"Please Describe your Single Greatest Challenge":
Life Challenge Narratives Reflect Personality Traits and Well-Being

Henry R. Cowan; Xiaodi Chen; Brady Jones, PhD; Dan P. McAdams, PhD
Northwestern University

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Introduction

Past experience plays a significant role in cognition, emotion, and coping with present and future stress
- E.g. transactional model of emotions, stress, and coping[1]
- E.g. cognitive model of mood disorders[2]

What is more important, the content of past experience, or how we interpret it?

Narrative perspective: *personal, autobiographical narratives of past stressors inform responses to stress in the present and the imagined future.*

Research on stress and coping tends to focus on daily stressors or traumatic experiences. A narrative perspective allows us to pose this question more broadly (See "Interview Question" below).

Narrative research on adaptation has identified processes of interest:
- Elaborated processing: Engaging with difficult/challenging aspects of a narrative[3,4]
- Positive resolution: Emotional closure and personal growth[3,4]

We investigated life challenge narratives at 3 levels of analysis:
1. Thematic content, e.g. career, parenting, loss, identity
2. Broad narrative factors, e.g., identity processing
3. Specific narrative processes, e.g., exploration, efficacy

Methods

This study drew on interviews and self-report data from Years 1 and 2 of the Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood (FLSA).

Participants
158 late midlife community adults (mean age = 56, SD = 1.1)
- 64% Female, 36% Male
- 56% Caucasian, 42% African-American
- Median household income: $75,000 - $100,000;
- Median education: undergraduate degree

FLSA follows a cohort of late midlife adults recruited from the Chicago area. We focused on one interview question (see below) and several self-report scales.

Measures
Year 1
- Life Story Interview (in person)
- NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI)

Years 1 and 2
- Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI)
- Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB)
- Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

Interview question: *"Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own life story?"*

What stories did people tell?

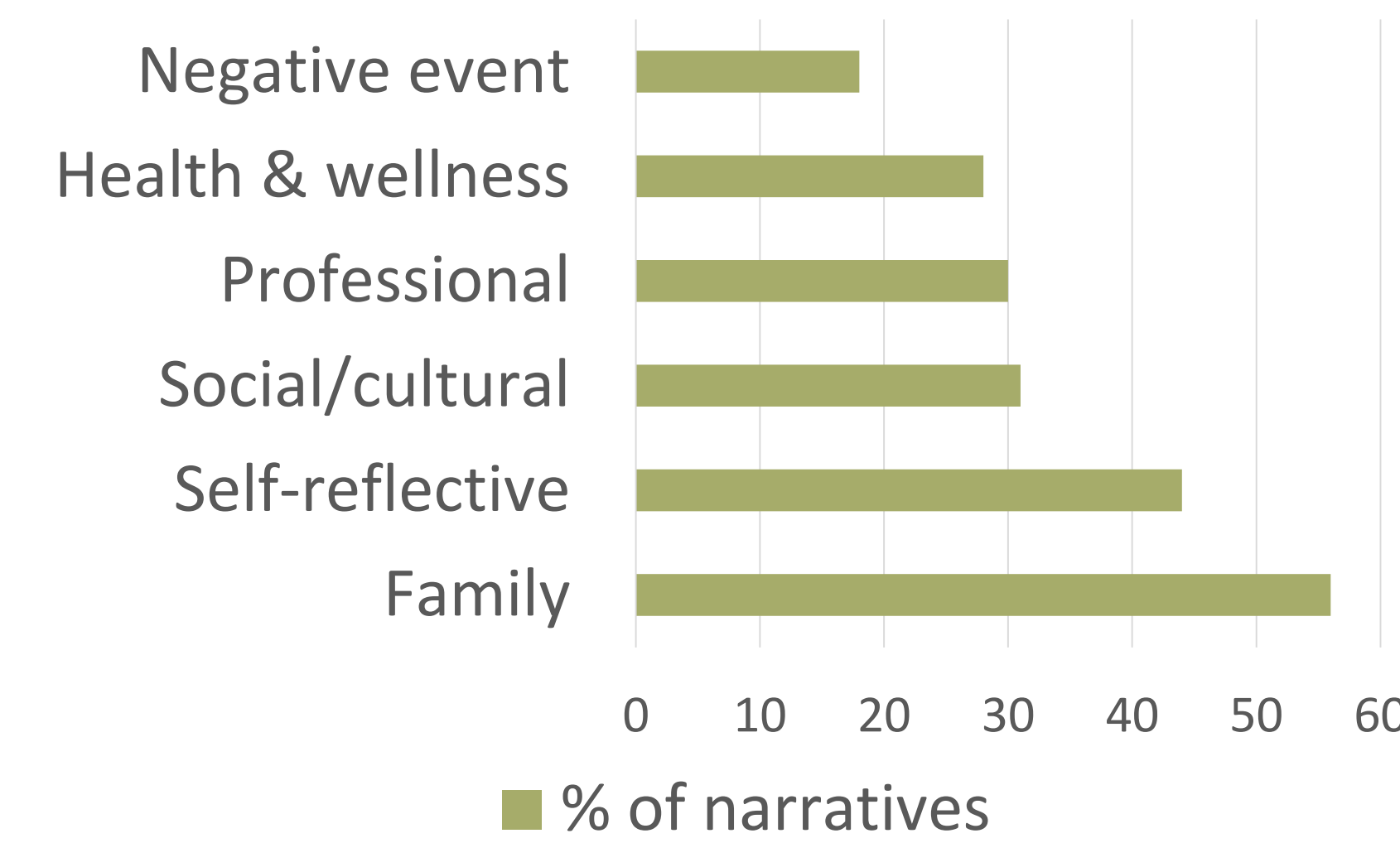A thematic analysis identified 20 themes grouped into 6 higher-order domains (mean 2.6 domains per narrative, SD 1.2).

Figure 1. Percentage of narratives including each domain

David got married while in law school. His wife built up credit card debt in his name, spending $2,500 on clothes in one month alone. They argued and separated after 9 months of marriage.
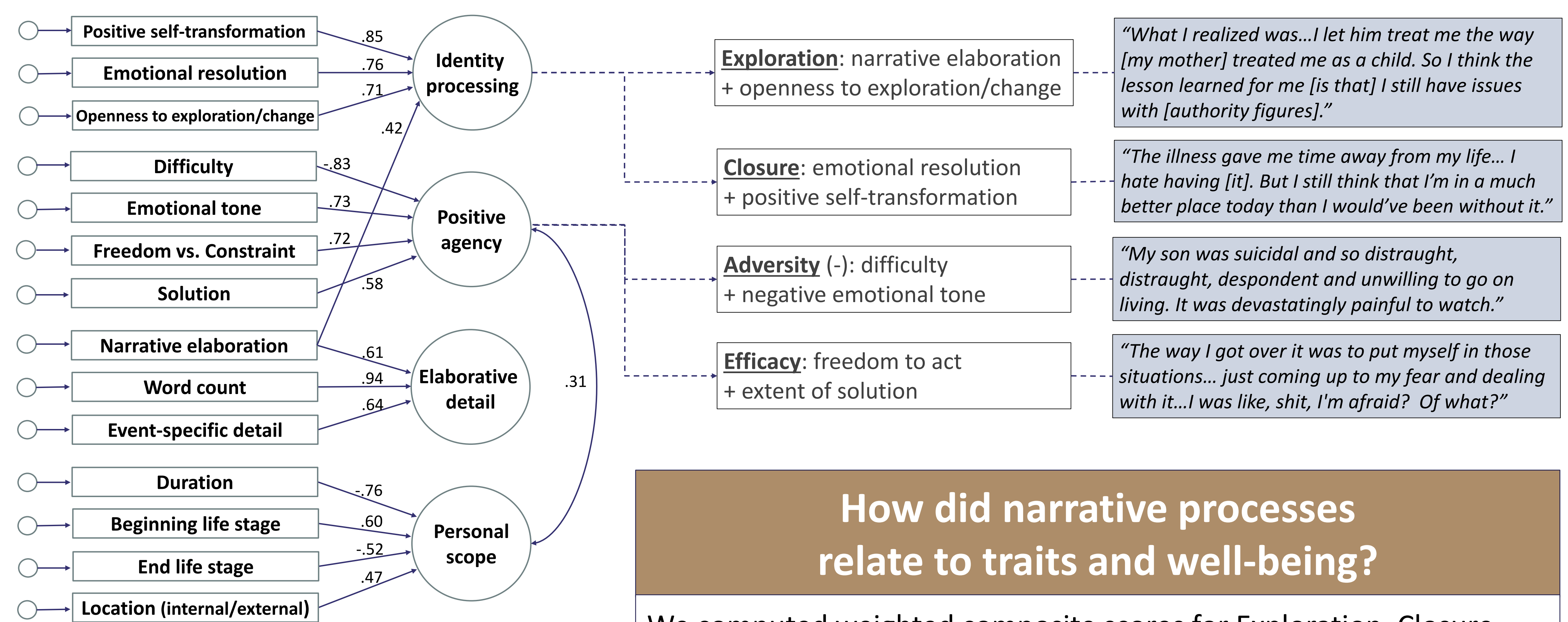
Hannah's daughter started wandering the streets, hearing voices. She asked Hannah to come to her house to help her build gates and cover up mirrors. Hannah's daughter was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and institutionalized for a year. She now lives independently with the help of medication.

As a child, Louise received negative feedback from people at school and from an "overbearing, opinionated, domineering" mother. Her lifelong challenge has been to empathize with the people behind this negativity, overcome low self-esteem, and find her own voice as an adult. (note: all names have been changed)

How did people tell their stories?

Pairs of independent raters scored each transcript on 14 narrative codes. We investigated the structure of these codes by exploratory factor analysis (EFA; see Figure 2).

The "Identity Processing" and "Positive Agency" factors capture interpretations of past experience. Theoretically, these should link to personality and well-being. We examined these factors in more detail and found that each one could be empirically divided into two smaller constructs.

Exploration: narrative elaboration + openness to exploration/change
"What I realized was…I let him treat me the way [my mother] treated me as a child. So I think the lesson learned for me [is that] I still have issues with [authority figures]."

Closure: emotional resolution + positive self-transformation
"The illness gave me time away from my life… I hate having [it]. But I still think that I'm in a much better place today than I would've been without it."

Adversity (-): difficulty + negative emotional tone
"My son was suicidal and so distraught, distraught, despondent and unwilling to go on living. It was devastatingly painful to watch."

Efficacy: freedom to act + extent of solution
"The way I got over it was to put myself in those situations… just coming up to my fear and dealing with it…I was like, shit, I'm afraid? Of what?"

Figure 2. Path diagram illustrating results of an exploratory factor analysis (minres; oblimin rotation). All item loadings, cross-loadings, and factor correlations were included in the model. Only those ≥ .30 are shown here.

How did narrative processes relate to traits and well-being?

We computed weighted composite scores for Exploration, Closure, Adversity, and Efficacy, and examined their correlations with personality traits and well-being measures.

Table 1
Correlations between Narrative Composite Scores and NEO-FFI Personality Traits

	Exp	Clos	Adv	Eff
Neuroticism	0.15	-0.09	0.28**	-0.31**
Extraversion	0.01	0.18*	-0.15	0.19*
Conscientiousness	-0.14	-0.04	-0.08	0.16*
Agreeableness	0.11	0.12	-0.04	0
Openness	0.03	0.01	-0.14	-0.02

*Exp = Exploration; Clos = Closure; Adv = Adversity; Eff = Efficacy. *p < .05; **p < .01*

Table 2
Correlations between Narrative Composite Scores and Well-Being Measures

		Exploration	Closure	Adversity	Efficacy
Year 1	BDI	0.03	-0.06	0.34**	-0.34**
	SWLS	0.11	0.08	-0.27*	0.19
	PWB	-0.06	0.06	-0.25†	0.32**
Year 2	BDI	-0.07	-0.09	0.24†	-0.26*
	SWLS	0.15	0.14	-0.20	0.18
	PWB	-0.05	0.03	-0.20	0.27*

*BDI = Beck Depression Inventory-II; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; PWB = Psychological Well-Being Scales. Year 1 was concurrent with interviews; Year 2 was one year later. P-values corrected for multiple comparisons using Holm method. †adjusted p < .10; *adjusted p < .05; **adjusted p < .01*

Results Summary

Participants' narratives covered a wide range of topics, although more than half included the theme of family.

We empirically derived four narrative composites. These composites captured how participants appraised and interpreted their life challenges.

Elaboration did not relate to participants' personality traits or well-being.

Participants who narrated life challenges with a lot of **closure** tended to be more extraverted.

Participants who narrated life challenges with a lot of **adversity** tended to be more neurotic. They reported more depressive symptoms and poorer life satisfaction and psychological well-being at the time of the interview.

Participants who narrated life challenges with a lot of **efficacy** tended to be less neurotic, more extraverted, and more conscientious. They reported better psychological well-being and less depression, both at the time of the interview and one year later.

Conclusions

This study introduces a new method for studying stress and coping. We empirically examined adults' narratives of their greatest life challenges, at three levels of analysis.

A narrative process called **efficacy**, composed of the autobiographical protagonist's *freedom to act* and *assessment that the challenge has been solved*, was most linked to personality traits and present and future well-being.

Contact

Henry R. Cowan
Northwestern University
raffles.cowan@u.northwestern.edu
847-467-3810

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