender, race, and age: The content of compound stereotypes across the life span. *The*

- International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 81(1–2), 27–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091415015616395>
- Appelbaum, M., Cooper, H., Kline, R. B., Mayo-Wilson, E., Nezu, A. M., & Rao, S. M. (2018). Journal article reporting standards for quantitative research in psychology: The APA Publications and Communications Board task force report. *American Psychologist*, 73(1), 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000191>
- Baker, T. A., Buchanan, N. T., Mingo, C. A., Roker, R., & Brown, C. S. (2015). Reconceptualizing successful aging among black women and the relevance of the strong black woman archetype. *The Gerontologist*, 55(1), 51–57. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu105>
- Bauer, J. J., Park, S. W., Montoya, R. M., & Wayment, H. A. (2015). Growth motivation toward two paths of eudaimonic self-development. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16(1), 185–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9504-9>
- Behrendt, S. (2023). *lm.beta: Add standardized regression coefficients to linear-model-objects* (Version R package Version 1.7-2) [Computer software]. <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=lm.beta>
- Blawert, A., & Wurm, S. (2021). Shifting self-perceptions of ageing: Differential effects of value priorities on self-perceptions of ageing beyond age stereotypes. *European Journal of Ageing*, 18(2), 257–267. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-020-00578-3>
- Booker, J. A., Fivush, R., & Graci, M. E. (2022). Narrative identity informs psychological adjustment: Considering three themes captured across five time points and two event valences. *Journal of Personality*, 90(3), 324–342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12668>
- Bowleg, L. (2008). When Black + Lesbian + Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The methodological challenges of qualitative and quantitative Intersectionality Research. *Sex Roles*, 59(5–6), 312–325. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9400-z>
- Buecker, S., Luhmann, M., Haehner, P., Bühler, J. L., Dapp, L. C., Luciano, E. C., & Orth, U. (2023). The development of subjective well-being across the life span: A meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 149(7–8), 418–446. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000401>
- Burns, A., & Leonard, R. (2005). Chapters of our lives: Life narratives of midlife and older Australian women. *Sex Roles*, 52(5–6), 269–277. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-005-2671-8>
- Butler, R. N. (1974). Successful aging and the role of the life review. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 22(12), 529–535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-5415.1974.tb04823.x>
- Calasanti, T., Slevin, K., & King, N. (2006). Ageism and feminism: From “et cetera” to center. *NWSA Journal*, 18(1), 13–30. <https://doi.org/10.2979/NWS.2006.18.1.13>
- Carstensen, L. L. (2006). The influence of a sense of time on human development. *Science*, 312(5782), 1913–1915. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1127488>
- Cash, T. F. (1990). *Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ)* [Database record]. APA PsycTests. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F08755-000>
- Cash, T. F. (2000). *Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire. MBSRQ* user’s manual, Third Revision.
- Corwin, S. J., Laditka, J. N., Laditka, S. B., Wilcox, S., & Liu, R. (2009). Attitudes on aging well among older African Americans and whites in South Carolina. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 6(4), Article A113.
- Cowan, H. R., Chen, X., Jones, B. K., & McAdams, D. P. (2019). The single greatest life challenge: How late-midlife adults construct narratives of significant personal challenges. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 83, Article 103867. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2019.103867>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), Article 1241. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Crewe, S. E. (2019). The task is far from completed: Double jeopardy and older African Americans. *Social Work in Public Health*, 34(1), 122–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2018.1562398>
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). Identity and the life cycle: Selected papers. *Psychological Issues*, 1, 1–171.
- Eriksson, P. L., & Frisén, A. (2024). Facing challenging experiences in life—Narrative identity development processes and associations with wellbeing during the transition to midlife. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 24(1), 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2023.2258152>
- Fabius, C. D. (2016). Toward an integration of narrative identity, generativity, and storytelling in African American elders. *Journal of Black Studies*, 47(5), 423–434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934716638801>
- Fivush, R., Booker, J. A., & Graci, M. E. (2017). Ongoing narrative meaning-making within events and across the life span. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 37(2), 127–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236617733824>
- Fivush, R., & Grysman, A. (2022). Narrative and gender as mutually constituted meaning-making systems. *Memory, Mind & Media*, 1, Article e2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2021.4>
- Fried, L. P., Wong, J. E.-L., & Dzau, V. (2022). A global roadmap to seize the opportunities of healthy longevity. *Nature Aging*, 2(12), 1080–1083. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43587-022-00332-7>
- Goldstein, D. (2023, June 22). The U.S. population is older than it has ever been. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/22/us/census-median-age.html>
- Grysman, A., & Booker, J. A. (2024). Agency and communion ratings do not suggest shifting gender norms in American Society: A registered report. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 110, Article 104493. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2024.104493>
- Hamilton-Mason, J., Hall, J. C., & Everett, J. E. (2009). And some of us are braver: Stress and coping among African American women. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 19(5), 463–482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911350902832142>
- Hammack, P. L., & Toolis, E. (2015). Identity, politics, and the cultural psychology of adolescence. In L. A. Jensen (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of human development and culture: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 396–409). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199948550.013.24>
- Hsu, N., Badura, K. L., Newman, D. A., & Speech, M. E. P. (2021). Gender, “masculinity,” and “femininity”: A meta-analytic review of gender differences in agency and communion. *Psychological Bulletin*, 147(10), 987–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000343>
- Jones, R. L. (2022). Imagining feminist old age: Moving beyond ‘successful’ ageing? *Journal of Aging Studies*, 63, Article 100950. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2021.100950>
- Kannan, V. D., & Veazie, P. J. (2023). US trends in social isolation, social engagement, and companionship—nationally and by age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, and work hours, 2003–2020. *SSM—Population Health*, 21, Article 101331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101331>
- Kluger, J. (2023, February 23). Why Americans are uniquely afraid to grow old. *Time*. <https://time.com/6257805/americans-aging-resistance/>
- Langmann, E., & Weßel, M. (2023). Leaving no one behind: Successful ageing at the intersection of ageism and ableism. *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, 18(1), Article 22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13010-023-00150-8>
- Levine, M. E., & Crimmins, E. M. (2014). Evidence of accelerated aging among African Americans and its implications for mortality. *Social Science & Medicine*, 118, 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.07.022>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8)
- Lodi-Smith, J., Geise, A. C., Roberts, B. W., & Robins, R. W. (2009). Narrating personality change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(3), 679–689. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014611>
- Lytle, A., Apriceno, M., Dyar, C., & Levy, S. R. (2018). Sexual orientation and gender differences in aging perceptions and concerns among older

- adults. *Innovation in Aging*, 2(3), Article igy036. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igy036>
- Martin, W. (2012). Visualizing risk: Health, gender and the ageing body. *Critical Social Policy*, 32(1), 51–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018311425980>
- Martinson, M., & Berridge, C. (2015). Successful aging and its discontents: A systematic review of the social gerontology literature. *The Gerontologist*, 55(1), 58–69. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu037>
- Mayukha, A., Guzman, A., Jitklongsab, S., & McAdams, D. P. (2025). “I want to lift my people up”: Exploring the psychological correlates of racial themes within the life stories of midlife Black Americans. *Journal of Personality*, 93(2), 320–340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12932>
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). *The person: An integrated introduction to personality psychology*. Harcourt.
- McAdams, D. P. (2007). *The Life Story Interview—II*. <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/4/3901/files/2020/11/The-Life-Story-Interview-II-2007.pdf>
- McAdams, D. P. (2008). Generativity, the redemptive self, and the problem of a noisy ego in American life. In H. A. Wayment & J. J. Bauer (Eds.), *Transcending self-interest: Psychological explorations of the quiet ego* (pp. 235–242). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11771-021>
- McAdams, D. P. (2015). *The art and science of personality development*. Guilford Press.
- McAdams, D. P. & de St. Aubin, E. (1992). A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(6), 1003–1015. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.62.6.1003>
- McAdams, D. P., & Guo, J. (2015). Narrating the generative life. *Psychological Science*, 26(4), 475–483. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614568318>
- McAdams, D. P., Hoffman, B. J., Mansfield, E. D., & Day, R. (1996). Themes of agency and communion in significant autobiographical scenes. *Journal of Personality*, 64(2), 339–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1996.tb00514.x>
- McAdams, D. P., Logan, R. L., & Reischer, H. N. (2022). Beyond the redemptive self: Narratives of acceptance in later life (and in other contexts). *Journal of Research in Personality*, 100, Article 104286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2022.104286>
- McLean, K. C. (2008). Stories of the young and the old: Personal continuity and narrative identity. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(1), 254–264. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.44.1.254>
- McLean, K. C., Fish, J., Rogers, L. O., & Syed, M. (2024). Integrating systems of power and privilege in the study of resilience. *American Psychologist*, 79(8), 999–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001260>
- McLean, K. C., Lilgendahl, J. P., Fordham, C., Alpert, E., Marsden, E., Szymanowski, K., & McAdams, D. P. (2018). Identity development in cultural context: The role of deviating from master narratives. *Journal of Personality*, 86(4), 631–651. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12341>
- McLean, K. C., Pasupathi, M., & Syed, M. (2023). Cognitive scripts and narrative identity are shaped by structures of power. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 27(9), 805–813. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2023.03.006>
- McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (2016). Personal, master, and alternative narratives: An integrative framework for understanding identity development in context. *Human Development*, 58(6), 318–349. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000445817>
- Menkin, J. A., Guan, S. A., Araiza, D., Reyes, C. E., Trejo, L., Choi, S. E., Willis, P., Kotick, J., Jimenez, E., Ma, S., McCreath, H. E., Chang, E., Witarama, T., & Sarkisian, C. A. (2017). Racial/Ethnic differences in expectations regarding aging among older adults. *The Gerontologist*, 57(Suppl. 2), S138–S148. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnx078>
- Nikitin, J., Luchetti, M., Alimanovic, N., Rupprecht, F. S., & Sutin, A. R. (2024). Are social interactions perceived as more meaningful in older adulthood? *Psychology and Aging*, 39(6), 599–607. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000827>
- Pals, J. L. (2006). Narrative identity processing of difficult life experiences: Pathways of personality development and positive self-transformation in adulthood. *Journal of Personality*, 74(4), 1079–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2006.00403.x>
- Pamplin, J. R., II, & Bates, L. M. (2021). Evaluating hypothesized explanations for the Black–white depression paradox: A critical review of the extant evidence. *Social Science & Medicine*, 281, Article 114085. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114085>
- Pasupathi, M., & Adler, J. M. (2021). Narrative, identity, and the life story: Structural and process approaches. In J. F. Rauthmann (Ed.), *The handbook of personality dynamics and processes* (pp. 387–403). Elsevier Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-813995-0.00016-9>
- Pew Research Center. (2023, July 24). *8 facts about Americans with disabilities*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/24/8-facts-about-americans-with-disabilities/>
- Pfeller, L., & Schweda, M. (2019). Excluded from the good life? An ethical approach to conceptions of active ageing. *Social Inclusion*, 7(3), 44–53. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i3.1918>
- Plácido, A. I., Herdeiro, M. T., & Roque, F. (2022). Health and wellbeing in aging. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(14), Article 8835. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19148835>
- R Core Team. (2023). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. R Foundation for Statistical Computing. <https://www.R-project.org>
- Reischer, H. N. (2021). The last chapters of life: A proposed research agenda for studying narrative identity in older adulthood. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 15(7), Article e12620. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12620>
- Reischer, H. N., Couch, N. G., Wright, M. N., Duarte, A. J., & McAdams, D. P. (2025). Narrative self-transcendence: Decreased regret and increased acceptance over late midlife. *Journal of Personality*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.13022>
- Reischer, H. N., Roth, L. J., Villarreal, J. A., & McAdams, D. P. (2021). Self-transcendence and life stories of humanistic growth among late-midlife adults. *Journal of Personality*, 89(2), 305–324. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12583>
- Reischer, H. N., Taber-Thomas, S., Turay, E., Johnson, D., Greene, B., Dauphin, C., Erwin, D. O., & Ashare, R. L. (2024). *Witnessing for Black mental health: Formative steps for designing a community-based mental health education intervention*. PsyArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/76w5k>
- Richards, N., Warren, L., & Gott, M. (2012). The challenge of creating ‘alternative’ images of ageing: Lessons from a project with older women. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 26(1), 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2011.08.001>
- Robinson, D., Hayes, A., & Couch, S. (2023). *broom: Convert statistical objects into tiny tibbles* (Version R package Version 1.0.5) [Computer software]. <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=broom>
- Rowe, J. W., & Kahn, R. L. (1997). Successful aging. *The Gerontologist*, 37(4), 433–440. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/37.4.433>
- Rowe, J. W., & Kahn, R. L. (2015). Successful aging 2.0: Conceptual expansions for the 21st century. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 70(4), 593–596. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbv025>
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), 719–727. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719>
- Sheldon, K. M., & Cooper, M. L. (2008). Goal striving within agentic and communal roles: Separate but functionally similar pathways to enhanced well-being. *Journal of Personality*, 76(3), 415–448. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00491.x>

- Shellman, J. (2004). "Nobody ever asked me before": Understanding life experiences of African American elders. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 15(4), 308–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659604268961>
- Singleton, M. (2023, September 20). Women and aging: What the media does and doesn't tell us. *Generations Today*. <https://generations.asaging.org/women-and-aging-what-media-tells-us>
- Syed, M., & McLean, K. C. (2022). Who gets to live the good life? Master Narratives, identity, and well-being within a marginalizing society. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 100, Article 104285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2022.104285>
- Syed, M., & Nelson, S. C. (2015). Guidelines for establishing reliability when coding narrative data. *Emerging Adulthood*, 3(6), 375–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815587648>
- Turner, A. F., Couch, N. G., Cowan, H. R., Otto-Meyer, R., Murthy, P., Logan, R. L., Rogers, L. O., & McAdams, D. P. (2022). The good and the bad in black and white: Stories of life's high and low points told by black and white midlife adults in America. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 101, Article 104298. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2022.104298>
- Turner, K., Lilgendahl, J. P., Syed, M., & McLean, K. C. (2024). Testing exploratory narrative processing as a mechanism of change in identity status processes over 4 years in college-going emerging adults. *Developmental Psychology*, 60(1), 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001665>
- U. S. Census Bureau. (2023). *America is getting older*. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/population-estimates-characteristics.html>
- Washburn, A. M., & Williams, S. (2020). Becoming and being an older adult: A mixed methods study of the lived experience of aging. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 54, Article 100871. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100871>
- Wickham, H., Averick, M., Bryan, J., Chang, W., McGowan, L. D., François, R., Grolemund, G., Hayes, A., Henry, L., Hester, J., Kuhn, M., Pedersen, T. L., Miller, E., Bache, S. M., Müller, K., Ooms, J., Robinson, D., Seidel, D. P., Spinu, V., ... Yutani, H. (2019). Welcome to the tidyverse. *Journal of Open Source Software*, 4(43), Article 1686. <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01686>
- Wilkins, A. C. (2012). Becoming Black women: Intimate stories and intersectional identities. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 75(2), 173–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272512440106>
- Wong, P. T., Reker, G. T., & Gesser, G. (1994). *Death attitude profile—Revised: A multidimensional measure of attitudes toward death*. PsycTESTS Dataset. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t17237-000>
- World Health Organization. (2024). *Ageing*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/ageing#tab=tab_1
- Xiao, H., Baxter, G. D., Liu, L., Doolan-Noble, F., & White, A. (2024). Men's health and ageing well in New Zealand: A focus group study. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000476>

Received October 8, 2024

Revision received April 7, 2025

Accepted May 7, 2025 ■