Crystallization of Desire and Crystallization of Discontent in Narratives of Life-Changing Decisions

Jack J. Bauer
Northern Arizona University
Dan P. McAdams and April R. Sakaeda
Northwestern University

ABSTRACT Two studies of adults examined personal narratives of life-changing decisions in relation to personality and well-being. Participants whose decision narratives emphasized a crystallization of desire (i.e., approaching a desired future) rather than a crystallization of discontent (i.e., escaping an undesired past; Baumeister, 1991, 1994) reported higher well-being, fewer avoidance strivings, lower Neuroticism (in Study 1 only), and better decision outcomes (in Study 2). However, neither strivings, traits, nor outcomes accounted for the relationship between crystallization of desire and well-being. The discussion considers the roles of life-changing decisions and personal narratives in research on personality, well-being, and positive personal development.

Jack J. Bauer, Northern Arizona University. Dan P. McAdams and April R. Sakaeda, The Foley Center for the Study of Lives, Northwestern University.

The authors would like to thank the Foley Family Foundation for its major support of this research, the Positive Psychology Summer Training Institute for its support, and Bob Emmons for his insights on an earlier draft of this paper. Portions of this paper were presented at the 2003 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in Toronto.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Jack Bauer, Department of Psychology, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5106. E-mail: jack.bauer@nau.edu.

Journal of Personality 73:5, October 2005

DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00346.x

Decisions to change one's life, such as the decision to marry or to change a career, are complex phenomena that guide the broad trajectories of a life course. Common sense suggests that people make life-changing decisions with the intentions of making their lives happier, more meaningful, or otherwise better. But not all life decisions turn out so well. We argue that people's underlying reasons for making a life decision are linked to the life path that follows, as well as to broader facets of personality and well-being. Research has shown that, especially during times of life review and decision making, the manner in which one construes one's life corresponds to psychological health and well-being (Kling, Ryff, & Essex, 1997; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). Yet, research specifically on life-changing decisions—let alone their underlying reasons and motivations—is harder to find.

In a stimulating proposal on how people initiate major changes in their lives, Baumeister (1991, 1994) claimed that people arrive at life-changing decisions by first experiencing a *crystallization of discontent*. He portrayed the crystallization of discontent as part of a subjective process in which the individual concludes that the negative aspects of a certain life condition outweigh the positives. Until that point, the individual engages in maintaining the view that the positives outweigh the negatives (e.g., by contextualizing or otherwise minimizing the importance of the negatives), thereby enabling the person to keep a rosier big picture and to maintain the current life condition. But when the person perceives bad days as turning into bad years, the person is more likely to conclude that the future will contain much of the same. At this point, the person arrives at a crystallization of discontent and is motivated to make a major life change. However, it seemed to us that this was an expressly avoidance-oriented style of decision making—an effort in fleeing or escape—and that many people would not interpret their own decision-making processes that way. It seems that some people arrive at a decision to change their lives by realizing what it is that they want to do in the future rather than by realizing what they do not want to do in the present or did not want to do in the past. We called this style of decision making a *crystallization of desire*.

Crystallization of Desire Versus Discontent

Past Research on Crystallization of Discontent

One study, to our knowledge, has addressed the notion of a crystallization of discontent (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). The study used narratives to capture the subjective dimension of the crystallization process. However, the aims and the methods of that study differed considerably from those of the present studies. Heatherton and Nichols randomly assigned participants into two groups, one to write a story about making a successful life change and another to write a story about an inability to make a major life change. The results showed that stories of successful attempts at life change were more likely than stories of unsuccessful attempts to involve a crystallization of discontent. Thus, it appeared that the crystallization of discontent—or at least the retrospective interpretation of one—was associated with a motivation to commit to a major life change. This question of whether one would make a change or not was a primary concern in the idea of the crystallization of discontent (Baumeister, 1991, 1994). In contrast, our concern in the present studies lay not with whether the presence of crystallization corresponded to making a change or not. Instead, our concern lay with whether the quality of crystallization (i.e., desire or discontent) corresponded to various qualities of personality and well-being.

Background: Approach Versus Avoidance

The distinction between the crystallization of desire and the crystallization of discontent boiled down to the distinction between approach and avoidance orientations, respectively. A person who takes an approach orientation focuses on the movement toward a desired outcome, such as pleasure or success, whereas one who takes an avoidance orientation focuses on the movement away from an undesired outcome, such as pain or failure (Carver & Scheier, 1999; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). The operational definitions for the crystallization of desire and the crystallization of discontent in the present studies were based on approach-versus-avoidance orientations as studied in personal goals. The tendency to have avoidance-oriented goals (in the form of both personal strivings and personal projects; Emmons, 1986; Little, 1989) has been linked to lower levels of well-being, both psychologically and physically, as well as to

higher levels of Neuroticism as a personality trait (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997, 1998; Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997; King, Richards, & Stemmerich, 1998). The tendency to have avoidance-oriented goals has also been linked to higher frequencies of self-defining memories involving the nonattainment of goals (Moffitt & Singer, 1994). Avoidance coping strategies have been inversely related to Extraversion and optimism (Amirkhan, Risinger, & Swickert, 1995). An avoidance orientation toward the task of revising self-identity has been associated with procrastination and excuse making (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996). The tendency to avoid problematic situations has been related to less-rational decision-making strategies (Phillips, Pazienza, & Ferrin, 1984). Thus, generally speaking, the approach orientation in thinking about one's life seems to correspond to the more desirable aspects of personality and well-being, whereas the avoidance orientation seems to correspond to the more undesirable aspects. (We emphasize "generally speaking" as either approach or avoidance can be adaptive in specific contexts.)

The Present Studies: Crystallization of Desire Versus Discontent

Any event can be interpreted in approach or avoidance terms. For example, when walking through a door from one room to another, a person can say that he or she is either "going into the next room" (approach) or "leaving the room" (avoidance). In making a life-changing decision, the approach-versus-avoidance orientation is similarly a matter of interpretation. Baumeister (1994) claimed that the crystallization process is fundamentally subjective and that personal narratives present the ideal format for data on crystallization. Therefore, we studied the crystallization of desire versus discontent via personal narratives of life-changing decisions. We operationally defined crystallization of desire versus discontent by drawing largely upon the research on approach-versus-avoidance goals (mentioned earlier; e.g., Elliot & Sheldon, 1997), except that with narratives we focused not on the type of decision but on the primary reasons for making the decision (see Method section). Briefly, the "crystallization of desire" variable compared narratives whose reasons for a decision emphasized an approach orientation (reflecting a crystallization of desire) with narratives whose reasons for a decision emphasized an avoidance orientation (reflecting a

crystallization of discontent).[1] One common distinction between narratives emphasizing a crystallization of desire versus discontent was the difference between knowing what one wanted to do (i.e., to move toward) versus simply knowing what one did not want to do (prompting a moving away; see methods). We expected that a crystallization of desire versus discontent would correlate with various measures of personality and well-being.

Crystallization of Desire, Personality, and Well-Being

Life-changing decisions are intended to guide broad paths in a life course. Thus, one could expect that a person's story of a life-changing decision would in some way speak to his or her personality and well-being. A growing body of research is showing the roles of personal narratives in meaning making, identity, and personality development (Singer, 2004). In the present studies, we inquired how the crystallization of desire versus discontent—as a narrative construal of a life-changing decision—fit within a broader context of personality and well-being. To address such questions, we employed McAdams's (1995) three-domain model of personality.

Three Domains of Personality

McAdams's (1995) model claims that personality can be studied in three levels or domains: broad traits, characteristic adaptations, and life stories. Domain I consists of broad traits or dispositions, such as the Big Five traits of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1999). Traits refer to the general (i.e., cross-situational) ways in which an individual thinks, feels, and behaves. Domain II consists of characteristic adaptations or personal

1. This variable may seem to simplify the complex process of decision making. A pilot study revealed that only a handful of narratives involved exclusively approach or avoidance orientations; the vast majority of involved both (see Method section). Indeed, the usefulness of narratives for research lies in their consideration and integration of competing motivations (McAdams, 1993; Singer & Salovey, 1993). Still, despite the mix of approach and avoidance in these narratives, one or the other was typically emphasized as primary in the individual's rationale for making the decision. Thus the "crystallization of desire" variable represented the individuals' *dominant* reason—the one arrived at after considering numerous, often competing reasons—for making a life decision.

concerns. Domain II characteristics include phenomena such as goals, motives, and ego defenses. Characteristic adaptations reveal what a person subjectively wants or how a person relates or adapts to specific contexts or circumstances in life. Domain III consists of life stories, or personal narratives. Life stories reveal how the individual makes sense of—creates meaning in—his or her life. Life stories reveal how one integrates the myriad elements of one's life into a sense of unity and purpose via narrative themes in life and narrative structure (McAdams, 1993).

The three domains can be compared in terms of their degrees of subjectivity. Traits are the least subjective in that they can be observed without having to ask how an individual thinks or feels about his or her life. In contrast, life stories are the most subjective in that they can only be understood by asking the individual to describe his or her life—and then in sufficient length for the observer to detect narrative patterns of tones, themes, coherence, etc. (McAdams, 1995). The degree of subjectivity of characteristic adaptations falls somewhere between that of traits and stories. It is important to note that characteristics in the three different domains may bear some relation to each other (e.g., trait Neuroticism and negative narrative tone; trait Openness and narrative complexity; McAdams et al., 2004). Indeed, it may seem that traits and goals are basic or foundational to narratives. However, McAdams (1995) claimed that this was not necessarily the case: One cannot know a person's life story simply by knowing his or her traits or goals.

Narratives and Well-Being

Several studies have shown ties between memory narratives and well-being or psychological health. The examples here focus on narratives of major life changes. In one study, parents wrote stories about the time they found out that their child had Down Syndrome. Stories that exhibited foreshadowing and happy endings were related to high levels of well-being over time (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). A longitudinal project on conjugal bereavement had participants write about various memories with their spouse (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001a, 2001b). Three narrative patterns of self-evaluation each predicted longitudinal adaptation to the loss: an optimal balance of mostly positive yet some negative self-evaluations, a higher ratio of behavioral to characterological self-evalua-

tions, and expressions of self-efficacy. A study on career changes showed that people who changed their environment to match their preferences and values (i.e., finding a greater person–environment fit; Holland, 1973) had greater job satisfaction (Oleski & Subich, 1996). Another study from a project on voluntary life transitions (from which the data for Study 2 came) found that transition stories emphasizing different forms of personal growth corresponded differentially to ego development, global well-being, and transition satisfaction (Bauer & McAdams, 2004b). We expected that narratives emphasizing a crystallization of desire would correspond to higher levels of well-being compared to narratives emphasizing a crystallization of discontent.

Narratives and Goals

Fewer studies have examined the relation between narratives and goals. As mentioned earlier, avoidance strivings (a measure of avoidance goals) correlated with narratives of not attaining one's goals (Moffitt & Singer, 1994). In another study, conflict among and ambivalence toward one's strivings corresponded to narratives expressing negative affect and complaints of physical problems (Emmons & King, 1988). In a study of caregivers of partners who had died from AIDS, caregivers who made positive appraisals were more likely to have personal goals and higher well-being than caregivers who made more negative appraisals (Stein, Folkman, Trabasso, & Richards, 1997). In another study, people whose narratives of major life goals and everyday strivings were coherent (i.e., related) had higher levels of ego development and well-being than people without coherent goal hierarchies (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a). In the present studies, we expected that narratives emphasizing a crystallization of desire would correlate negatively with avoidance-oriented goals (measured as avoidance strivings; Emmons, 1986). The comparison of these two variables would also provide a measure of construct validity for the crystallization of desire, as both variables were defined in terms of approach versus avoidance. However, because strivings represent a more general (i.e., less contextualized) manner of thinking about one's life than narratives of a specific life decision, we questioned whether crystallization of desire was merely a derivative of avoidance strivings. We predicted that it was not and expected that crystallization of desire

would hold its relation to well-being when controlling for avoidance strivings. (We expected that avoidance strivings would correlate negatively with well-being, as found in previous research; e.g., Elliot et al., 1997.)

Narratives and Traits

The traits Neuroticism and Extraversion are especially important to consider in studying the role of crystallization of desire in personality and well-being. Neuroticism was found to correlate with a negative emotional tone in personal narratives (McAdams et al., 2004). A study of adults found that low Neuroticism and high Extraversion correlated with narrative memories that emphasized intrinsic values (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). Extraversion was found to correlate with narratives expressing lower levels of sympathy for the victims of one's own teasing (Georgesen, Harris, Milich, & Young, 1999). Based on the findings cited earlier on approach-versus-avoidance orientations (Amirkhan et al. 1995; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997, 1998; Elliot et al., 1997), we expected that narratives emphasizing a crystallization of desire would correlate with low Neuroticism and high Extraversion. However, in addition to finding relations between narratives and traits, we questioned whether Neuroticism or Extraversion might explain more parsimoniously the role of narratives in personality and well-being. Neuroticism is closely linked to negative affectivity and low levels of well-being, whereas Extraversion is linked to positive affectivity and high well-being (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Watson & Clark, 1984, 1997)—both of which might underlie the approach-or-avoidance orientation of a person's decision narrative. (Narratives' degree of subjectivity and methodological complexity relative to traits make this an important question.) However, in the studies cited above, we also found that narrative memories were largely independent of traits in predicting well-being (Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; Bauer et al., 2005), suggesting that narratives conveyed information about people's well-being that traits did not. Therefore, we expected that crystallization of desire would continue to correlate with well-being when controlling not only for avoidance strivings but also for traits. In other words, we predicted that people's traits would not explain how people interpreted their life-changing decisions. We were also interested in whether narrative, goal, and trait measures would predict well-being independently.

Crystallization of Desire and the Decision's Outcome

We also examined the relationship between crystallization of desire and the individual's evaluation of how well the decision turned out. Study 2 involved people who had made a major life change in recent years. This life change could have been perceived as good or bad. It stands to reason that a person who felt that the decision turned out well would be more likely to perceive in retrospect that the decision was based on a crystallization of desire (e.g., "I always knew what I wanted to do in the future"). Such a perception might reflect a self-serving bias that allowed the individual to perceive more internal control than might actually have been the case (Langer & Roth, 1975). Research has shown that perceptions of one's life in the present (such as current evaluations of a past decision's outcome) can influence retrospective perceptions of one's thoughts and experiences (Ross, 1989). Similarly, the perception that a decision turned out well may be a source of positivity bias—much as the general traits of Extraversion and Neuroticism can be a source of positivity or negativity bias. Research has shown that people who claimed in narratives that a decision turned out well had higher levels of well-being (King et al., 2000). Whether such perceptions affect the relationship between construals of decision-making processes and well-being remained to be seen. In Study 2 we compared the crystallization of desire with how well people perceived the decision to turn out (using a scale measure). We expected that crystallization of desire would correlate with positive evaluations of the decision's outcome. We also expected that positive outcome evaluations would correlate with well-being. However, we expected that the crystallization of desire would retain its relation to well-being when controlling for perceptions of how well the decision turned out.

STUDY 1

In the first study we asked adults to write 1–2 pages about a life-changing decision they had made in their lives and to complete a variety of nonnarrative measures, e.g., well-being, strivings, and traits. The following hypotheses addressed the questions raised above. *Hypothesis 1:* Crystallization of desire would be part of a constellation of personality characteristics that corresponds to well-being. In particular, we predicted that participants whose decision

narratives emphasized a crystallization of desire rather than discontent would have higher levels of well-being, fewer avoidance strivings, lower Neuroticism, and higher Extraversion. In addition, we predicted that the other personality measures—fewer avoidance strivings, lower Neuroticism, and higher Extraversion—would correlate with each other and with well-being. *Hypothesis 2:* Crystallization of desire would continue to predict well-being when controlling for strivings and traits. More broadly, we were interested in whether variables from the three domains of personality would predict well-being independently.

Method

Participants

The data from this study came from a larger project on adults' life stories. Fifty-one adults from the Chicago area who had participated in interview-based studies previously (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001) were contacted to volunteer for a written study on life narratives. The sample was 70% female and 20% minority in race and had a mean age of 51.7 years ($SD = 10$; range 30–72), a median household income of $55,000, and college degrees in 80% of the cases. Participants completed, at their leisure, a booklet containing narrative and scale measures and were paid $150. The life-story survey included a narrative segment on life decisions, from which the narrative data came.[2]

The Narrative Procedure

The instructions for the decision episode first led participants to think about decisions that had had a significant impact on their lives. Participants in both studies were given up to two pages to write their responses. The instructions then contrasted a few relatively benign decisions (e.g., what to wear in the morning) with decisions that are likely to change the course of one's life (e.g., choosing a spouse). The instructions then read:

2. Study 1 used data for life satisfaction that were published previously in two empirical articles (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Bauer et al., 2005). The "approach goals" variable in Study 1 came from the raw responses to the personal strivings measure (Emmons, 1986), from which a "growth goals" variable—an entirely distinct form of goal—were coded for Bauer & McAdams (2004a). Those studies examined different narratives (not the narratives of life-changing decisions) and addressed entirely distinct theoretical perspectives and hypotheses.

> Please consider the most important decisions or choices you have made in your life. Describe in detail a particular event in your life in which you made an important decision. Please tell us what the decision was and why it was an important one. As usual, tell us what happened in the event, when the event occurred, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, and what the event says about you and your personality.

Coding the Decision Narratives

Narratives were coded by two raters as emphasizing either a crystallization of desire or a crystallization of discontent. Coders were directed to follow a strict protocol. Coders first identified the type of decision involved in the narrative. Most narratives focused on the decision to get married, to get divorced, to change jobs, to relocate, and to stand up for what one believes. These types of decisions were not the focus of coding for crystallization of desire versus discontent. Any one type of decision could be coded for crystallization of desire or discontent. The target element of the narrative was the protagonist's predominant reason for making that type of decision.[3] The coder was to ask whether the protagonist (i.e., the narrator, the self) decided to make a life change primarily for the purpose of wanting to move toward something desirable in the future (approach) or primarily for the purpose of wanting to escape a bad situation in the past (avoidance; from Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). Crystallization of desire or discontent was then coded accordingly. The "crystallization of desire" variable was dichotomous and had values of 1 for crystallization of desire (i.e., approach reasons) and 0 for crystallization of discontent (i.e., avoidance reasons).

As noted earlier, the dichotomous nature of this coding system may seem at first to ignore the competing motivations and struggles that typically come with life-changing decisions. For example, a person may

3. The first author (Jack Bauer) also coded narratives for the *type* of decision as approach or avoidance. For example, "starting a new career" and "getting married" were approach, whereas "leaving a career" and "getting divorced" were avoidance. (We note that the approach or avoidance orientation of those phrases is inherent. Alternative ways of phrasing "getting married" could be "leaving singlehood" [avoidance], whereas "getting divorced" could be "becoming single" [approach], but such phrases are not the cultural standard.) We found that crystallization of desire (which involved the primary reason for the decision) correlated significantly with approach-oriented types of decisions, X^2 (49) = 15.23, $p < .001$. However, approach types of decisions did not correlate significantly with any other measure of personality and well-being.

wish simultaneously to approach a desired future and escape an undesired past. Indeed, most of the present decision narratives conveyed elements not just of crystallization of desire or discontent but of both. Only 2 of the 35 narratives that were coded for crystallization of desire (see results) portrayed exclusively approach-like thoughts; the rest addressed the conflicting approach and avoidance orientations that could be expected to accompany a life-changing decision in adulthood (Baumeister, 1991; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). However, research has demonstrated that narratives tend to focus on or emphasize one value orientation or another, with implications for personality and well-being (McAdams, 1993). So the crystallization of desire did not equate to a Pollyanna-ish description of the life decision. As the term "crystallization" suggests, the decision to change one's life is likely to come from a relatively firm evaluation about one's life condition and its possible future (Baumeister, 1991, 1994). The "crystallization of desire" variable represented the primary (i.e., crystallizing) reason at which the individual arrived only after considering his or her various desires and discontents. Most of the decision narratives conveyed these competing considerations as well as the primary consideration. Coders were blind to other information about the participants, such as well-being, goals, and traits. Coders used photocopies of the original narratives that were part of the survey booklet. Coders attained an overall agreement rate of 86%, kappa = .65. Since all narratives were coded as crystallization of either desire or discontent, we expect that the most ambivalent of the narratives were the source of most of the coders' discrepancies. Discrepancies were then resolved through discussion.

Narrative Examples

In order to provide a sense of what a crystallization of desire and crystallization of discontent meant in this study, we present some narrative excerpts. The first comes from a participant who decided to change from a career in sales to a career in teaching:

> My realization was a gradual process defined in negative terms. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but as time passed, I knew more and more precisely what I did not what to do . . . I hit a saturation point, and I left . . . Then I received a job offer, which I accepted for lack of anything better to do.

This person's narrative focused almost entirely on not liking sales and wanting to leave; the person used no overt words to convey even a liking for teaching. The decision here was decidedly for the purpose of moving

away from the current job, which reflects a crystallization of discontent. In contrast, the next excerpt portrayed a strong desire to move toward something desired, which reflects a crystallization of desire. This person made a career change from being a paramedic (for 13 years) to attending medical school and eventually practicing medicine:

> My realization was that it is possible to have a career that I was passionate about . . . I had always fantasized about one day becoming a physician. Watching [physicians work together] in action catapulted me to the decision to go for it—I knew my passion lay in doing healing work.

As mentioned earlier, most narratives involved elements of both a crystallization of desire and a crystallization of discontent. To give such an example, one participant wrote this decision, which was coded as crystallization of desire:

> I feel as though many of the paths in my life were results not of healthy decision making but of feeling I had no options. However, the decision to work for [company] almost 10 years ago has proved to be a major one for me. I [emphasis in original] made the decision—did not involve friends in this choice. I felt very connected to the woman who interviewed me.

Even though this participant mentioned several difficulties, the reason she decided to change careers was predominantly to move toward a specific interpersonal environment that she found desirable, rather than merely escape an unpleasant situation. Many of the narratives in these studies conformed to what we called an "even though" script. That is, many narratives seemed to say, "Even though there were several difficulties to consider, I still chose to move toward what I really wanted to do."

On the other hand, some narratives involved competing motivations but were coded as crystallization of discontent. For example, one participant wrote: "Recently, I made the decision to get better (health) fast because I couldn't stand being so dependent on and disappointed by others" (parentheses in original). In this case, the type of decision was "to get better (health)," which is an approach-oriented phrase, but the reason for the decision (tipped off by the word "because" is avoidance-oriented—wanting to stop "being so dependent on and disappointed by others."

Nonnarrative Measures

Well-being. Participants completed a measure of subjective well-being, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larson, &

Griffen, 1985). The SWLS is a well-validated, simple, five-item measure of overall life satisfaction. On a 1–7 Likert scale, participants rate statements such as "In most ways my life is close to my ideal," "I am satisfied with the current state of affairs in my life," and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing."

Strivings. Participants took Emmons's (1986) measure of personal strivings, which elicits 15–18 responses to the sentence stem, "I typically try to . . . ," Due to the time required for other measures, we asked for only 10 strivings. Each striving was individually coded for an approach or avoidance orientation (in a dichotomous fashion). Avoidance strivings (which was the name of the dichotomous variable) gave evidence of avoiding, leaving, not doing, or otherwise moving away from something (Elliot, et al., 1997). Examples included: "avoid burdening others with my problems," "cut back on the things I say 'yes' to," and "not get too down or worried about matters." In contrast, approach strivings gave evidence of approaching, doing, or otherwise moving toward something. Examples included: "exercise daily," "do my best at work," and "be a good parent." The total numbers of avoidance strivings were calculated for each participant. As a measure of interrater reliability, two coders attained a correlation of $r = .93$.

Traits. We used the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999), a well-validated measure in which participants rate on a 5-point scale the degree to which each of 44 items describes one's own personality. The prompt reads, "I see myself as someone who . . . " Sample descriptions include: "is talkative," "can be tense," and "does things efficiently." Items converge on five personality traits: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. John and Srivastava (1999) report alpha reliabilities for the independent scales of the BFI in the +.75 to +.90 range. Validity evidence includes substantial convergent and divergent relations with other Big Five instruments as well as with peer ratings. Because Neuroticism and Extraversion have established relations to affectivity, well-being, and approach-versus-avoidance orientations, we focused on those two traits.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Of the 51 decision narratives, 35 (69%) were coded as a crystallization of desire (16 were coded as a crystallization of discontent). Means (and *SD*) for variables were: SWLS = 23.04 (7.36), avoidance

strivings = 1.38 (1.37), Neuroticism = 21.10 (7.09), Extraversion = 27.86 (5.12). Due to the skewed distribution of avoidance strivings (more than 8 of every 10 strivings were approach oriented), we collapsed avoidance strivings into a dichotomous variable that compared participants who could be considered particularly avoidance oriented with those who were not. Moffitt & Singer (1994) chose a cut-off of 40% avoidance strivings to represent high-avoidance individuals, but only 12% ($n = 7$) of the present participants had four or more avoidance strivings. Therefore, we defined "avoidance-oriented" individuals as those who had three or more avoidance strivings. The dichotomous "avoidance strivings" variable that we used in all subsequent analyses compared these participants ($n = 13$, or 25%) with the others, i.e., those with two, one, or zero avoidance strivings ($n = 38$). No significant demographic differences were found for any of these variables, and demographics did not significantly affect any of the relationships reported below.

Bivariate Relationships: Hypothesis 1

Relationships with crystallization of desire. Participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire rather than discontent had higher SWLS scores, fewer avoidance strivings, X^2 (49) = 4.76, $p < .05$, lower levels of Neuroticism, but not higher levels of Extraversion (see Table 1 for t values and means for continuous variables; also see correlations among all variables in Table 2 for ease of comparison). Thus, we found support for the first part of Hypothesis 1 (dealing

Table 1
T-Tests of Variables for Crystallization of Desire

Variable	Crystallization Group	Mean *(SD)*	*T* value (*df* = 49)
SWLS	Desire	25.40 *(5.82)*	4.14***
	Discontent	17.20 *(7.71)*	
Neuroticism	Desire	18.87 *(6.02)*	− 4.32***
	Discontent	26.90 *(6.00)*	
Extraversion	Desire	27.57 *(5.33)*	− .31
	Discontent	28.07 *(4.54)*	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2
Correlations

Variable	CD	SWLS	AS	N	E
1. Crystallization of Desire					
2. Satisfaction with Life Scale	.51***				
3. Avoidance Strivings	− .31*	− .49***			
4. Neuroticism	− .53***	− .66***	.39**		
5. Extraversion	− .04	.33*	− .13	− .31*	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.
Note. Spearman rho and point-biserial correlations for nonparametric variables showed similar magnitudes and the same levels of significance as the Pearson correlations reported above.

with crystallization of desire), except that crystallization of desire did not correlate with Extraversion. Furthermore, the relationship between crystallization of desire and avoidance strivings provided evidence of construct validity for crystallization of desire, which was operationally defined in terms of approach-versus-avoidance orientations.

Other relationships. Participants with larger numbers of avoidance strivings had significantly lower SWLS scores, $t\ (49) = -3.94$, $p < .001$, and higher Neuroticism scores, $t\ (49) = 2.97$, $p < .01$, but not lower Extraversion scores, $t\ (49) = -.89$, $p > .10$. SWLS correlated significantly with Neuroticism (inversely) and Extraversion (see Table 2). Thus, we found support for the second prediction of Hypothesis 1 in all cases except that avoidance strivings did not correlate with Extraversion. Notably, we found that variables in all three domains of personality (narratives, strivings, and traits) showed relationships with one another.

Multiple Regression: Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted that crystallization of desire would continue correlating with well-being when controlling for strivings and traits. To test this, we ran a two-step regression model of SWLS, first on narratives and strivings, then adding traits. More specifically, we

entered crystallization of desire and avoidance strivings simultaneously in the first step and then added Neuroticism and Extraversion simultaneously in the second step. We first found that crystallization of desire, $\beta = .40$, $p < .01$, and avoidance strivings, $\beta = -.36$, $p < .01$, each predicted SWLS significantly and independently. Thus, the tendency of participants with high scores on life satisfaction to emphasize a crystallization of desire was not explained by their tendency to have avoidance strivings. When adding traits to the equation, we found that crystallization of desire, $\beta = .24$, $p < .05$, avoidance strivings (inversely), $\beta = -.24$, $p < .05$, and Neuroticism (inversely), $\beta = -.38$, $p < .01$, each predicted SWLS significantly and independently, while Extraversion was a marginally significant predictor, $\beta = .19$, $p < .10$. These findings further supported Hypothesis 2, noting that variables in all three domains of personality (narratives, strivings, and traits) were independent in predicting well-being.

Summary

Participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire rather than discontent were more likely to have higher levels of life satisfaction, fewer avoidance strivings, and lower levels of Neuroticism, but not higher levels of Extraversion. Also, fewer avoidance strivings, lower Neuroticism, and life satisfaction correlated with each other. Crystallization of desire continued to predict well-being significantly when controlling for avoidance strivings and traits. Notably, variables from the three domains of personality (McAdams, 1995)—crystallization of desire, avoidance strivings, and Neuroticism—were independent predictors of well-being. Further discussion of these topics appears in the general discussion.

STUDY 2

For the second study we recruited adults who had recently changed either careers or religions. Participants wrote about their decision to make the change. In this study, we again tested Hypotheses 1 and 2 from Study 1. In Study 2, we added a scale measure of how well the decision turned out, i.e., the degree to which the decision to make a life change had a positive impact on one's life (see Method section). This measure enabled us to test Hypotheses 3 and 4. *Hypothesis 3:*

Participants emphasizing a crystallization of desire rather than discontent would be more likely to report that their decision turned out well. *Hypothesis 4:* Crystallization of desire would be independent of how well the decision turned out in predicting well-being. Among other things, Hypothesis 4 served as another way to control for a positivity/negativity bias, much as Hypothesis 2 did by controlling for Extraversion and Neuroticism. The difference was that the present measure of decision outcome dealt specifically with the life-changing decision rather than with a personality disposition.

Method

Participants

The data for this study came from a larger project on adults' life transitions. The 67 participants in this study first responded to our advertisement in a Chicago newspaper for a study of major changes in careers and religions. The sample included 40 career changers and 27 religion changers. The overall sample was 64% female and 28% minority in race and had a mean age of 41 years ($SD = 10$; range 25–73), a median household income between $30,000 and $40,000, and college degrees in 67% of the cases. Participants completed, at their leisure, a booklet containing narrative and scale measures and were paid $50. Study 2 asked participants to write specifically about their transition story, which included a narrative segment on the decision to make the change, from which the narrative data came.[4]

Measures

Decision narratives. Participants wrote a 1–2-page narrative about their decision to make a major life change in either careers or religions. In a fashion similar to Study 1, participants were asked to think and write in detail about the decision episode, complete with an account of what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what the participant was thinking and feeling, and what the event said about the participant's sense of self and personality. The same coding procedures as in Study 1 for

4. Study 2 used data for life satisfaction that were published previously in an empirical article (a different one than those related to Study 1; Bauer & McAdams, 2004b). However, Study 2 focused on a narrative that dealt specifically with the decision to make the life transition, whereas the previous article focused on all the episodes of the transition story in aggregate. The previous article also addressed entirely distinct theoretical perspectives and hypotheses.

crystallization of desire versus discontent were applied to the present decision narratives.

Well-being, strivings, and traits. Participants in Study 2 took the same measures as those in Study 1: Avoidance strivings (coded from personal strivings; Emmons, 1986), SWLS (Diener et al., 1985), and the BFI (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Life impact from the transition. We adapted a scale measure originally used to assess the impact of a religious conversion on various domains in a person's life (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). We called this measure the Life Impact from Transition scale (LIFT), which measured the degree to which the life change (and therefore the life decision) had a positive impact on the individual's life. Participants were asked to rate on a 9-point scale how much for the better (9) or how much for the worse (1) the transition (either career or religion) had affected nine domains in life (one item per domain). The prompt read, "To what degree do you feel your transition has . . . ." The items were: "altered your general outlook on life," "provided a sense of meaning in your life," "changed your goals in life," "affected your relationships with friends," "affected your relationships with your family," "affected your life at work or school," "affected your religious or spiritual life," "affected your day-to-day activities," "changed your life." Scores for each item were added to create a total LIFT score, such that higher LIFT scores indicated a greater sense that the transition had a positive impact on one's life.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Of the 67 participants, 35 (52%) emphasized a crystallization of desire (32 emphasized a crystallization of discontent). Means (and *SD*) for variables were: SWLS = 22.25 (7.57), avoidance strivings = 1.74 (1.50), Neuroticism = 22.40 (7.14), Extraversion = 27.99 (4.37), LIFT = 66.15 (11.31; range 44–81). As in Study 1, we collapsed the avoidance strivings into a dichotomous variable, comparing 18 participants (27% of the sample) who had three or more avoidance strivings with 49 participants who had two, one, or zero avoidance strivings. The only demographic variable to distinguish these measures was race: African Americans and Asian Americans scored significantly higher on LIFT, $t(65) = -2.79$,

$p < .01$, than did European Americans. Demographic variables did not significantly influence any of the results reported here.

Bivariate Relationships: Hypotheses 1 and 3

Hypothesis 1: Relationships with crystallization of desire. Participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire rather than discontent had significantly higher levels of SWLS (see Table 3 for t values and means for continuous variables), and fewer avoidance strivings, X^2 (65) = 5.90, $p < .05$ (see correlations of all variables in Table 4 for ease of comparison). However, participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire did not have significantly lower levels of Neuroticism or higher levels of Extraversion. Thus, we found partial support for the first prediction of Hypothesis 1, the notable exception being that crystallization of desire did not correlate with traits. The relationship between crystallization of desire and avoidance strivings replicated evidence of construct validity for crystallization of desire, which was operationally defined in terms of approach-versus-avoidance orientations.

Hypothesis 1: Other relationships. Participants with larger numbers of avoidance strivings had significantly lower SWLS scores, $t(65) = -3.44$, $p < .001$, and significantly higher Neuroticism scores, $t(65) = 2.26$, $p < .05$, but not lower Extraversion scores,

Table 3
T-Tests of Variables for Crystallization of Desire

Variable	Crystallization Group	Mean *(SD)*	*T* value (*df* = 65)
Satisfaction with Life	Desire	25.34 *(7.47)*	3.84***
	Discontent	18.76 *(6.16)*	
Neuroticism	Desire	21.86 *(7.88)*	−.65
	Discontent	23.00 *(6.32)*	
Extraversion	Desire	28.17 *(3.72)*	.36
	Discontent	27.78 *(5.05)*	
Life Impact from Transition	Desire	70.34 *(11.16)*	3.42***
	Discontent	61.56 *(9.70)*	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 4
Correlations

Variable	CD	SWLS	AS	N	E
1. Crystallization of Desire					
2. Satisfaction with Life	.43***				
3. Avoidance Strivings	− .30*	− .39***			
4. Neuroticism	− .08	− .44***	.27*		
5. Extraversion	.05	.28*	− .14	− .16	
6. Life Impact from Transition	.39***	.26*	− .12	− .25*	.26*

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.
Note. Spearman rho and point-biserial correlations for nonparametric variables showed similar magnitudes and the same levels of significance as the Pearson correlations reported above.

$t(65) = -1.12$, $p > .10$. SWLS correlated significantly with Neuroticism (inversely) and Extraversion. Thus, the second prediction of Hypothesis 1 panned out, except for the relation between avoidance strivings and Extraversion.

Hypothesis 3. Crystallization of desire corresponded to higher levels of LIFT (see Table 3). Thus, we found support for our prediction that participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire rather than discontent would be more likely to claim that their decision turned out well. LIFT also correlated significantly with higher SWLS, lower Neuroticism, and higher Extraversion (see Table 5). However, individuals with fewer avoidance strivings did not show higher LIFT scores, $t\ (65) = 1.02$, $p > .10$.

Multiple Regressions: Hypotheses 2 and 4

Hypothesis 2. As in Study 1, we regressed SWLS, first on crystallization of desire and avoidance strivings and then on those variables plus Neuroticism and Extraversion. We first found that crystallization of desire, $\beta = .34$, $p < .01$, and avoidance strivings, $\beta = -.29$, $p < .05$, each predicted SWLS significantly and independently. Thus, as in Study 1, the tendency of participants with high life satisfaction to emphasize a crystallization of desire was not explained by their

tendency to have avoidance strivings. When adding traits to the equation, we found that crystallization of desire, $\beta = .34$, $p < .001$, and Neuroticism (inversely), $\beta = -.33$, $p < .01$, predicted SWLS significantly and independently, while Extraversion, $\beta = .18$, $p < .10$, did so marginally significantly and avoidance strivings did not do so significantly, $\beta = -.17$, $p = .10$. Thus, we found support for the first part of Hypothesis 2, that crystallization of desire would be independent of strivings and traits in predicting life satisfaction. But we did not find support for the independence of variables from all three domains of personality: Avoidance strivings no longer predicted life satisfaction when considering traits.

Hypothesis 4. We regressed SWLS simultaneously on crystallization of desire and LIFT. We found that crystallization of desire, $\beta = .39$, $p < .01$, predicted SWLS significantly, but LIFT did not, $\beta = .10$, $p > .10$. Thus, participants who felt the decision turned out well were more likely to portray their decision as based on a crystallization of desire, but this fact did not account for the relationship between crystallization of desire and well-being. In fact, we found just the opposite: Crystallization of desire mediated the relationship between the decision outcome and well-being.

Summary

Participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire rather than discontent were more likely to have higher levels of life satisfaction and fewer avoidance strivings but not lower Neuroticism or higher Extraversion. Also, avoidance strivings, Neuroticism, and life satisfaction correlated with each other. As in Study 1, crystallization of desire continued to predict life satisfaction when controlling for avoidance strivings and traits. Unlike Study 1, avoidance strivings were not a significant predictor in that equation. Finally, crystallization of desire correlated significantly with the perception that the decision turned out well (which also correlated with life satisfaction), but this fact did not significantly alter the relationship between crystallization of desire and life satisfaction. In addition to largely showing an independence of constructs, the findings for Hypotheses 2 and 4 provided tests of bias. The findings for Hypothesis 2 showed

that Extraversion and Neuroticism, respectively, were not a source of positivity and negativity bias for those participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire or discontent in their decision narratives. The findings for Hypothesis 4 showed that a positive or negative evaluation of the decision's outcome did not play a significant role in the relationship between crystallization of desire and life satisfaction.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These studies examined how perceived reasons for making life-changing decisions related to personality and well-being. Participants who emphasized a crystallization of desire rather than discontent had higher levels of well-being (measured as life satisfaction), fewer avoidance strivings, and (in Study 1 only) lower levels of Neuroticism, but not higher levels of Extraversion. Despite these relationships, the relationship between crystallization of desire and well-being was in large part not attributable to strivings or traits. In addition, Study 2 showed that positive evaluations of the decision's outcome did not account for the high levels of well-being reported by participants whose narratives emphasized a crystallization of desire. These findings have implications for the roles of life-changing decisions and personal narratives in research on personality, well-being, and positive personal development.

Before discussing these findings, we first point out that many more participants in Study 1 emphasized a crystallization of desire than discontent, and slightly more participants in Study 2 did so. This suggested that a crystallization of desire played a prominent role in people's recollection of a life-changing decision. Still, it is important to restate that the vast majority of decision narratives in these studies involved both desire and discontent (i.e., approach and avoidance) and that our narrative variable addressed the most dominant one. Thus, we found evidence that a sense of discontent—where the negatives outweighed the positives—played a role in most life-changing decisions, as suggested by Baumeister (1991, 1994). But it seemed that the crystallization process—coming to a firm evaluation of one's life conditions—was based, at least as often, on the evaluation that the positives of a possible future outweighed any negative evaluations of the past.

Crystallization of Desire and Well-Being

Both studies showed that people who emphasized a crystallization of desire had higher levels of well-being (as life satisfaction) than participants who emphasized a crystallization of discontent. In other words, people who claimed to base their life decisions on moving toward something they wanted seemed to be happier with their lives than people who claimed to base their decisions on escaping something they couldn't stand any longer. The approach-versus-avoidance orientation in these life-changing decisions conveyed distinct temporal qualities. When making a life-changing decision, a person can place a primary interpretive emphasis on moving toward a desirable future or on moving away from an undesirable past. Like an approach orientation, future-oriented and growth-oriented thinking—particularly when facing major life plans and transitions, including the difficult ones—holds a strong relationship to well-being and adjustment (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001b; Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; King et al., 1998; Kling et al., 1997; Stein et al., 1997).

The present findings extended the notion of a crystallization of discontent (Baumeister, 1991, 1994). Previous research has shown that a crystallization of discontent (vs. no crystallization) corresponded to making (vs. not making) a major life change (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). In contrast, the present studies showed that the quality or orientation of crystallization (i.e., approaching desire vs. avoiding discontent) corresponded to well-being. We view the present studies not in contrast to past research, but rather as an extension of it. Together, the Heatherton and Nichols study and the present studies suggest that a crystallization of discontent may help influence the decision to make a major life change in the first place (though a crystallization of desire might do the same thing), whereas a crystallization of desire is more closely linked to a sense of well-being, in terms of both satisfaction with life and satisfaction with the decision's outcome.[5]

5. However, it is important to keep in mind that the present studies, as well as the Heatherton & Nichols (1994) study, involved retrospective narratives. Thus, these studies have not shown that certain kinds of decisions cause certain kinds of outcomes.

Crystallization of Desire, Personality, and Well-Being

We also found that a crystallization of desire versus discontent in decision narratives was related to personal strivings and personality traits. In both studies, crystallization of desire corresponded to fewer avoidance strivings. In Study 1 only, crystallization of desire corresponded to lower levels of Neuroticism. In neither study did crystallization of desire correspond to Extraversion. Thus, the most consistent findings suggested that people who perceived a crystallization of desire rather than discontent as the primary reason for a life-changing decision were likely to view their everyday strivings in approach rather than avoidance terms. Such a claim raises the question of whether the tendency to have approach-oriented strivings is responsible for the tendency to describe one's life decision as rooted in a crystallization of desire (which was operationally defined as approach oriented). However, both studies showed that avoidance strivings did not explain the relationship between crystallization of desire and well-being.

When adding Neuroticism and Extraversion to the equation, crystallization of desire continued to be a significant predictor of well-being in both studies. However, slightly different pictures emerged between the two studies regarding (1) the strength of crystallization of desire in predicting well-being and (2) the role of avoidance strivings. In Study 1, even though crystallization of desire retained its significant relation to well-being when considering avoidance strivings and traits, crystallization of desire's Beta dropped from .51 as a single predictor of well-being to .40 when considering avoidance strivings and to .24 when also considering Neuroticism and Extraversion. So it appeared that crystallization of desire alone had a quite strong relation to well-being, but a good proportion of that relation was explained by the combination of avoidance strivings and Neuroticism (given that Extraversion did not correlate with crystallization of desire). However, it is important to note that Neuroticism's Beta also dropped from $-.53$ to $-.38$. Furthermore, a significant portion of the relation between crystallization of desire and well-being remained when considering strivings and traits. In Study 2, contrary to expectations, crystallization of desire did not correlate significantly with Neuroticism. One reason for this could be that the two studies addressed life-changing decisions in different ways: Participants in Study 1 took a survey

dealing with life-story episodes across one's lifetime and were asked to choose any life-changing decision. In contrast, participants in Study 2 took a survey dealing with a specific major life change, and the decision dealt with that change. Perhaps participants in Study 1 chose a decision that conformed to the general sense of personality they were portraying in the survey, whereas participants in Study 2 were not free to choose which decision to write about. (This could also explain why the frequencies of crystallization of desire and crystallization of discontent were more evenly emphasized in Study 2.) In any case, both studies revealed that crystallization of desire, a Domain-III variable (McAdams, 1995), retained its relation to well-being when controlling for avoidance strivings (Domain II) and traits (Domain I), as predicted in Hypothesis 2.

We were similarly surprised to find in both studies that crystallization of desire (and avoidance strivings) did not correlate significantly with high levels of Extraversion, given Extraversion's tie to positive affect (Watson & Clark, 1997). Thus, crystallization of desire had very little to do with—let alone appeared as a derivative of—Extraversion. It appeared that the crystallization of desire variable (which pitted desire vs. discontent) had more to do with the absence of negativity than with the presence of positivity, as is often the case in measures relating affectivity and self-views (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001a; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Malle & Horowitz, 1995).

One important conclusion from these findings was that the way people described and ultimately emphasized their various desires and discontents in making a life decision was not simply attributable to those people's strivings and traits. The way people thought about their life decisions was related to more general ways of thinking about themselves but was not explained by those ways. Looking at the three domains of personality (McAdams, 1995) in relation to well-being, measures of narratives, strivings, and traits seemed to function as relatively unique domains in Study 1, but not in Study 2, where avoidance strivings no longer predicted well-being when controlling for crystallization of desire and the traits Neuroticism and Extraversion. Neuroticism appeared to be the primary force in that scenario, given that avoidance strivings remained significant when controlling for crystallization of desire. Overall, the two studies pointed to Neuroticism's strong tie to well-being, as well as the unique role

that narratives of a single (albeit life-changing) event can play in personality and well-being.

Life Decisions: Crystallization of Desire and Positive Outcomes

One of the most common arguments against narrative research is that narratives of personal memories are perceptions, and perceptions of the past can be easily reconstructed to serve present purposes, such as positive self-appraisal. We found in Study 2 that happy people wrote stories of favorable decision outcomes (also see King et al., 2000). It stands to reason that the perception that a decision turned out well might lead participants to think that they were in control of their decision and had always focused on the good that lay ahead (i.e., a crystallization of desire). However, the relationship between crystallization of desire and well-being held when controlling for evaluations of the decision's outcome. In other words, the perception that a decision turned out well did not account for the fact that happy people emphasized a crystallization of desire in their retrospective accounts of a life-changing decision. People's current perceptions of how their lives have turned out have been shown to skew their perceptions of how they thought about their lives at earlier times in the past (Ross, 1989; Safer, Bonanno, & Field, 2001). The present finding contributes to the notion that people's subjective decision-making processes have significant implications for one's life, even when considering factors (such as outcome appraisals) that may appear to be more salient (Kahneman, 2003; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). Narrative research is ideally suited for the systematic examination of such subjective perspectives (see Singer, 2004).

Crystallization of Desire: A Positive Approach to Personal Development

We conceptualized the crystallization of desire as a forward-looking, future-oriented alternative to the crystallization of discontent's escape-oriented perspective on making a life-changing decision. In this sense, the crystallization of desire squares with the perspective of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and general research on positive emotionality (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998; Isen, 1990). We see a basic similarity between the approach-versus-

avoidance distinction and the distinction between positive psychology and the more traditional perspective on psychological well-being and adjustment. The kinds of questions asked by the more traditional perspective are: What causes suffering, and how do we avoid or escape it? The kinds of questions asked by positive psychology are: What causes thriving, and how do we foster it? In this sense, the traditional perspective tends toward an avoidance perspective toward health ("how to escape the bad"), even when the health focus is on "prevention" (read, "how to avoid the bad"). In contrast, positive psychology (as well as humanistic psychology) tends toward an approach-oriented perspective ("how to create the good"). Our findings suggest that decisions based primarily on approach-oriented reasons are more likely to foster well-being than decisions based primarily on escaping, avoiding, or preventing undesirable conditions.

While these data were not longitudinal, these findings have implications for personal growth—i.e., the intentional development of one's life course and personality (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b; Brandtstadter, Wentura, & Rothermund, 1999). Attaining happiness may be more difficult if one's life-changing decisions are focused primarily on escaping misery. But we also are not suggesting that a happy-go-lucky attitude is the way to go about a life-changing decision. Rather, it seems that a primary—but not exclusive—focus on approach- and future-oriented thinking is likely to correspond to well-being and other positive outcomes. Even where loss and trauma are pervasive in one's life, the subjective emphasis on positive meaning is possible and adaptive, provided that it also acknowledges difficulties (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001a; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Frankl, 1946/1984). The vast majority of participants in the present studies—happy and unhappy alike—wrote about the interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts that were part of the process of making their life-changing decision. Despite such conflicts, these people did eventually decide on a course of action. For those people who appeared happy with life and with their decision, the primary reasons for their decision seemed to be based on a crystallization of desire.

Limitations and Directions

Granting our earlier claim that retrospective narratives—with all their biases—play an important role in personality and well-being, the susceptibility to memory bias and state-dependent responses still

leaves retrospective narratives open to criticism. An ideal study would involve not only retrospective narratives but also real-time and more objective measures (see Wirtz et al., 2003). Another limitation was the study's correlational nature. The language of interpreting multiple regressions is such that causality often appears to be implied. The variables of the present study are additionally subject to such misinterpretation, as we compared narratives of decisions in the past with well-being in the present. We attempted to make clear that causality was in no way implied in these findings. Certainly, it could be argued that high levels of well-being cause people to tell stories that emphasize a crystallization of desire (as well as to report that one is less neurotic, more outgoing, etc.). A third variable (e.g., cognitive, emotional, social, or biological forces that underlie both types of interpretations) is likely to be at work as well. Of particular interest is the notion of intentional self-development (Brandtstadter et al., 1999), where measures of people's intentions to shape their lives can be compared with what happens to their lives later. For example, does the crystallization of desire lead to actual increases in well-being down the road? Other limitations include the facts that both studies used samples of limited size, involved restricted socioeconomic ranges, and were predominantly female. Finally, participants in narrative research self-select for their personal level of comfort with writing about themselves, an inherent concern for narrative research.

Conclusion

What did these data suggest about the people in these studies? The happier people in this study construed their life-changing decisions as efforts in primarily moving toward a future filled with what they wanted, rather than efforts in escaping what they could not stand in the past. In other words, these people claimed to have arrived at a crystallization of desire rather than a crystallization of discontent. The crystallization of desire also corresponded to less avoidance-oriented thinking in personal strivings, lower Neuroticism (in Study 1 only), and positive appraisals of the decision's outcome (in Study 2). Notably, the relationship between crystallization of desire and well-being was not explained by avoidance strivings or by positivity/negativity biases measured in Extraversion, Neuroticism, and the decision's outcome evaluation. These findings suggest independent

and unique roles that life-changing decisions and narratives play for personality, well-being, and positive personal development.

REFERENCES

Amirkhan, J. H., Risinger, R. T., & Swickert, R. J. (1995). Extraversion: A "hidden" personality factor in coping? *Journal of Personality*, **63**, 189–212.

Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator—mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **51**, 1173–1182.

Bauer, J. J., & Bonanno, G. A. (2001a). Doing and being well (for the most part): Adaptive patterns of narrative self-evaluation during bereavement. *Journal of Personality*, **69**, 451–482.

Bauer, J. J., & Bonanno, G. A. (2001b). I can, I do, I am: The narrative differentiation of self-efficacy and other self-evaluations while adapting to bereavement. *Journal of Research in Personality*, **35**, 424–448.

Bauer, J. J., & McAdams, D. P. (2004a). Growth goals, maturity, and well-being. *Developmental Psychology*, **40**, 114–127.

Bauer, J. J., & McAdams, D. P. (2004b). Personal growth in adults' stories of life transitions. *Journal of Personality*, **72**, 573–602.

Bauer, J. J., McAdams, D. P., & Sakaeda, A. R. (2005). Interpreting the good life: Growth memories in the lives of mature, happy people. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **88**, 203–217.

Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of life*. New York: Guilford Press.

Baumeister, R. F. (1994). The crystallization of discontent in the process of major life changes. In T. F. Heatherton & J. L. Weinberger (Eds.), *Can personality change?* (pp. 281–297). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, **5**, 323–370.

Berzonsky, M. D., & Ferrari, J. R. (1996). Identity orientation and decisional strategies. *Personality and Individual Differences*, **20**, 597–606.

Brandtstadter, J., Wentura, D., & Rothermund, K. (1999). Intentional self-development through adulthood and later life: Tenacious pursuit and flexible adjustment of goals. In J. Brandtstadter & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Action and self-development: Theory and research through the life span* (pp. 37–66). Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage.

Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (2001). Posttraumatic growth: The positive lessons of loss. In R. A. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss* (pp. 157–172). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1999). Themes and issues in the self-regulation of behavior. In R. S. Wyer Jr. (Ed.), *Perspectives on behavioral self-regulation* (pp. 1–105). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larson, R. J., & Griffen, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, **49**, 71–75.

Elliot, A. J., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (1996). Approach and avoidance achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: A mediational analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **70**, 461–475.

Elliot, A. J., & Sheldon, K. M. (1997). Avoidance achievement motivation: A personal goals analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **73**, 171–185.

Elliot, A. J., & Sheldon, K. M. (1998). Avoidance personal goals and the personality-illness relationship. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **75**, 1282–1299.

Elliot, A. J., Sheldon, K. M., & Church, M. A. (1997). Avoidance personal goals and subjective well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **23**, 915–927.

Emmons, R. A. (1986). Personal strivings: An approach to personality and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **51**, 1058–1068.

Emmons, R. A., & King, L. A. (1988). Conflict among personal strivings: Immediate and long-term implications for psychological and physical well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **54**, 1040–1048.

Frankl, V. E. (1946/1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press.

Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). What good are positive emotions? *Review of General Psychology*, **2**, 300–319.

Georgesen, J. C., Harris, M. J., Milich, R., & Young, J. (1999). "Just teasing . . . ": Personality effects on perceptions of life narratives of childhood teasing. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **25**, 1254–1267.

Hart, H. M., McAdams, D. P., Hirsch, B. J., & Bauer, J. J. (2001). Generativity and social involvement among African Americans and White adults. *Journal of Research in Personality*, **35**, 208–230.

Heatherton, T. F., & Nichols, P. A. (1994). Personal accounts of successful versus failed attempts at life change. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **20**, 664–675.

Holland, J. L. (1973). *Making vocational choices: A theory of careers*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Isen, A. (1990). The influence of positive and negative affect on cognitive organization: Some implications for development. In N. L. Stein, B. Leventhal, & T. Trabasso (Eds.), *Psychological and biological approaches to emotion*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

John, O. P., & Srivastava, S. (1999). The big five trait taxonomy: History, measurement, and theoretical perspectives. In L. A. Pervin & O. P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (2nd ed., pp. 102–138). New York: Guilford.

Kahneman, D. (2003). A perspective on judgment and choice: Mapping bounded rationality. *American Psychologist*, **58**, 697–720.

Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1996). Further examining the American dream: Well-being correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **22**, 281–288.

King, L. A., Richards, J. H., & Stemmerich, E. (1998). Daily goals, life goals, and worst fears: Means, ends, and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality*, **66**, 713–744.

King, L. A., Scollon, C. K., Ramsey, C., & Williams, T. (2000). Stories of life transition: Subjective well-being and ego development in parents of children with Down Syndrome. *Journal of Research in Personality*, **34**, 509–536.

Kling, K. C., Ryff, C. D., & Essex, M. J. (1997). Adaptive changes in the self-concept during a life transition. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **23**, 981–990.

Langer, E. J., & Roth, J. (1975). Heads I win, tails it's chance: The illusion of control as a function of the sequence of outcomes in a purely chance task. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **32**, 951–955.

Little, B. R. (1989). Personal projects analysis: Trivial pursuits, magnificent obsessions, and the search for coherence. In D. Buss & N. Cantor (Eds.), *Personality psychology: Recent trends and emerging directions*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Loevinger, J. (1976). *Ego development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Malle, B. F., & Horowitz, L. M. (1995). The puzzle of negative self-views: An explanation using the schema concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **68**, 470–484.

McAdams, D. P. (1993). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York: William Morrow.

McAdams, D. P. (1995). What do we know when we know a person? *Journal of Personality*, **63**, 365–396.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, **5**, 100–122.

McAdams, D. P., Anyidoho, N. A., Brown, C., Huang, Y. T., Kaplan, B., & Machado, M. A. (2004). Traits and stories: Links between dispositional and narrative features of personality. *Journal of Personality*, **72**, 761–784.

McAdams, D. P., Diamond, A., de St. Aubin, E., & Mansfield, E. (1997). Stories of commitment: The psychosocial construction of generative lives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **72**, 678–694.

McAdams, D. P., Reynolds, J., Lewis, M. L., Patten, A., & Bowman, P. T. (2001). When bad things turn good and good things turn bad: Sequences of redemption and contamination in life narrative, and their relation to psychosocial adaptation in midlife adults and in students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **27**, 472–483.

McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T., Jr. (1999). A five-factor theory of personality. In L. A. Pervin & O. P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (2nd ed., pp. 139–153). New York: Guilford.

Moffitt, K. H., & Singer, J. A. (1994). Continuity in the life story: Self-defining memories, affect, and approach/avoidance personal strivings. *Journal of Personality*, **62**, 21–43.

Oleski, D., & Subich, L. M. (1996). Congruence and career change in employed adults. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **49**, 221–229.

Phillips, S. D., Pazienza, N. J., & Ferrin, H. H. (1984). Decision-making styles and problem-solving appraisal. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, **31**, 497–502.

Ross, M. (1989). Relation of implicit theories to the construction of personal histories. *Psychological Review*, **96**, 341–357.

Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **69**, 719–727.

Safer, M. A., Bonanno, G. A., & Field, N. P. (2001). "It was never that bad": Biased recall of grief and long-term adjustment to the death of a spouse. *Memory*, **9**, 195–204.

Schmutte, P. S., & Ryff, C. D. (1997). Personality and well-being: Reexamining methods and meanings. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **73**, 549–559.

Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, **55**, 5–14.

Sheldon, K. M., Kasser, T., Smith, K., & Share, T. (2002). Personal goals and psychological growth: Testing an intervention to enhance goal attainment and personality integration. *Journal of Personality*, **70**, 5–31.

Singer, J. A. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning-making across the adult lifespan: An introduction. *Journal of Personality*, **72**, 437–460.

Singer, J. A., & Salovey, P. (1993). *The remembered self: Emotion and memory in personality*. New York: Free Press.

Stein, N., Folkman, S., Trabasso, T., & Richards, T. A. (1997). Appraisal and goal processes as predictors of psychological well-being in bereaved caregivers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **72**, 872–884.

Stewart, A. J., & Vandewater, E. A. (1999). "If I had it to do over again . . . ": Midlife review, midcourse corrections, and women's well-being in midlife. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **76**, 270–283.

Watson, D., & Clark, L. (1984). Negative affectivity: The disposition to experience aversive emotional states. *Psychological Bulletin*, **94**, 465–490.

Watson, D., & Clark, L. (1997). Extraversion and its positive emotional core. In R. Hogan, J. Johnson, & S. Briggs (Eds.), *Handbook of personality psychology* (pp. 767–793). San Diego: Academic Press.

Wirtz, D., Kruger, J., Scollon, C. N., & Diener, E. (2003). What to do on spring break? The role of predicted, on-line, and remembered experience in future choice. *Psychological Science*, **14**, 520–524.

Zinnbauer, B. J., & Pargament, K. I. (1998). Spiritual conversion: A study of religious change among college students. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, **37**, 161–180.