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What growth sounds like: Redemption, self-improvement, and eudaimonic growth across different life narratives in relation to well-being

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Abstract

Objective: We disentangled three growth-relevant concepts (redemption, self-improvement, and eudaimonic growth) in personal narratives of high, low, and turning points and tested their relations to well-being.

Method: In two studies, participants (Study 1 $n = 111$, Study 2 $n = 206$; overall ages 17–83, 56% women, 75% white) wrote narratives of high points, low points, and turning points. Researchers coded each narrative for *redemption sequences* (i.e., affectively valenced changes in life from bad to good), *self-improvement sequences* (i.e., affectively valenced changes in oneself for the better), and *themes of eudaimonic growth* (i.e., values or motives for cultivating meaningful activities or relationships, helping others, or wisdom). Participants also self-reported well-being.

Results: Redemption sequences in low points predicted higher well-being but in high points predicted lower well-being. Self-improvement sequences and growth themes each predicted higher well-being in each life event (and interacted in high points). Growth themes consistently mediated predicted relations between both redemption and self-improvement sequences and well-being. Findings held when controlling for global narrative affect, self-reported growth motivation, and big-five traits.

Conclusions: Thematic motives for eudaimonic growth were more closely tied to well-being than were affective evaluations of either changes from bad to good (redemption) or one's becoming better (self-improvement).

KEYWORDS
eudaimonic growth, narrative self-identity, redemption, self-improvement

What is personal growth? Is it about one's life changing from bad to good—a matter of redemption? Is it about one's becming better—a matter of self-improvement? Is it about cultivating meaningful activities, relationships, or wisdom—a matter of eudaimonic growth?

People think about their lives in each of these growth-relevant ways. Individuals have been shown to use these growth-relevant concepts to narrate and make sense of the important events in their lives (e.g., Adler, Chin, Kolisetty, & Oltmanns,

2012; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Mansfield, Pasupathi, & McLean, 2015; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001), but often in a manner that confounds redemption, self-improvement, and eudaimonic growth. In the present studies, we differentiate the use of these growth-relevant concepts in personal narratives as they relate to well-being—and then across different life events. This differentiation comes from models of eudaimonic growth and

a good life story (Bauer, 2016), which integrate theories of a good life and of life stories with an emphasis on personal development. We first present the model of a good life story by introducing hedonic and eudaimonic goods in life, narrative tone and narrative theme, and the idea of growth in people's life stories. The sections after that explain, by drawing on the elements of a good life story, how personal narratives convey redemption, self-improvement, and eudaimonic growth.

1 | A GOOD LIFE STORY

Personal growth aims to create a better self and a better life. Theories of a *good life* explain various goods, values, and motives in life but often lack a model of the meaning-making processes through which people identify with those goods, particularly from a developmental perspective (Bauer, 2016; Steger, 2016; Ward & King, 2016). Conversely, theories of *life stories* explain meaning-making processes but often lack a model of the various goods in life around which meaning is constructed (Bauer, King, & Steger, in press). The present studies target the good of eudaimonic growth in life stories. Two basic features in the narrative meaning-making of eudaimonic growth (among others that are beyond the scope of this article—Bauer, 2016) are *affect* and *value*.

1.1 | A good life: hedonic affect as well as eudaimonic value

Theoretical models of a good life split largely into two camps: Hedonic or eudaimonic. Hedonic models emphasize *affect* or pleasure as the primary good in life (Haybron, 2008), whereas eudaimonic models emphasize *value* or meaning as the primary good (notably, virtuous values like care, meaningfulness, self-actualizing growth, or wisdom—Huta & Ryan, 2010; Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Vittersø, 2013, 2016, 2013, 2016). Measures of well-being also split in this way. Hedonic measures of well-being assess a person in terms of exclusively affective valence (i.e., positivity and negativity), without reference to specific contexts of meaning (e.g., subjective well-being as net-positive affect and life satisfaction—Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Eudaimonic measures of well-being also assess satisfaction but *within* contexts of specific values, motives, and meanings that serve to explain why those affective satisfactions are meaningful (e.g., six areas of eudaimonic well-being—Ryff & Singer, 2008).

We use the term "affect" in reference to the targeted phenomena of measures that *only* differentiate degrees of *affective valence of self-expressed satisfactions*. We use the term "value" as an umbrella term in reference to the targeted phenomena of measures that differentiate *types of self-expressed values*, motives, and other sources of meaning (Bauer, 2016; Schwartz, 2015). It is one thing to measure the degree to which one is satisfied, and another to measure the value-laden reasons why. These values and the degrees to which they are affectively satisfied can be measured separately in both narrative and non-narrative research.

1.2 | Life stories: affective tones and value-laden themes

People construct a meaningful self-identity in their life stories (McAdams, 2008). In these stories, people intuitively describe their lives in terms of hedonic affect and value (eudaimonic or otherwise), which researchers can differentiate reliably (e.g., Blagov & Singer, 2004; Philippe, Koestner, Beaulier-Pelletier, & Lecours, 2011). The difference is a matter of narrative tone and narrative theme, respectively. Narrative tone conveys the narrative's positive or negative affect, whereas narrative theme conveys the narrative's orientations of value, motive, and other sources of meaning—i.e., the reasons why an event is meaningful to the narrator (McAdams, 1985). Many narrative studies have differentiated affective evaluations from motivational evaluations (e.g., Blagov & Singer, 2004; McAdams et al., 2006; Sutin & Robins, 2005). For instance, communal motives have been distinguished from their satisfaction or fulfillment (Adler et al., 2012).

In a comprehensive literature review, Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, and Houle (2016) categorize numerous measures of narrative meaning-making. One category includes measures of affective valence, such as positive resolution and happy endings, positive processing, valence, emotional tone ("overall positivity or negativity" [p. 59]), specific emotions ("specific discrete emotions such as happiness, surprise, sadness, fear or anxiety, anger, shame, or guilt" [p. 59], which in each measure were aggregated and reduced to positive or negative affect), and redemption. Each of these measures differentiates *only* degrees of positive and negative affect—and *not types of values* (motives, etc.). While Adler et al. label this category "affective themes," which we argue is better labeled "affective tones," the more important point is that affective measures of narratives are distinct from measures of value, motivation, and other sources of meaning. The Adler et al. category of "motivational themes" (plus some of the measures in their category of "integrative meaning") fall squarely into what we mean by value-laden themes (see Bauer, 2016). We note that measures of narrative structure assess degrees of organizational complexity and coherence (Adler et al., 2016) that are distinct from the affective and thematic content that is organized (Bauer et al., in press; McAdams, 1985), but this distinction is beyond the scope of the present article, which focuses on affective tones and value-laden themes.

In addition to revealing how individuals interpret their lives in terms of affect and value, life stories also reveal how people do so in different kinds of important life events, such as high points, low points, and turning points in life (McAdams, 1993). The meaning-making properties of personal narratives vary from event to event in those properties' consistency, form, and relations to well-being and other personality characteristics (e.g., Habermas & Reese, 2015; McLean, Pasupathi, Greenhoot, & Fivush, 2017). However, few studies have reported relations between either redemption sequences or growth themes and well-being separately for narratives of different life events (Adler et al., 2015; Bauer et al., 2005; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). The present studies are the first to differentiate and compare growth-related properties of affect and value in narratives of different life events in relation to well-being.

1.3 | Growth stories as good life stories

The model of eudaimonic growth (Bauer, 2016; Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008) applies hedonic and eudaimonic principles of a good life to the study of life stories, yielding a model of narrative self-identity (e.g., McAdams, 1993; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007) that is grounded in non-narrative theories of human values, motives, and goods (e.g., self-determination theory in psychology [Deci & Ryan, 2012], and in philosophy, value fulfillment [Tiberius, 2014], meaningfulness [Wolf, 2010], and self-fulfillment [Haybron, 2008]). Where a good life story features personal growth, two broad qualities of self-narration have implications for well-being: *positive affective sequences* and *themes of eudaimonic growth* (Bauer, 2016). Positive affective sequences convey changes toward greater positive affect, whereas growth themes convey a personal value for the cultivation of eudaimonic growth (e.g., for pursuing meaningful activities and relationships, helping others, or wisdom—Bauer & McAdams, 2010). It is one thing to express (and measure) a positive change (i.e., a hedonic change for the better), another to value (and to measure the valuing of) activities that foster eudaimonic growth, and still another to combine them into (measures of) the satisfaction of having grown in eudaimonically meaningful ways.

2 | POSITIVE AFFECTIVE SEQUENCES OF REDEMPTION AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Next we explain how people use positive affective sequences to construct and to convey personal stories of redemption and self-improvement. To start, an affective sequence in a personal narrative is a temporal sequence of positively and/or negatively valenced appraisals (Adler & Poulin, 2009), such

as a redemption sequence (a bad event turns good) or a contamination sequence (a good event turns bad – McAdams et al., 2001). We note that affective sequences can be distinguished from their contexts of value (i.e., from their meanings). A *positive* affective sequence is an affective sequence that ends well, such as redemption or happy endings (e.g., King Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). Positive affective sequences are especially relevant to personal growth. We target two such sequences: Redemption sequences and self-improvement sequences, both of which involve self-perceived changes for the better.

2.1 | Redemption sequences

A redemption sequence is operationally defined as a narrative evaluation of life conditions that change from bad to good (McAdams et al., 2001). Redemption sequences correlate with well-being, particularly amid life's difficulties or potential traumas (Adler & Poulin, 2009; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). The manual for coding redemption sequences in personal narratives includes five categories—sacrifice, recovery, growth, learning, and improvement/other—as examples of types of redemption sequences, but these types of redemption sequences are *not coded as separate categories*. Instead, the coding manual lists examples in these categories as illustrations of what redemption sounds like in a personal narrative. Despite the fact that redemption sequences *may* involve specific values and motives, the measure of redemption sequences does not differentiate those values or motives. The measure of redemption sequences aggregates all values and motives into a single metric of redemption sequences that are defined by changes from negative affect to positive affect (see Method).

Thus the measure of redemption sequences is a hedonic measure of narratives. Here it is important to keep in mind that "hedonic" does not mean "selfish." Hedonia is a philosophical position that pleasure is the ultimate good in life. A hedonic measure (or a hedonic theory) is hedonic not because it assesses selfishness but because it assesses only degrees of affective valence (i.e., pleasurable experience or evaluations of satisfaction—Haybron, 2008). As a counterpoint, it might be argued that a narrator's use of redemption sequences is itself a statement of valuing the cultural ideal of redemption (McAdams, 2013a). However, when people value redemption itself, their doing so equates to the valuing of pleasure—and *not* to the specific, value-laden contexts in which that pleasure gains its particular meanings. These contexts vary for redemption itself, which we explain next.

When a redemption sequence intuitively appears eudaimonic, it does so only by virtue of its association with a eudaimonic theme. Confusion may arise especially in the association between the "redemptive self" (McAdams, 2013a)—as a higher order construct comprised of redemption

sequences—and the eudaimonic theme of Eriksonian (1950/1994) generativity (i.e., concerns for contributing to future generations – McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). However, the relation between redemption *sequences* and themes of generativity is of a correlational, not constitutive, nature (see McAdams & Guo, 2015). Redemption may involve changing from rags to riches (riches being generally a non-eudaimonic value) or from ignorance to enlightenment (generally a eudaimonic value). McAdams (2013a) devotes an entire chapter to explain that a redemption story is not always ethically good, as when it facilitates nationalistic arrogance or religiously inspired discrimination. Redemption sequences may or may not coincide with themes of eudaimonic growth (e.g., generative concern) within the same narrative.[1]

Finally, most research on redemption sequences has reported relations between them and well-being at the molar level, i.e., aggregated across different life events (e.g., McAdams et al., 2001). However, some research has differentiated high, low, and turning points in life, with consistent findings: Redemption sequences in low points relate to well-being, but redemption sequences in neither high points nor turning points are related to well-being (Adler et al., 2015; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008).

2.2 | Self-improvement sequences

Self-improvement involves a desirable change in oneself from one time to another (O'Brien & Kardas, 2017; Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Similarly, Dunlop and Tracy (2013) distinguish *self*-redemption from the more general measure of redemption: Whereas redemption sequences involve *any* significant change in one's life from bad to good, self-redemption involves a change specifically in *one's self-perceived personality (i.e., one's self)* from bad to good. However, unlike a self-redemption sequence, a self-improvement sequence need not start off bad. Instead, the person may view himself or herself as improving from good to better, from bad to good, or from any other starting point to an end point at which the self has become better. Self-improvement may involve becoming stronger, gaining confidence, becoming better able to relate to others, or any other change in one's personal characteristics. These changes may be either eudaimonic or hedonic (or some other set of value orientations – see Sedikides & Hepper, 2009).

How can self-improvement be a positive affective sequence and not a theme, when it involves the self? It does so in the same way that life satisfaction, despite assessing "one's life," is hedonic (Haybron, 2008). If the measure only differentiates degrees of positive or negative valence in self-improvement in general, without reference to a particular type (i.e., value-laden context) of self-improvement, then the measure can at most be assumed to assess hedonic affect (i.e.,

as tone in a narrative measure). If the measure differentiates among values associated with self-improvement (e.g., becoming better at helping others vs. becoming better at defeating others—both of which are forms of self-improvement), then the measure additionally assesses theme (and in the case of "helping others," a eudaimonic/humanistic theme)—a topic to which we turn next.

3 | GROWTH THEMES: THE VALUING OF GROWTH

Redemption and self-improvement sequences in personal narratives convey *whether* events or the self got better, but not *why*. Growth themes convey why. A theme of eudaimonic growth conveys a *value* or *motive* toward *actions* that *facilitate personally meaningful development* (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b, 2010). However, researchers have often confounded two important elements of growth: One's *valuing of growth* and one's *satisfaction with one's having grown*. Measures of growth themes focus on the former—the valuing of growth—or more precisely, the valuing of the *actions that foster* eudaimonic growth (Bauer, 2016; Bauer et al., 2005). Importantly, a redemption or self-improvement sequence in any one narrative may or may not coincide with a theme of eudaimonic growth.

Positive affective sequences measure only positive (i.e., satisfying) change. But when paired with a growth theme, positive affective sequences indicate satisfaction with how the value of growth has panned out in a narrated event. It is probably safe to say that most measures of growth in personal narratives differentiate degrees to which a narrator claims to have grown satisfactorily—i.e., the attainment of growth—and not growth themes as an independent phenomenon of values or motives, thereby confounding the two. Examples include life lessons and insights about the self (McLean, 2005; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004), growth from transgressions (Mansfield et al., 2015), self-transformation and self-growth (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006b), gaining wisdom (Bluck & Glück, 2004), posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), and various forms of self-event connections or heightened degrees of processing that involve exploration, differentiation, perspective-taking, or integrative complexity (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001; Bauer et al., 2005; Blagov & Singer, 2004; Bluck & Glück, 2004; Cox & McAdams, 2014; Graci & Fivush, in press; King & Hicks, 2007; King & Noelle, 2005; King & Smith, 2004; King et al., 2000; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Lilgendahl, Helson, & John, 2013; McAdams et al., 2006; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pals, 2006a; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Philippe et al., 2011; Suedfeld & Bluck, 2016; Weststrate & Glück, 2017; Woike, Lavezzary, & Barsky, 2001). However, many of these

measures do not differentiate the specific value orientation of growth (e.g., hedonic change vs. eudaimonic growth) from the satisfaction or fulfillment of it, even though the coding protocols effectively target values of eudaimonic growth (e.g., life lessons and insights, several forms of self-growth and posttraumatic growth). Then again, some measures do distinguish thematic growth from affective tones of positive changes, for example, differentiating wisdom from its outcome (Bluck & Glueck, 2004) and agentic and communal growth from each other and from outcomes (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2010; Philippe et al., 2011).

Themes of eudaimonic growth distinguish among types of values (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b, 2010 ; Philippe et al., 2011; Philippe, Koestner, Beaulier-Pelletier, Lecours, & Lekes, 2012), notably by applying the values and motives of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to the study of narrative self-identity (McAdams, 1993; McLean et al., 2007). Growth themes are rooted in intrinsic or internally regulated motives (Deci & Ryan, 2000; i.e., "growth motivation" in non-narrative research—Bauer, Park, Montoya, & Wayment, 2015). Such motives aim toward cultivating personally meaningful activities, relationships, helping others (e.g., generative concerns), and wisdom, rather than social status, egoistic self-image, and materialistic gain (see Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996 ; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Importantly, growth themes involve not merely "wanting" such qualities in life in the abstract (e.g., narrative scripts like "I want to grow" or "I'm all about growth") but instead situate specific actions within contexts of eudaimonic, humanistic, and organismic values (Bauer, 2016, e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2010). Narratives convey the enactment of a value (such as eudaimonic growth) by describing the importance of an action in terms of that value. Doing so is empirically distinguishable from associated positive affective sequences that convey that these valued actions turned out for the better (Philippe et al., 2011). Growth themes in narrative research, like growth motives in non-narrative research, have been shown to predict longitudinal increases in well-being and maturity (Bauer & McAdams, 2010; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996, 1993, 1996; Kasser, Koestner, & Lekes, 2002; Philippe et al., 2012; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). Furthermore, in contrast to redemption sequences, growth themes across different life events (high points, low points, etc.) have been shown to hold consistent relations with well-being (Bauer et al., 2005).

4 | HYPOTHESES

We tested how people use redemption sequences, self-improvement sequences, and growth themes in personal narratives, how doing so relates to well-being, and how these relations might vary across narratives of different life events.

While the present studies do not focus on age differences, we note that the present studies include samples of emerging, young, midlife, and older adults.

First, we predicted that people who narrated their important life events with positive affective sequences or with growth themes would have generally higher levels of well-being. Second, we expected some similarities and some differences across different life events in the relations between growth-related narrative variables and well-being. Most research on either redemption sequences or growth themes in relation to well-being has either focused on narratives of a single event or topic of importance in life (e.g., Adler & Poulin, 2009; Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2010 ; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; Philippe et al., 2011) or aggregated different life events into a single score for redemption sequences or growth themes (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; McAdams et al., 2001; McAdams & Guo, 2015). However, some research has reported findings on narratives of individual life events separately in relation to well-being. Based on findings from these latter studies, we expected that redemption sequences in narratives of low points in life, but not high points or turning points, would predict well-being (Adler et al., 2015; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). In contrast, we expected that self-improvement sequences and growth themes would predict well-being across high, low, and turning points, as found previously for growth themes (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005).

Third, we predicted that growth themes would be at least independent of (Philippe et al., 2011)—and possibly explain the relation between—positive affective sequences in predicting well-being, because growth themes reflect more contextualized, meaning-rich construals of selfhood than do merely affective construals. Fourth, we predicted that the interaction of self-improvement sequences and growth themes would predict well-being—i.e., that claiming to attain eudaimonic and humanistic self-improvement would predict especially high levels of well-being. Fifth, we predicted that positive affective sequences and growth themes would predict well-being when controlling for narrative measures of global affect, big-five traits, and a non-narrative measure of growth motivation (defined by the same theoretical principles as narrative growth themes—an especially stringent test of growth themes' incremental validity).

Despite our differentiation of hedonic and eudaimonic measures of narratives, we did not hypothesize differences between narrative measures and hedonic versus eudaimonic measures of well-being. The hedonic and eudaimonic features of narration do not necessarily translate into hypotheses like "positive affective sequences should correspond exclusively to hedonic measures of well-being, whereas growth themes should correspond exclusively to eudaimonic well-being." Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being overlap considerably and are not orthogonal (Sheldon, 2016). Measures of

eudaimonic *motives* predict measures of both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, primarily because eudaimonic motives tap into hedonic enjoyment while adding an element of eudaimonic meaningfulness (notably via the intrinsic motives of self-determination theory – Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008).

5 | STUDY 1

This study measured narratives of high points and low points in the lives of emerging adults and older adults. Each narrative was coded for positive affective sequences, growth themes, and (as control variables) global positive affect and global negative affect. We also measured big-five traits as a control variable. Despite the age differences in the two samples, in the interest of space we do not examine cohort differences in depth (also see Results).

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants

The study involved 111 participants (57% women, 43% men), half in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), half in old age. The 55 emerging adults were college students at a public university in southern Ontario and received course credit for participation. Their M age was 18.7 years, $SD = 1.5$, ranging 17 to 25 years. The 56 older adults were recruited through the same university and received $20 for participation. Their M age was 71.8 years, $SD = 5.2$, ranging 59 to 83 years. Ethnicity percentages for the sample overall were: White (Causasian and European), 56%; Asian (East and Southeast Asian), 27%; Black, 8%; Middle Eastern, 4%; Other, 5%. These data come from a larger study in which data for well-being and global narrative affect were reported earlier (for coding method, see McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). We coded redemption sequences anew, with a different research team, given their central role in our hypotheses.

5.1.2 | Measures

Narrative prompts and coding overview
Each participant was instructed to write two narratives about a high point in life and a low point in life (McAdams, 1993). They were given approximately a page to do so, and most narratives were a paragraph of several sentences. The instructions described high points as "peak experiences" in one's life that involved an experience of a "great uplifting, joy, excitement, contentment, or some other highly positive emotional experience." The instructions described low points as experiences of "negative emotions, such as

despair, disillusionment, terror, profound guilt, shame, etc." For each life event, participants were further instructed to describe what the event was, when it was, where it was, and who was there, plus what one was thinking and feeling, and why the event was significant. Two researchers independently coded each narrative in a dichotomous manner (presence vs. absence) for each of the narrative contents (described below). Examples appear in the Appendix. We also computed aggregate variables by adding the total number of each narrative variable across high and low points, thereby creating continuous-level variables for each aggregate narrative content (for redemption sequences, for self-improvement sequences, and for growth themes). To control for general positivity and negativity of the narratives, each narrative was also coded for global positive affect and global negative affect (for which we used the coded data of McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008, which are reported in that article).

Coding narratives for affective sequences of redemption
Redemption sequences involved a change in a narrative from a bad condition at an earlier time in the narrative to an explicitly good condition at the end point in the narrative (i.e., "Time 1" and "Time 2"), as described in the introduction (see McAdams, 1999). Notably, bad or aversive conditions that were not especially taxing and that were expectable (e.g., being nervous before an important competition) were *not* grounds for redemption (McAdams, 1999).[2] Interrater agreements of the present research team, as measured by the kappa statistic, were 0.88 for high points and 0.79 for low points.

Coding narratives for affective sequences of self-improvement
Narratives were coded for self-improvement sequences according to a coding protocol developed by the first author for this study, based on qualities of self-improvement described earlier (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Self-improvement sequences involved narratives that portrayed the narrator as perceiving his/her abilities or himself/herself as a person as getting better from Time 1 to Time 2 (e.g., "I became more outgoing"). Notably, unlike redemption sequences, self-improvement sequences did not necessarily start off with a bad event. But where they did, the self-improvement sequence involved redemption, coming more specifically in the form of self-redemption sequences (Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). Interrater kappas were 0.71 for high points and 0.82 for low points.

Coding narratives for motivational themes of eudaimonic growth
Narratives were coded for themes of eudaimonic growth if the narrator valued or placed importance on eudaimonic,

humanistic, and organismic values or concerns (Bauer et al., 2005, but with more stringent criteria, as with the goal narratives of Bauer & McAdams, 2010). *Eudaimonic concerns:* Narratives emphasizing eudaimonic concerns described the *specific, meaningful reasons why* an event was important, whereas narratives emphasizing hedonic concerns either simply stated *that* the event was important or otherwise evaluated it in exclusively affective terms of good/positive or bad/negative. *Humanistic concerns:* Narratives with themes of eudaimonic growth emphasized humanistic *experiences* versus egoistic/materialistic *evaluations* (based on Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996 ; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998, 2001). Humanistic experiences emphasized activities, relationships, helping others, or wisdom-related insights as important because they were intrinsically enjoyable, interesting, or meaningful or else were for the developmental benefit of the self or others (e.g., generativity). Egoistic/materialistic evaluations emphasized evaluations of physical appearance, social status, or self-image, without reference to the intrinsically enjoyable experience of those evaluations. Past research has differentiated intellectual/reflective from experiential growth themes, and then agentic from communal forms of both (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2004b, 2010). However, for the purposes of this article, we combined all forms into a single category of "growth themes." *Organismic concerns:* Narratives emphasizing organismic versus static/mechanistic concerns described an event or person or goal in terms of its relation to a process of self-development that is *grounded in specific actions* (rather than statements of merely idealized or abstract desires like "I want to grow"). Theoretically, the organismic perspective of cognitive development frames the person as a self-organizing system whose thoughts are grounded in action and whose development is thus rooted in action (e.g., Goldstein, 1939; Piaget, 1970). Narratives show the grounding of self in actions via, for example, self-event connections (McLean, 2008; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006), causal connections (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006a), or behavioral-characterological integration (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001)—that is, *not just scripted claims* of value but "walking the talk" (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). Interrater kappas were 0.86 for high points and 0.82 for low points.

Psychological well-being
Participants completed the 54-item version of Ryff's well-validated, multidimensional scale of psychological well-being (PWB; Ryff, 1989). PWB is a measure of six dimensions of well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (each of which is a subscale). Participants rate on a 6-point scale the degree to which they agree with 54 items relating to well-being. PWB data from this study were also reported in McLean and Lilgendahl (2008). In the interest of space, only the aggregate mean of the six subscales was used.

Big-five traits
The Big Five Inventory (BFI) is 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 (John & Srivastava, 1999). The prompt reads, "I see myself as someone who…" Sample descriptions include: "can be tense," "is outgoing, sociable," and "is curious about many different things." Items converge on five personality traits: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness.

5.2 | Results

Gender did not relate to any of the variables except that women reported higher levels of neuroticism than men did, $t(110) = 2.87$, $p < 0.01$. Gender did not affect the following findings.

5.2.1 | Descriptive Statistics

The frequencies of narratives coded for the presence of narrative contents were as follows: Redemption sequences (39% of high points, 44% of low points), self-improvement sequences (19% of high points, 15% of low points), and growth themes (34% of high points, 17% of low points). Findings between age-group samples did not differ from the overall pattern. Descriptive statistics for PWB: $M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.70$, ranging from 2.15 to 5.79. Older adults ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.55$) reported higher levels of PWB than did emerging adults ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.76$), $t(101) = 3.16$, $p < 0.01$. In the interest of space, we present below the findings that combine the emerging-adult and older-adult samples, noting that age group did not affect the following results.

5.2.2 | Bivariate relations between narratives and well-being

Redemption sequences
Aggregated redemption sequences did not correlate with PWB, $r = -0.03$, $p > 0.10$. However, this null result is most likely due to the fact that participants who used redemption sequences in high points ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.74$) reported *lower* levels of PWB than those who did not ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.65$), $t(97) = -2.48$, $p < 0.05$, whereas participants who used redemption sequences in low points ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.60$) reported *higher* levels of PWB than those who did not ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.71$), $t(99) = 2.04$, $p < 0.05$, thereby revealing a neutralizing of opposite-direction findings for redemption sequences in high versus low points. Stepping
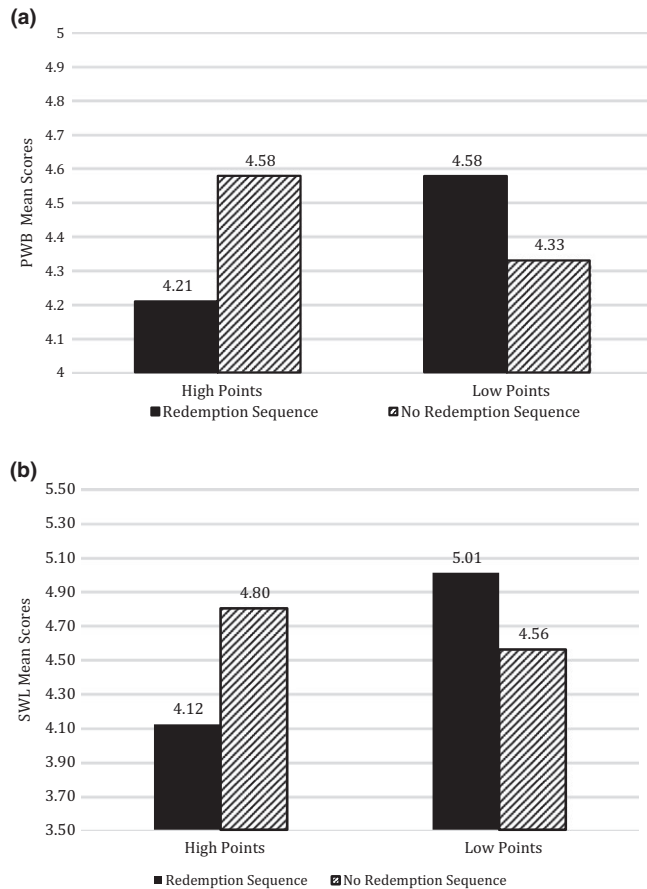
FIGURE 1 (a) Study 1: The interaction of redemption sequences and type of life event in predicting psychological well-being, (b) Study 2: The interaction of redemption sequences and type of life event in predicting life satisfaction

beyond bivariate relations, an ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of life event (high vs. low point) by redemption sequence (presence vs. absence), $F(1, 204) = 10.16$, $p < 0.01$ (means reported in Figure 1a). After observing this unexpected finding, we wondered whether some people (such as extraverts or those prone toward positive self-presentation) would interpret the task of telling about a high point as an event that *should* be told as thoroughly positive (i.e., with no negativity, even if things turned out well in the end). We report these findings in the section on traits, below.

Self-improvement sequences
Aggregated self-improvement sequences correlated with PWB, $r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$. Participants who used self-improvement sequences in high points ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.83$) reported higher levels of PWB than those who did not ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.65$), $t(97) = 2.21$, $p < 0.05$. Participants who used self-improvement sequences in low points ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 0.55$) reported higher levels of PWB than those who did not ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.65$), $t(99) = 3.15$, $p < 0.01$.

Growth themes
Aggregated growth themes correlated with PWB, $r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$. Participants who used growth themes in high points ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.49$) reported higher levels of PWB than those who did not ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.71$), $t(97) = 4.85$, $p < 0.001$. Participants who used growth themes in low points ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 0.48$) reported higher levels of PWB than those who did not ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(99) = 3.71$, $p < 0.001$.

5.2.3 | Regressions of well-being on positive affective sequences and growth themes

Next we tested whether positive affective sequences and growth themes predicted PWB independently by a series of multiple regressions of PWB on narrative contents that held bivariate relations with PWB. Verbosity (word count) did not affect the following results. Aggregated growth themes continued to predict PWB, but aggregated self-improvement sequences no longer did (see Table 1). To test mediation in this study (and Study 2), we used the model of Baron and Kenny (1986), which involves more stringent criteria for mediation than does the currently and widely used model of Preacher & Hayes (2004). Furthermore, we used the Sobel statistic to

TABLE 1 Study 1: Multiple regressions of PWB on relevant models of competing narrative contents

Models	B	SE	β
Aggregated across life events			
Self-improvement sequences	0.06	0.14	0.04
Growth themes	0.52	0.12	0.49***
High points			
Redemption sequences	−0.14	0.07	−0.19*
Growth themes	0.30	0.07	0.42***
Self-improvement sequences	−0.07	0.09	−0.08
Growth themes	0.47	0.09	0.42***
Self-improvement sequences X growth themes	0.26	0.09	0.32**
Low points			
Redemption sequences	0.09	0.07	0.12
Growth themes	0.29	0.09	0.32***
Self-improvement sequences	0.32	0.15	0.16
Growth themes	0.48	0.20	0.26*

Note. Each model involves a simultaneous regression.
*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

infer nontrivial mediation effects, which is appropriate for dichotomous mediators, provided the use of a logistical regression of the potential mediator variable on the predictor variable (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Brown, Want, & Hoffman, 2007).

High points

Redemption sequences (inversely) and growth themes continued to predict PWB (see Table 1). Growth themes but not self-improvement sequences continued to predict PWB, reflecting a mediating effect (self-improvement sequences' β dropped from 0.22 to 0.05, Sobel test = 3.84, p <0.001). In other words, self-improvement's relation to well-being was explained by growth themes. As predicted, the interaction of self-improvement sequences and growth themes was significant (see also Figure 2a), suggesting that participants who narrated their high points with self-improvement sequences had especially high levels of well-being when the self-improvement in question dealt with values for personally meaningful activities, relationships, and wisdom rather than for social status, appearances, and self-image.

Low points

Growth themes continued to predict PWB, whereas low-point redemption sequences no longer did (see Table 1), reflecting a mediating effect (redemption sequences' β dropping from
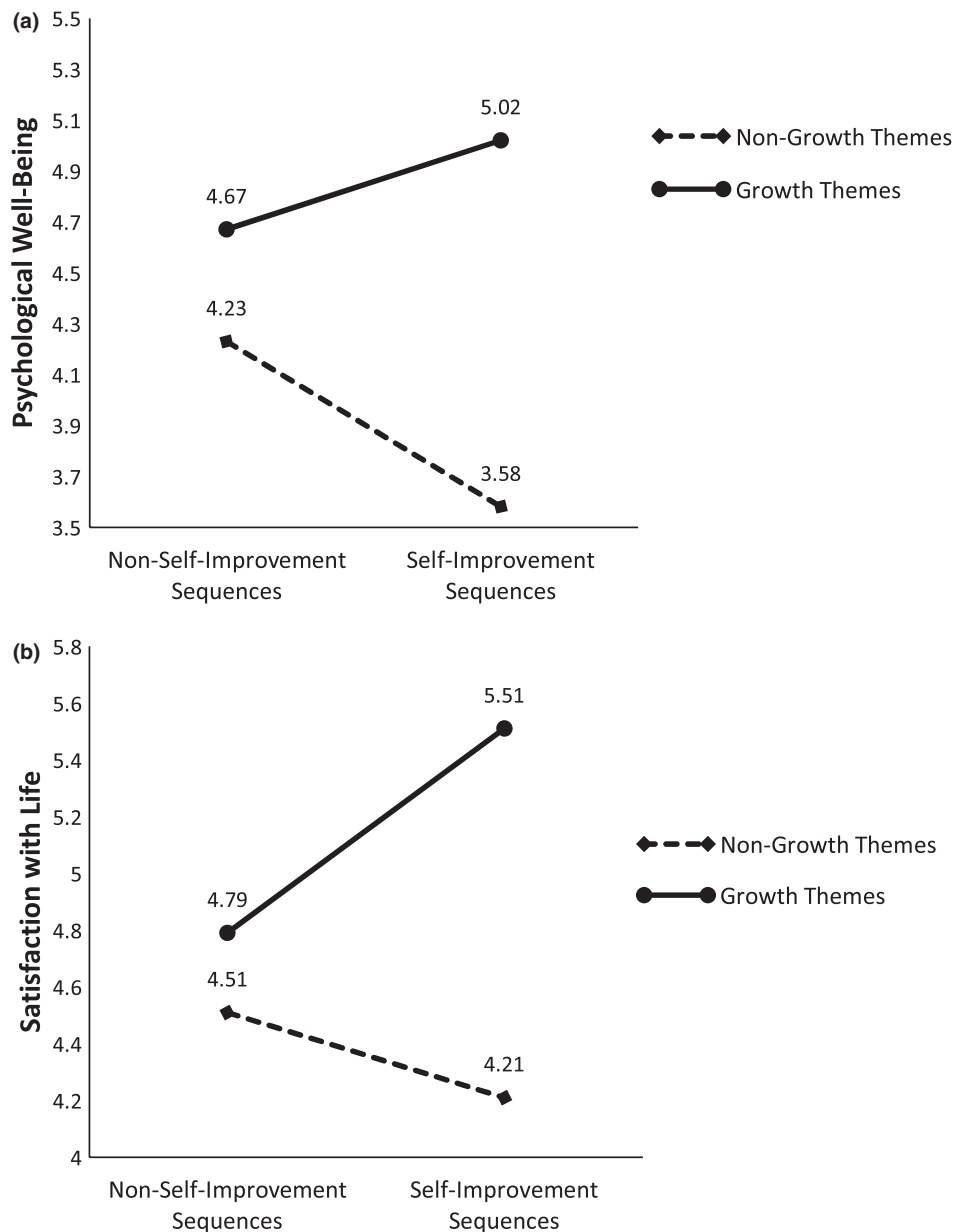

FIGURE 2 (a) Study 1: The attainment of eudaimonic growth interaction as the interaction of self-improvement sequences and growth themes in high points in predicting psychological well-being, (b) Study 2: The attainment of eudaimonic growth interaction as the interaction of self-improvement sequences and growth themes in high points in predicting life satisfaction

0.20 to 0.12, Sobel test = 3.35, p <0.01). Growth themes but not self-improvement sequences continued to predict PWB, reflecting a mediating effect (self-improvement sequences' β dropped from 0.30 to 0.16, Sobel test = 3.36, p <0.001). In other words, growth themes explained the relations between well-being and both redemption sequences and self-redemption sequences. Contrary to predictions, the interaction of self-improvement sequences and growth themes was not significant for low points.

5.2.4 | Controlling for global affect in narratives

Growth themes in high points related to positive affect in high points, $t(104) = 2.02$, p <0.05, and inversely to negative affect in high points, $t(104) = -1.99$, p <0.05. No other narrative variable related to global affectivity in the same narrative. Global affectivity in narratives related to PWB in only two ways: Positive affectivity in high points (but not low points) correlated with PWB, $r = 0.36$, p <0.001, whereas negative affectivity in low points (but not high points) correlated inversely with PWB, $r = -0.38$, p <0.001. So the only potential confound between global affectivity and growth-relevant narrative contents involved positive affectivity and growth themes in high points. In a multiple regression, both high-point growth themes, $B = 0.56$, $SE = 0.13$, $\beta = 0.39$, p <0.001, and high-point positive affect, $B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.28$, p <0.01, continued to predict PWB. All other relations between narrative contents and PWB held when controlling for global affectivity in narratives. Thus, positive affective sequences and growth themes held relations to well-being that were independent of global affect in those same narratives.

5.2.5 | Controlling for big-five traits

In the interest of space, we report only tests between traits and the aggregated narrative variables in predicting PWB. In each case of a bivariate relation between traits and narrative variables, the aggregated narrative variable continued to predict PWB when controlling for traits, which also continued to predict PWB (see Table 2). In other words, aggregated positive affective sequences and aggregated growth themes were each independent of traits in predicting PWB—notably, despite strong bivariate relations between PWB and the traits of neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness—further supporting the incremental validity of narratives (Adler et al., 2016).

To explore possible reasons for the inverse relation between high-point redemption sequences and well-being, we found that high-point redemption sequences correlated with extraversion, inversely, $r = -0.22$, p <0.05 (but with no other trait). In a multiple regression, extraversion predicted PWB, $B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.01$, $\beta = 0.55$, p <0.001, but high-point redemption sequences no longer did, $B = -0.16$, $SE = 0.12$,

TABLE 2 Study 1: Multiple regressions of PWB on relevant models of narrative contents and big-five traits

Models of traits and aggregated narratives	B	SE	β
Neuroticism	−0.06	0.01	−0.62***
Agg. growth themes	0.28	0.08	0.26***
Extraversion	0.05	0.01	0.52***
Agg. self-improve. seq.	0.24	0.11	0.19*
Extraversion	0.05	0.01	0.48***
Agg. growth themes	0.44	0.08	0.41***
Openness	0.03	0.01	0.24*
Agg. self-improve. seq.	0.37	0.12	0.29**
Openness	0.02	0.01	0.20*
Agg. growth themes	0.51	0.09	0.48***
Conscientiousness	0.06	0.01	0.56***
Agg. self-improve. seq.	0.24	0.10	0.19*
Conscientiousness	0.06	0.01	0.51***
Agg. growth themes	0.39	0.08	0.36***

Note. Each model involves a simultaneous regression. Among the possible iterations of models of traits and narrative contents, those listed in the table involve traits and narrative contents that held bivariate relations.
*p <0.05. **p <0.01. ***p <0.001.

$\beta = -0.11$, p >0.10, reflecting a mediating effect (redemption sequences' β dropped from 0.24 to 0.11, Sobel test = 2.09, p <0.05). Thus extraversion explained the inverse relation between high-point redemption sequences and PWB.

5.3 | Discussion

First, we found that redemption sequences in low points predicted higher levels of well-being, but redemption sequences in high points predicted lower levels of well-being. It is important to note that redemption sequences have a well established tie to well-being, but only when aggregated across many life events or when looking specifically at low point events or in clinical samples (Adler et al., 2015; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; McAdams et al., 2001). We note that our base rates for redemption sequences were higher than in the previous study with this dataset (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008; cf. Study 2), perhaps because we did not use the growth-themed "bonus points," which we viewed as a confound (see end note #2). Furthermore, previous studies that have analyzed narratives of high points separately from other life events have found no relation between high-point redemption sequences and well-being (a non-significant correlation of −0.10 in Adler et al., 2015; non-significant statistics were not reported in McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). The present study is the first to show an inverse, significant relation, so replication is especially important (see Study 2). Notably, we found that

trait extraversion statistically explained the inverse relation between high-point redemption and well-being. As for low-point narratives, growth themes explained the relation between redemption sequences and well-being. In other words, affective changes for the better in low points no longer predicted well-being when considering the statistical effects of valuing eudaimonic growth in life's low points.

Second, we found that self-improvement sequences and growth themes—each whether in high or low points—predicted higher levels of well-being. However, we found that growth themes explained relations between self-improvement sequences and well-being. We had expected that, if any narrative variable mediated the others, then growth themes would mediate positive affective sequences, because growth themes are how people convey what is valued and meaningful about their life events, whereas positive affective sequences merely state that those events change from bad to good. However, in addition to the significant mediation, the interaction of self-improvement sequences and growth themes in high points, but not in low points, predicted higher levels of well-being. In other words, participants whose positive changes in themselves involved eudaimonic growth—i.e., those who claimed to have attained eudaimonic growth—had especially high levels of well-being.

Third, we found that positive affective sequences and growth themes predicted well-being when controlling for global affect in the same narratives and when controlling for big-five traits. Overall, the findings in Study 1 tease apart growth-oriented features of narrative tone and narrative theme, suggesting that value-based growth themes held stronger ties to well-being than did positive changes in affect.

6 | STUDY 2

In Study 2 we looked to replicate and expand upon the key findings of Study 1. Again we measured redemption sequences, self-improvement sequences, and growth themes in the narratives of high and low points in life, but in Study 2 we included narratives of a turning point in life, an event that has particular salience to the topic of personal change and development. Turning-point narratives require the individual to think about change, think about life's difficulties or triumphs or both, and to engage in meaning-making processes that allow for identity coherence (or lack of it) before and after a major life event (Habermas & Reese, 2015). Furthermore, turning points help tease apart growth-related interpretations of major life changes as involving developmental opportunities versus mere change (Bauer et al., 2005). For Study 2 we recruited samples of emerging adults (as in Study 1) as well as young and midlife adults. In addition, participants also took a self-report measure of growth motivation, thereby providing an especially stringent test of narrative versus

non-narrative motives for eudaimonic growth. Satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffen, 1985) was assessed instead of PWB as a different measure of well-being, even though the hypotheses work the same for both measures of well-being.

6.1 | Method

6.1.1 | Participants

The sample of emerging adults came from a mid-sized, Midwestern university, included 145 participants (55% women; $M_{age} = 18.9$ years, $SD_{age} = 0.93$, range$_{age} = 18$–22). Students received course credit for participation. The adult sample was recruited in a Midwestern city through a local newspaper, included 61 participants (69% women; $M_{age} = 38.0$ years, $SD_{age} = 10.18$, range$_{age}$ 21–60, which is to say, mostly in young adulthood and middle age), who had $M = \$47,000$/year in household income ($SD = \$26,000$) and who received $40 for participating.

6.1.2 | Measures

Narrative prompts and coding
Each participant was asked to write three narratives of approximately one page each about high and low points in life (as in Study 1), plus a turning point in life (McAdams, 1993). The instructions described turning points as life "episodes through which a person undergoes substantial change," which might be in relationships, in one's work life, in personal interests, or any other domain of life. Participants were told, "We are especially interested in a turning point *in your understanding of yourself*," and were asked to consider concerns of who, what, where, when, and why the even was significant.

As in Study 1, we coded each narrative for redemption sequences, self-improvement sequences, and growth themes. Interrater reliabilities with the kappa statistic were: high-point redemption sequences, 0.77; low-point redemption sequences, 0.78; turning-point redemption sequences, 0.80; high-point self-improvement sequences, 0.81; low-point self-improvement sequences, 0.92; turning-point self-improvement sequences, 0.75; high-point growth themes, 0.81; low-point growth themes, 0.70; turning-point growth themes, 0.77.

Satisfaction with life
Participants completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWL; Diener et al., 1985). SWL is a well-validated, simple, five-item measure of overall life satisfaction. Items include "I am satisfied with my life" and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Items are rated on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Growth motivation (self-report, non-narrative)

The Growth Motivation Index (GMI – Bauer et al., 2015) measures the degree to which people claim to be motivated by eudaimonic growth, which is defined as in growth themes, except here in an explicit self-report measure rather than in an implicit and researcher-coded measure of personal narratives. Again, eudaimonic growth focuses on activities that facilitate meaningful experiences versus evaluations of social status and self-image. The GMI asks participants to rate on 7-point Likert-type scale how often they do particular activities for particular reasons of growth (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*). Sample items are "I make sure to do things in everyday life that are personally enjoyable, interesting, or engaging, rather than things that simply make me look good to others" and "The important activities in my life are activities that involve the people I love." For the student sample, we used the 8-item GMI (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81). For the adult sample, we used an earlier, 6-item version of the GMI (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). To compare the two versions of the GMI, we converted GMI scores to z-scores.

6.2 | Results

Gender did not correlate with any of the narrative variables in either sample.

6.2.1 | Descriptive statistics

The frequencies of narratives coded for the presence of narrative contents were as follows: Redemption sequences (15% of high points, 31% of low points, 41% of turning points), self-improvement sequences (21% of high points, 25% of low points, 31% of turning points), and growth themes (36% of high points, 36% of low points, 37% of turning points). Findings between age-group samples did not differ from the overall pattern. For SWL, participants overall scored $M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.35$, ranging from 1.00 to 7.00. Emerging adults, $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.15$, reported higher levels of SWL than did young-to-midlife adults, $M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.68$, $t(208) = 3.28$, $p <0.001$. In the interest of space, we present below the findings that combine the two samples, noting that age did not affect the following results.

6.2.2 | Bivariate relations between narratives and well-being

Redemption sequences

Aggregated redemption sequences did not correlate with SWL, $r = 0.02$, $p>0.10$. However, this null result owed to the fact that participants who used redemption sequences in high points ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.64$) reported *lower* levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(202) = -2.74$, $p <0.01$, whereas participants who used redemption

sequences in low points ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.18$) reported *higher* levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.41$), $t(200) = 2.20$, $p <0.05$. As in Study 1, an ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of life event by redemption sequence, $F(1, 416) = 11.96$, $p <0.001$ (means reported in Figure 1b). Thus, Study 2 replicated Study 1's novel finding for redemption sequences in high points. Redemption sequences in turning points did not predict SWL ($p>0.10$).

Self-improvement sequences

Aggregated self-improvement sequences correlated with SWL, $r = 0.27$, $p <0.001$. Participants who used self-improvement sequences in high points ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.05$) reported higher levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(202) = 2.60$, $p <0.01$. Participants who used self-improvement sequences in low points ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.09$) reported higher levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.41$), $t(200) = 2.29$, $p <0.05$. Participants who used self-improvement sequences in turning points ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.20$) reported higher levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(196) = 2.92$, $p <0.01$.

Growth themes

Aggregated growth themes correlated with SWL, $r = 0.43$, $p <0.001$. Participants who used growth themes in high points ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.33$) reported higher levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(202) = 3.22$, $p <0.001$. Participants who used growth themes in low points ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.12$) reported higher levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(200) = 4.32$, $p <0.001$. Participants who used growth themes in turning points ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.18$) reported higher levels of SWL than those who did not ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(196) = 4.92$, $p <0.001$.

6.2.3 | Regressions of well-being on positive affective sequences and growth themes

Next we tested whether positive affective sequences and growth themes predicted SWL independently by a series of multiple regressions of SWL on narrative contents that held bivariate relations with SWL. Verbosity (word count) did not affect the following results. Aggregated growth themes continued to predict SWL, but aggregated self-improvement sequences no longer did (see Table 3).

High points

High-point redemption sequences and high-point growth themes predicted SWL independently (see Table 3). High-point growth themes but not self-improvement sequences predicted SWL, reflecting a mediating effect (self-improvement sequences' β dropped from 0.18 to 0.11, Sobel test = 2.98, $p <0.01$). As in Study 1, the predicted interaction

TABLE 3 Study 2: Multiple regressions of SWL on relevant models of competing narrative contents and growth motivation

Models	SWL		
	B	**SE**	**β**
Aggregated across life events			
Self-improvement sequences	0.12	0.10	0.09
Growth themes	0.51	0.10	0.38***
High points			
Redemption sequences	−0.37	0.12	−0.21**
Growth themes	0.33	0.09	0.24***
Self-improvement sequences	0.10	0.13	0.06
Growth themes	0.40	0.13	0.28**
Self-improvement sequences X growth themes	0.26	0.13	0.17*
Low points			
Redemption sequences	0.10	0.10	0.07
Growth themes	0.38	0.10	0.27***
Self-improvement sequences	−0.03	0.13	−0.02
Growth themes	0.54	0.12	0.30***
Turning points			
Self-improvement sequences	0.12	0.11	0.08
Growth themes	0.41	0.10	0.29***
Narrative v. non-narrative growth motives			
Growth Motivation Index	0.24	0.09	0.18**
Aggregated growth themes	0.51	0.09	0.37***
Growth Motivation Index	0.33	0.09	0.24***
High-point growth themes	0.46	0.19	0.16*
Growth Motivation Index	0.31	0.09	0.22***
Turning-point growth themes	0.82	0.19	0.29***

Note. Each model involves a simultaneous regression. SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale.
$^*p < 0.05.$ $^{**}p < 0.01.$ $^{***}p < 0.001.$

of self-improvement sequences and growth themes was significant (see Figure 2b).

Low points
Low-point growth themes but not low-point redemption sequences continued to predict SWL (see Table 3), reflecting a mediating effect (redemption sequences' β dropped from 0.15 to 0.07, Sobel test = 3.25, $p < 0.001$). Low-point growth

themes but not low-point self-improvement sequences continued to predict SWL, reflecting a mediating effect (self-improvement sequences' β dropped from 0.16 to −0.02, Sobel test = 4.05, $p < 0.001$). The predicted interaction was not significant, just as in Study 1. Overall, in low points, growth themes explained the bivariate relations between SWL and both redemption sequences and self-improvement sequences.

Turning points
Turning-point growth themes but not turning-point self-improvement sequences continued to predict SWL (see Table 3), reflecting a mediating effect (self-improvement sequences' β dropped from 0.17 to 0.06, Sobel test = 3.52, $p < 0.001$). The interaction was not significant. Thus in turning points themes of eudaimonic growth outweighed merely positive hedonic change in predicting well-being (see also Bauer et al., 2005).

6.2.4 | Growth themes, growth motivation, and well-being

Bivariate relations
Among narrative variables, only growth themes predicted GMI. Aggregate growth themes correlated with GMI, $r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$. Participants who used growth themes in high points ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.92$) reported higher levels of GMI than those who did not ($M = −0.16$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(202) = 3.31$, $p < 0.001$. Participants who used growth themes in turning points ($M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.98$) reported higher levels of GMI than those who did not ($M = −0.12$, $SD = 1.99$), $t(196) = 2.30$, $p < 0.05$. Neither redemption sequences nor self-improvement sequences in any life event predicted GMI. Neither did growth themes in low points. GMI correlated with SWL, $r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$.

Regressions of well-being
In the three regression models that were relevant (based on bivariate relations), growth themes and GMI each predicted SWL independently (see Table 3). In other words, people's explicit reports of how much they were motivated by the idea of growth correlated moderately (at most) with their implicit use of those same motives in their personal narratives. Yet these explicit and implicit measures of growth motives explained different portions of the variance in those people's levels of well-being. This was an especially stringent test of differences between narrative and self-report measures, since growth themes and GMI were both defined in terms of the same principles of eudaimonic growth.

6.3 | Discussion

Study 2 replicated Study 1 in a four main ways. First, redemption sequences in low points predicted higher levels of well-being but in high points predicted lower levels of well-being.

Second, self-improvement sequences and growth themes—in both high and low points, as well as in turning points—predicted well-being. Third, growth themes mediated all predicted relations between positive affective sequences and well-being. Fourth, self-improvement sequences and growth themes interacted in high points, but not in other life events, to predict well-being, such that participants whose positive changes in themselves involved eudaimonic growth had especially high levels of well-being.

Study 2 also included narratives of turning points in life, in which self-improvement sequences and growth themes, but not redemption sequences, predicted higher levels of well-being. The null finding for turning-point redemption sequences replicated a study that found a nonsignificant correlation of −0.15 between turning-point redemption sequences and well-being (Adler et al., 2015) and another study that found a nonsignificant correlation of −0.02 between redemption-related affective sequences and self-esteem (Nelson et al., 2012). One study that measured turning-point narratives of Taiwanese women reported that redemption sequences versus contamination sequences (a ratio of sequences in which bad turns good vs. good turns bad) held a significant correlation with well-being (Liao, Bluck, & Cheng, 2015), but as these authors noted, this finding did not reflect the use of redemption sequences alone, as the other studies have done. As for self-improvement sequences in turning points, because the interaction with growth themes was not significant, we concluded that participants who reported high levels of well-being narrated their turning points not merely as a change in life (which is what the turning-point event is about) but rather either as a positive change *in oneself* or as involving personally meaningful activities and relationships. As for the relation between turning-point growth themes and well-being, the present findings support past findings (Bauer et al., 2005; using self-esteem in lieu of well-being, Nelson et al., 2012), even in emerging adulthood. However, we note that studies of adolescents' turning points have shown an inverse relation between meaning-making and well-being (Habermas & Reese, 2015).

Finally, researcher-coded growth themes in personal narratives were related to self-reported growth motivation, but the two predicted well-being independently, suggesting that narrative growth themes' relation to well-being is not merely a matter of claiming in the abstract to be motivated by eudaimonic growth but rather is a matter of interpreting the important, concrete actions in one's life in terms of the theoretical mechanisms of eudaimonic growth.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In these studies of personal narratives, we found overall that themes of eudaimonic growth held closer ties to well-being than did positive affective sequences of redemption and self-improvement. Redemption sequences in low points predicted higher levels in well-being but in low points predicted lower levels of well-being (and in turning points held no relation to well-being). In contrast, self-improvement sequences and growth themes each predicted well-being across high, low, and turning points. Wherever positive affective sequences predicted well-being in an expected manner, growth themes explained those relations. Finally, growth-relevant narratives continued to predict well-being when controlling global narrative affect, big-five traits, and non-narrative growth motivation. We note the correlational nature of these data—that the relations between narratives and well-being are of a predictive, not causal, nature. These findings support a claim of the model of eudaimonic growth (Bauer, 2016) that well-being has more to do with the eudaimonic value orientation of one's self-identity than with its hedonic affect.

7.1 | Redemption sequences, growth themes, and well-being

Participants who narrated their life's *low* points with redemption sequences reported higher levels of well-being, as expected. Redemption sequences in low points seem to reflect a buoyant or resilient approach to difficult life events (McAdams, 2013b), a form of identity-reconstructive processing (Adler & Poulin, 2006; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013), and effortful processing of recovery that enables one to make good things happen or to see light at the end of the tunnel (e.g., Banks & Salmon, 2013; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; King & Miner, 2000; Lilgendahl, 2014; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). However, we found that low-point redemption's relation to well-being owed more to redemption's tie to themes of eudaimonic growth than to its constitutive evaluations of affectively getting better. Eudaimonic, humanistic valuing taps into a deeper feature of self-identity than does hedonic gain (Bauer, 2016; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996 ; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001).

However, the difference between low points and high points as a situational context (Bauer et al., 2005; Cox & McAdams, 2014; Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013; Lilgendahl, 2014) was stronger than expected for redemption sequences. Redemption sequences in *high* points have previously shown *no* relation to well-being (Adler et al., 2015; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008), but in two studies we found that participants with redemption sequences in high points reported *lower* levels of well-being. This finding is difficult to explain theoretically—as are the previous, null findings. Intuitively speaking, perhaps happy people (i.e., those reporting high levels of well-being) are less likely to mention negative emotionality (even if it turns positive) when asked to describe a pleasurable event. We found that happy people told happy stories: Low points ended well, and high points started and ended well. Plus, extraverts, who are prone toward positivity (John & Srivastava, 1999), were less likely

than introverts to narrate their high points with redemption sequences, which explained the relation between high-point redemption sequences and lower well-being. Based on research to this point, redemption sequences in high points have either no relation or an inverse relation to well-being—the latter of which can be explained by trait extraversion.

While the present findings might seem to suggest that redemption sequences in high points are undesirable, or that redemption sequences in low points do not matter as much as growth themes, we note that, when research participants were given the option to write about either positive or negative life events, redemption sequences and growth themes predicted well-being independently (Philippe et al., 2011). Furthermore, the present studies involved samples that were *not* recruited for currently experiencing difficult events (c.f. Adler & Poulin, 2009; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). We expect that redemption sequences would predict well-being independently of growth themes during times of loss and potential trauma, that is, in times when simply getting better (i.e., recovering – Bonanno, 2004) is extremely important in itself, regardless of themes.

7.2 | Self-improvement sequences, growth themes, and well-being

Self-improvement sequences were found to predict well-being in life's high points, low points, and turning points. However, in each event in both studies, growth themes statistically explained the relation between self-improvement sequences and well-being. Again, the valuing of eudaimonic growth was more closely tied to well-being than was the affective evaluation of becoming better. In the introduction we noted that, for a narrative to convey (a) the *attainment* of (b) *intrinsically meaningful (not status/image-oriented) growth*, this narrative would need *both* a self-improvement sequence (to express the perception of hedonic self-improvement – Sedikides & Hepper, 2009) and a growth theme (to express that improvement's eudaimonic, humanistic, and organismic value orientation – Bauer, 2016). Indeed we found such an interaction in both studies, but only for narratives of high points. Participants who narrated their high points with self-improvement sequences were especially likely to report high levels of well-being if they framed that self-improvement in terms of personally meaningful activities or relationships, helping others, or wise insights rather than social status, appearances, and seeking approval.

7.3 | A stringent test of incremental validity

While the uniqueness of narratives within the personological system has been well established in research (Adler et al., 2016), it is important that narrative measures continue to demonstrate incremental validity. Overall, we found that positive affective sequences and growth themes were not mere byproducts of global narrative affect, traits, or self-reported

growth motives. Study 2 provided an especially rigorous test: The measures of narrative growth themes and the self-report GMI scale were both designed by the first author and colleagues to measure motives for eudaimonic growth both implicitly in researcher-coded narratives and explicitly in a self-report questionnaire (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer et al., 2015). Generally speaking, explicit and implicit measures of personal motives have been shown to have little relation (e.g., McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Schultheiss, Yankova, Dirlikov, & Schad, 2009), unless the measures are carefully matched in content (Thrash, Elliot, & Schultheiss, 2007), as is the case here. Why might growth narratives predict well-being independently of GMI? We suspect that self-reported growth motivation reflected an *abstract, decontextualized* construal of one's growth motives, whereas researcher-coded, narrative themes of growth reflected *concrete, contextualized* construals of one's growth motives.

7.4 | Conclusion

It is one thing for one's life to change from bad to good (redemption) or for one to become better (self-improvement), but it is another to focus, even amid life's difficulties, on those activities and relationships that one would want in life if one were not so consumed by one's difficulties (i.e., a growth vs. safety orientation – Maslow, 1968). Using narrative methods, we disentangled how people use growth-relevant ideas simultaneously when thinking about the *same* major life event—and then to see the relation among these disentangled ideas and other facets of personality like well-being, traits, and non-narrative growth motivation. In the present studies, we found that perceptions of positive change in one's life were not as indicative of well-being as the valuing of eudaimonic growth, that is, wanting to cultivate personally meaningful activities or relationships, helping others, or wisdom.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ENDNOTES

[1] Our main point is to demonstrate that redemption sequences measure changes in affect, not value or motivation. Some confusion in the field may result from the fact that redemption sequences have been framed in terms of themes and other narrative elements. In the seminal article on redemption sequences (McAdams et al., 2008), the term "redemption imagery" is used, but the rationale for the term "imagery" is not explained (although on imagery see McAdams, 2006). Recently McAdams and Guo (2015) have used the term "theme" to categorize redemption sequences and four other "themes of redemption" like one's having an early advantage in life, a sensitivity to suffering, moral steadfastness, and prosocial goals. However, those four other themes are themes in the value-laden sense, as they involve concerns for more than just pain (noting that even sensitivity to suffering plays out as a moral, not merely pleasurable, theme). We note also that those same four themes and redemption sequences have previously been categorized together as elements of a "commitment story" (e.g., McAdams, 2013a; McAdams et al., 1989). We argue in favor of McAdams's (1985, 1993) earlier distinction between narrative tones and themes in terms of affective/emotional valence and values/motives, respectively. Drawing on that model, and by considering in the vast amount of work differentiating hedonia/affect/satisfaction/pleasure and eudaimonia/value/motivation/meaning, we argue that redemption sequences are not only exclusively about affect but also are best categorized as narrative tone. The fact that they involve affect *over time* does not change the hedonic focus, as time is value-neutral.

[2] The coding protocol for redemption sequences awards "bonus points" for redemption sequences that involve growth-related themes of "enhanced agency," "enhanced communion," and "ultimate concerns." While these themes can possibly be scored separately, most research does not differentiate them (e.g., Adler et al., 2000; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2012), instead following the protocol guidelines to tally a total score for redemption, thereby yielding a single score that does not differentiate redemption sequences that do or do not accompany growth-related themes. Indeed, in McAdams et al. (2008), the range of redemption scores, *when added across eight life-story episodes*, was 0 to 11, $M = 2.92$, and $SD = 2.88$, suggesting that most redemption sequences do not involve themes of enhanced agency, enhanced communion, or ultimate concerns. Thus, the coding of a redemption sequence does not require the coding of a theme. (Regardless of whether redemption sequences are called "themes," neither the coding protocol—nor any extant article using the term "themes"—provides a rationale for the label of redemption sequences as "themes.") What is necessary, however, is that a redemption sequence involve a change in affect from bad to good. In the present studies, we coded redemption sequences without the bonus points, and growth themes were coded separately (on the difference between agentic and communal growth themes, see Bauer & McAdams, 2010, 2008).

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APPENDIX
Examples of Positive Affective Sequences and Growth Narratives in High Points

REDEMPTION SEQUENCE *WITHOUT* SELF-IMPROVEMENT SEQUENCE OR GROWTH THEME

"The other day, I *was feeling very bad about my physical appearance. I had been for at least a week*. My weight is always a struggle, but I had on a cute outfit & spent more time on my hair & make-up than usual. *Some guy* […] stopped me as I got off and *gave me a really nice compliment*. It was just what I needed, when I needed it which is so rare. I am someone who enjoys attention. This episode demonstrates one of the few times that I got the kind of attention combined with respect and customized just for me that made me really feel good."

Note: The italicized phrases show the bad beginning and good ending. The narrative does not involve a self-improvement sequence, because the positive change did not involve an improved characteristic of self or personality. The narrative does not have a theme of eudaimonic growth, because the desire to overcome the problems is not associated with eudaimonic, humanistic, or organismic concerns; rather, the positive change involves a situational emphasis on gaining others' approval and feeling good about oneself.

SELF-IMPROVEMENT SEQUENCE *WITHOUT* GROWTH THEME

"After 2 years in the army and 3 years in a POW camp, I felt finally that it (the war) was over and my family and I had survived to face a better future. I felt at the time—and *ever since*—that *nothing that would befall me* could be as bad or worse and *could not be overcome*. I felt like a winner. I beat the odds."

Note: The italicized phrases show self-improvement; from that event on, the person can overcome anything. The value orientation involves the hedonic concern of overcoming obstacles rather than of personally meaningful activities or relationships, helping others, or wisdom.

GROWTH THEME *WITHOUT* SELF-IMPROVEMENT SEQUENCE

"I had many high and low points, my two highest were, the birth of my son (now 20) and daughter (11). It is incredible to see a baby that is yours! *At that moment […] the feeling is wonderful, positive, full of love*. It's a unique time where your whole family is high on life! Personally, I felt pride, *love, and a stronger belief of good in the world*."

Note: The italicized phrases show eudaimonic, humanistic themes in the present experience, but this experience is not presented as an improvement in the narrator as a person.

GROWTH THEME *WITH* SELF-IMPROVEMENT SEQUENCE

"[When] my niece was born. […] I suppose it's like joy, amazement, curiosity, and a great depth of love (for someone who knows nothing about me or has given me anything). This event […] *added a new dimension to the way I feel* love for another person. I really like this new found love that I have for my niece, and even though I've always had a bond and enjoyment with children, this is so much different because there is an attachment there […]. I think this says about me that I have a great capacity to love and that *my commitment and love towards my family is very strong and extremely important*."

Note: The first italicized phrase shows self-improvement—an added capacity to feel something. The words immediately after ("love for another person") and the second italicized phrase are two phrases in this narrative that show themes of eudaimonic, humanistic, and organismic values.