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Introduction to the special issue on “Storying the good life: Pathways and pitfalls to adaptive narrative identity”

How do we make sense of our lives? What makes a good life? These questions course through the heart of this special issue, and that heart is *narrative identity*. Narrative identity refers to the person’s evolving understanding of themselves and their life over time in story form (e.g., [McAdams, 2021](#); [McLean et al., 2007](#); [Singer, 2004](#)). Inquiry into narrative identity deals with the first question of how individuals make sense and meaning of life, which is intimately tied to their sense of their life as good. Narrative identity captures the unique lived experience of what is good in a person’s life, how they achieved this good, or obstacles to living a good life. At the same time, narrative identity reveals how the person interprets their life in terms of cultural ideals for a good life—by aligning with, failing, or resisting the ideals of cultural master narratives (e.g., [Bauer, 2021](#); [Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001](#); [Hammack, 2011](#); [McAdams, 2013](#); [McLean & Syed, 2016](#)). The study of narrative identity both displays and challenges the diverse ways that we conceptualize—and, importantly, *might* conceptualize—a good life. Here, “the” good life does not refer to a monolithic prescription for a life but rather to any of myriad goods that function as ideals for living a life, which are collectively called “the good.” These goods generally constitute qualities of human flourishing valued by individuals and society, including well-being, meaning, moral virtues, wisdom, and self-actualizing (e.g., [Ryan & Deci, 2001](#); [Vittersø, 2016](#); [Waterman, 2013](#)). This special issue on “storying the good life” examines the ways in which individuals create or struggle to create narrative identities that make for good lives. It showcases how the unique and personal stories of individuals in a range of life contexts express, challenge, and expand scientific and cultural notions of a good life.

This special issue is dedicated to the inimitable and widely loved Will Dunlop, who was its managing co-editor at the time of his death. The issue features 15 articles on narrative identity and the good life, plus an article in tribute to Will that includes reflections from family, friends, students, and colleagues. The issue also includes two articles co-authored by Will and completed by Dulce Westberg that were in process at the *Journal of Research in Personality* and that seemed fitting to be included alongside this special issue.

1. The narrative identity approach to the good life

The study of narrative identity and the good life has gone hand in hand for decades in both philosophy and psychology. The epistemological processes of narrative meaning-making are inherently rooted in ethical questions of value and the good, while conversely people recognize and feel the goods in their lives as they narrate experience to make sense of it (e.g., [Bruner, 1990](#); [MacIntyre, 1981](#); [Ricoeur, 1990](#);

[Syed et al., 2020](#); [Taylor, 1989](#)).

The scientific study of narrative identity commonly examines various features of narrative identity such as themes, structure, and meaning-making in relation to particular qualities of a good life, such as well-being, love, moral virtues and motives, self-transcendence, or wisdom (e.g., [Adler et al., 2016](#); [Bauer et al., 2005](#); [Bluck & Glück, 2004](#); [Dunlop et al., 2019](#); [Dunlop et al., 2017](#); [Dunlop et al., 2013](#); [Ferrari et al., 2013](#); [King & Hicks, 2007](#); [Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011](#); [McAdams, 2013](#); [Mansfield et al., 2015](#); [McLean et al., 2020](#); [Park & Moon, in press](#); [Perlin & Li, 2020](#); [Reischer et al., 2021](#); [Weststrate & Glück, 2017](#); [Schwab, 2020](#)). This approach highlights general patterns in how individuals story their identities in ways that relate to aspects of the good life as agreed upon by established scientific and cultural notions of the good life. However, the narrative identity approach anchors identity construction firmly in socio-cultural contexts ([McAdams, 2013](#); [McLean et al., 2007](#); [McLean & Syed, 2016](#)) as evident in approaches that analyze how individuals’ identities align with, fail or challenge cultural master narratives of the good life (e.g., [Bauer, 2021](#); [Syed & McLean, in press](#)). This latter approach highlights how relations between narrative identity and the good life are deeply contextualized.

Turning to the scientific study of the “good life” in psychology, much of it does not involve narrative concepts, theories or methods, so one aim of this special issue is to show what narrative psychology has to offer. Below, we first elaborate on the contribution of narrative psychology as a theoretical framework and second on the advantages of narrative identity methods.

Most scientific inquiry into the “good life” focuses on the first word, “good” (with endless yet important debates over what constitutes the good; e.g., [Huta & Waterman, 2014](#)). Narrative identity inquiry begs us to start with the second word, “life.” One of the great contributions of narrative inquiry to the study of personhood is an emphasis on the *lives of persons in context* rather than merely in abstract, decontextualized knowledge of this or that (good or bad) quality about oneself ([Dunlop, 2015](#)). The study of narratives situates individuals in a vast array of overlapping contexts, including life circumstances, developmental phases, and socio-cultural niches. Contexts are varied and layered for any one person, so studying lives in context requires a multiperspectival model of personhood (e.g., [Martin, 2012](#)). Accordingly, narrative psychology comprises a broad range of theoretical perspectives that draw not only from all major subfields of psychology but also from the humanities and the social and biological sciences (e.g., [Boyd, 2013](#)). In our view, narrative psychology is not an isolated niche area, as if the construction of narratives is somehow separate from phenomena like self and identity, personality traits, self-regulation, emotion, motivation,

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well-being, moral virtue, or wisdom. Narrative identity is involved in any process that concerns the interpretation of self and others, including all those mentioned above. As such a variety of phenomena, including the good life, can be illuminated from a narrative identity perspective which highlights interpretation of lived experience as situated in multiple contexts.

As for narrative methods, these include purely quantitative, purely qualitative, or mixed data. Narrative methods span designs for large samples with surveys or experiments (Adler et al., 2017) as well as designs for small groups or case studies, including in-depth psychobiographies (e.g., McAdams, 2019; Schultz, 2005; Singer, 2016). When narrative identity is examined quantitatively, various aspects of narration are coded by systematically applying coding manuals with high degrees of interrater reliability (or with computer software) to allow the detection of general patterns across individuals. These coding systems are developed from and adapted to the concrete story material in consideration of the rich contextuality of narrative data. When applying this approach, researchers capture identity more objectively than do most self-report measures of self-identity and the good life, resulting in measures of personhood that are incrementally and uniquely predictive of desired outcomes (e.g., Adler et al., 2016). Other approaches dive deeply into the subjectivity and contextualization of narrative identity as they apply diverse qualitative analyses of life stories to understand individuals and groups (e.g., Singer, 1997; Thomsen et al., in press).

2. The contribution of this special issue

Narrative psychology's methodological and theoretical pluralism has resulted in comprehensive and rich understandings of personhood. This special issue aims to show, among other things, how the narrative identity approach can help expand, deepen, and reorganize existing models of a good life. Accordingly, the articles in this special issue draw from a range of theoretical perspectives and methods to explore how narrative identity and the good life shed light on each other. In an effort to keep this introduction brief, we refrain from summarizing all 15 articles in this special issue. Overall, each of these articles advances theory of narrative identity, particularly in terms of the good life and human flourishing. Some articles focus entirely on theory (Lysaker et al., this issue; McAdams et al., this issue; Syed & McLean, this issue). Most articles offer new empirical findings involving innovative approaches to quantitative analyses of narratives in relation to quantitative measures of a good life (Bauer et al., this issue; Bluck et al., this issue; Booker, this issue; Camia et al., this issue; Grysman, this issue; Lind, this issue; Mansfield et al., this issue; Marshall & Reese, this issue; Suh et al., this issue; [Wilkinson] Westberg, this issue). Some articles feature primarily qualitative methods to show broad contours and in-depth processes of narrative meaning-making in the context of cultural ideals for a good life (Adler et al., this issue; Singer, this issue).

Research on narrative identity is especially useful for demonstrating how vastly *varied* goods in life are and how context shapes this. This does not mean that anything is good or that context is all that matters. It means that, depending on the varied and layered contexts in which individuals construct their narrative identity, different goods in life may become salient and available – or remote and unavailable. Conceptualizations of “the good” vary in psychological research, which often focuses on well-being as the primary phenomenon of interest. Within well-being studies alone we find an extensive range of goods and lively, empirically driven debates over them (e.g., hedonic and eudaimonic well-being; e.g., Huta & Waterman, 2014; Sheldon, 2016). Yet eudaimonia in both psychology and philosophy reaches beyond well-being as the ultimate good, notably toward the qualities of meaning-making that involve moral concerns for others as well as depth and complexity in thinking, which is characteristic of wisdom (e.g., Bauer, 2021; Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017; Grossmann, 2017; Oishi & Westgate, 2021). The articles in this special issue collectively encompass this range of goods and how they are situated with respect to various contexts of

individual lives, including life circumstances (particularly non-idealized circumstances), developmental phases, and cultural master narratives.

For instance, cosmopolitan models of a good life often ignore some of the most prominent hindrances to human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2019). These models have historically promoted ideals for a good life that rest on the resources and freedoms afforded to those who live within societal structures of power, thereby systematically suppressing key capabilities of those who do not (as in the Capabilities Approach of Nussbaum, 2000). Cultural master narratives of a good life crystallize around these ideals of privilege (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2016). Research on the good life in both psychology and philosophy has become increasingly concerned with the “burdened virtues” and “moral damage” (Tessman, 2005) of oppression in contexts of social marginality in terms of demographics like gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability (e.g., Adler, 2018; Bhatia, 2018; Booker et al., in press; Fish et al., 2021; Frost et al., 2015; Grysman et al., 2016). Thus the study of alternatives to cultural master narratives of a good life—notably in the narrative identities of individuals from marginalized groups—reveal different perspectives on commonly accepted goods, calling canonical models of the good life into question (Adler et al., this issue; Syed & McLean, this issue).

Another pitfall to flourishing involves mental and physical health issues like anxiety, depression, addiction, grief, personality disorders, or physical illness—issues that, like social marginalization, are often overlooked in the models of the good life (Fowers et al., 2017). Yet narrative identity research demonstrates how story content and structure (and changes in them) coincide with and prospectively predict adaptation and well-being when health is challenged (e.g., Adler, 2018; Bauer & Bonanno, 2001; Bluck et al., 2022; Booker et al., 2020; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; Lind et al., 2019; Lind et al., 2020; Lysaker et al., 2005; Pedersen et al., in press; Singer, 2013; Thomsen et al., in press). This research draws attention to the intimate connection between narrative identity and the obstacles to human flourishing posed by difficult life circumstances (Lind, this issue; Lysaker, this issue).

Finally, cutting across all these models of goods in life is the fact that goods in life *develop* across the life course (Bauer, 2021; King, 2001; Waterman & Schwartz, 2013). The goods that are salient in emerging adulthood may differ from those of older adulthood. Some goods like practical wisdom (particularly as *phronesis* and psychological maturity; e.g., Staudinger & Glück, 2011) take decades to develop and comprise narrative meaning-making that combines structural complexity and perspective-taking with humane motives (e.g., Bauer et al., 2019; Ferrari et al., 2013; Glück & Bluck, 2013; Grossmann, 2017; Pasupathi, 2001; Wink & Staudinger, 2016). Narrative identity is developmental at its core (McAdams, 2021; McLean et al., 2007) and can be applied to illuminate both how different aspects of the good life may be valued differently across developmental phases and how specific goods, like wisdom, require development of narrative processes to emerge. The articles in this special issue address the age periods of high school (Lind, this issue), emerging adulthood, (Booker, this issue; Camia et al., this issue; Grysman, this issue; Mansfield et al., this issue; Marshall & Reese, this issue; Suh et al., this issue; Wilkinson, this issue), younger and middle adulthood (Adler et al., this issue), mostly middle adulthood (Bauer et al., this issue), younger, middle, and older adulthood (Bluck et al., this issue), older adulthood (McAdams et al., this issue), and the life span (Singer, this issue). As evident in several of these papers, research on narrative identity emphasizes development over time within the dynamic social ecology (e.g., Camia, Sengsavang, Rohrmann, & Pratt, 2021; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; McLean, 2015; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Reese et al., 2017; Syed & Azmitia, 2010; Thomsen & Vedel, 2019; Waters, Camia, Facompré, & Fivush, 2019).

The study of narrative identity opens a window to a uniquely expansive view of personhood (Grysman & Mansfield, 2017) that is grounded in lived experience with potential for understanding “the good” in dynamic and contextualized ways. The articles in this special issue provide a sampling of theories, methods, and findings that point to

these possibilities for storying the good life.

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