



“Every Day has Enough of Its Own Torment”—A Narrative Study of Life’s Greatest Challenge Among Men in Late Adulthood

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate stories of life’s greatest challenge among men in late adulthood from a narrative and developmental perspective. The investigations focused on narrative processes and the content of challenge narratives in relation to satisfaction with life and generativity. Narrative processes were analyzed using existing frameworks (Eriksson et al. *Identity* 20:157–169, 2020). The study showed negative, neutral/vague, redemptive, and a combination of positive and negative emotional sequences, among which negative sequencing was the most common. An additional narrative theme, metareflections of challenges as part of life, involved the conclusion that hardship is simply part of what one may expect from life. Analyses of types of challenges revealed six categories and a secondary coding the adversity of the challenges. In contrast to expectations, redemptive sequencing was not associated with either higher satisfaction with life or generativity. The few differences that emerged in the subsequent analyses showed that participants whose challenges were coded as not expected and potentially disruptive had significantly lower satisfaction with life and lower mean age when the challenge occurred. In conclusion, the study demonstrated the saliency of the challenges’ timing and adversity. Negative framing was common in the challenge narratives of the men in late adulthood, without being negatively associated with satisfaction with life or generativity. The role of negative emotional sequencing in this study adds new perspectives to the emphasis on redemption and positive emotionality for well-being and generativity in later adulthood.

Keywords Narrative identity · Challenges · Satisfaction with life · Generativity · Later adulthood

Introduction

Imagine being asked “When you look back over your entire life what is the most difficult experience, or one of the most difficult events, you have faced?” What would your reply be, and how would you narrate the story of your *life’s greatest challenge*? Indeed, challenges can play an important part in life and involve events that change people’s outlook on life and their identity (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). Even when narrating a negative experience, people may emphasize a positive outcome from the experience (McAdams et al., 2001); however, they may also narrate it with a more negative tone overall or frame it as something that has been both positive and negative (Eriksson et al., 2020). Previous studies have also found that the structure of narratives

concerning traumatic and challenging experiences may vary depending on the narrator’s cultural context (Blackie et al., 2023; Eriksson et al., 2020) and gender (McLean, 2008). Importantly, the structure of how challenges are narrated may also be associated with well-being (Adler et al., 2016) and generativity (McAdams et al., 2001). We, therefore, asked this question of men in late adulthood to investigate how they narrated their life’s greatest challenge, what these challenges concerned, and how this was related to their well-being and generativity.

Storytelling is a part of how people construct meaning and temporal continuity over time and is important for identity development (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The process of narrative identity development involves telling and retelling parts of one’s life story over one’s life course, in a way that also conveys the subjective interpretation of the individual’s current point of view. Through processes of narrative identity development, such as autobiographical reasoning, stories of personal experiences are constructed and used in the individual’s life story to emphasize who they

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are and how they came to be and point out the direction they are heading.

Much research attention has been given to the emotional sequence of redemption (Cox et al., 2019), which stands out as a narrative process involving both autobiographical reasoning and affect (McLean et al., 2020a). Redemptive narratives involve negative events (e.g., a difficult challenge, the loss of someone close) that end positively (through, for example, insight or recovery from alcohol abuse) (McAdams et al., 2001). The redemptive way of narrating a story has been described as part of the master narrative in the United States, meaning that it informs how a personal story should be told within this specific context (McLean & Syed, 2015). Indeed, research in the United States has demonstrated that redemptive narratives are preferred to narratives that end negatively (McLean et al., 2020b). Research from Northern Europe has found that while redemption is present it is not the most, or the only common emotional sequence (Blackie et al., 2023; Eriksson et al., 2020). Negative, neutral/vague, and a combination of positive and negative sequencing were also common ways of narrating challenging experiences in a study with early adults from Sweden (Eriksson et al., 2020). In this study, we wanted to investigate whether these ways of narrating challenges would also be found in a different sample and age group from the same context, and to investigate any specific aspects of these narratives and their relation to well-being (Adler et al., 2016) and generativity (McAdams & Guo, 2015) from the retrospective perspective of men in late adulthood.

Difficult and traumatic experiences are part of the challenges people face in life. Depending on their severity, these experiences may come to destabilize a person's existence and outlook on life, leading to a need to make sense of the event. Indeed, highly stressful experiences often lead to meaning-making attempts whereby individuals try to grapple with and understand what they have experienced and how it may have changed their beliefs (Park, 2010) and who they are—their identity (Singer, 2004). Besides traumatic or more disruptive experiences, challenges and crises often reflect the difficulties that different parts of the life span present (Robinson & Wright, 2013). Life scripts describe experiences that may be expected at a certain age and illuminate negative events that may be experienced as a divergence from the expected or scripted (Rubin & Berntsen, 2003). Part of the life script in later adulthood is the death of a parent (Janssen & Rubin, 2011), but it may also involve losing someone else close, one's own or one's partner's illness, self-questioning, retirement, and withdrawal from work and social activities (Robinson & Stell, 2015).

Narrative research on *life's greatest challenge* focusing on both narrative processes and the content of these challenges among late midlife adults (Cowan et al., 2019) found that challenges often involved themes related to family,

profession, social life, health and wellness, and loss or trauma for some individuals and that narrative processes concerning agency and emotional experiences were important for the narrator's well-being. The authors point out that there is need for research conducted in cultures different from the North American to learn how findings concerning narratives of life challenges generalize to other cultural settings. In the present study, we investigated stories of challenges in the Swedish context with a focus on both content and narrative processes. The participants' being in later adulthood added a lifespan perspective to our investigations, as the findings may be influenced both by their current situation in life and by the retrospective perspective that later adulthood may add to their narratives.

Life review is a salient psychological process in later adulthood (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014) and involves how people reflect on and evaluate their lives and salient experiences when looking back (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). It has integrative functions, as the reminiscence and meaning-making of past experiences may be seen as an identity process that helps individuals to flexibly adjust in the present. It is also described as a coping mechanism through the regulation of emotions in the present by emphasizing positive memories. This regulation of emotions becomes increasingly important compared to other incentives as one's time horizons become constrained (Carstensen, 2006). Kitayama et al. (2020) showed a bias toward positive (vs. negative) emotions in later adulthood, but their findings also illustrated that positivity also served the function of concealing more negative aspects of aging and showed cultural variations in these patterns. The focus on life's greatest challenge in the narratives analyzed in this study prompts a narration of difficult memories, which may imply a more negative emotional sequence, but the process of life review and narrowing time horizons may nevertheless influence the emotional framing of the narrated events toward a more positive direction.

Besides life review, another salient developmental process in both middle and later adulthood is generativity—the ability and willingness to invest in future generations (Jones & McAdams, 2013). Research from the United States has indicated that generativity is associated with satisfaction with life (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995) and with narrative processes, whereby individuals with higher levels of generativity typically narrate events with a redemptive emotional sequence (McAdams & Guo, 2015; McAdams et al., 2001). Based on these findings, McAdams and Guo (2015) suggested that, at least in the North American context, the redemptive narrative sequencing may strengthen the individual's morale in the face of difficulties in life.

Together, these developmental processes in later adulthood—life review in combination with perceptions of future time as limited as well as generativity—may suggest that even challenging events might be narrated with a positive

emotional framing, for example, through a redemptive story structure. However, these studies have typically been performed in the United States, where redemption has been described as a master narrative (McLean & Syed, 2015) and as such is the preferred emotional sequence for many different stories. In other cultures, where other story structures may be the norm, it may not be assumed that redemptive structures are related to generativity or well-being. Nonetheless, the developmental processes of life review and generativity may help us understand individual differences in how people narrate difficult experiences, as well as what experiences stand out as particularly challenging in retrospect.

The Present Study

The present study draws on a larger scale research project that investigates parenthood and developmental aspects from a lifespan perspective among men in later adulthood, from different perspectives and with mixed methods. The investigations in the present study concern stories of life’s greatest challenge from these men in later adulthood. We investigated these stories by addressing the following research questions:

1. What emotional sequences can be identified in narratives of life’s greatest challenge from men in later adulthood?
2. What types of challenges do men in later adulthood narrate as life’s greatest challenge, and when in their lives did these events occur?
3. Are emotional sequencing and types of challenges related to generativity, satisfaction with life, and timing of the narrated challenge among men in later adulthood?

Methods

Participants

This study is part of the project Father Involvement from Early Childhood to Adulthood (FIECA), for which data collection took place in 2019/2020. In the FIECA study, 98 fathers were recruited from the Gothenburg longitudinal study of development (GoLD), which was initiated in 1981/1982 (Lamb et al., 1988). The 144 families that participated in the first wave of the GoLD represented all social strata living in the Gothenburg region at the time (Broberg, 1989). The ongoing GoLD study has focused on the children born in 1981/1982 (see e.g., Wängqvist et al., 2022), but the fathers recruited to FIECA took part in the GoLD study until the children turned 15.

From the original sample of 144 families, eight fathers had declined further participation in the longitudinal study. Sixteen fathers did not wish to participate in the current data collection, and we were unable to reach seven individuals at

the time of data collection for this study. Among the fathers who had previously participated, 13 were deceased and two were unable to participate because of severe health issues or other circumstances. A total of 98 fathers participated in the FIECA study. For the investigations of this specific study, there were seven interviews that we were not able to code for emotional sequencing, and seven participants were either not asked about challenging experiences or did not provide an answer to the question, resulting in a final sample of 84 fathers. For the statistical analyses, two participants did not answer the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), and one participant did not answer the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS). Comparisons between the total sample of 98 fathers and the 84 fathers included in the present investigations revealed no differences with regard to their age, SES (Hollingshead, 1975), or levels in the key variables SWLS and LGS.

The 84 fathers were between 59 and 89 years old ($M = 68.4$, $SD = 4.9$) when interviewed. A majority ($n = 75$) of the participants were in a relationship, and 66 of these were married. The length of the relationships (independent of marital status) ranged between 2 and 53 years, with a mean of 36 years ($SD = 12$ years). The participants had between one and four children ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 0.8$) and 72 of the fathers had grandchildren, with the number of grandchildren ranging between one and nine ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.7$).

Fourteen participants were working and 69 had retired; however, among the participants who had retired, 43 still worked to some extent. One participant did not work and was not retired. The Hollingshead measure (Hollingshead, 1975) was used to assess the participants’ socioeconomic status. The mean score for Hollingshead was 49.2 (range = 24–66, $SD = 11.5$) on a scale from 8 to 66, with a higher score indicating higher socioeconomic status.

Most participants were interviewed ($n = 68$) at the department of Psychology at the University of Gothenburg. Ten interviews took place in the participants homes, one at their workplace, and five by phone. The interviews were performed by a PhD student and a research assistant who both had a master’s degree in psychology and were trained interviewers. The interviews were in Swedish, recorded on a digital recording device, and transcribed before coding. Quotes have been translated to English and are presented with pseudonyms.

Measures

Satisfaction with Life

To measure subjective well-being, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985; Hultell & Gustavsson, 2008) was used. This is a global measure with five

statements that participants rate on a seven-point scale from 1 (*Strongly agree*) to 7 (*Strongly disagree*). Coefficient alpha for the present sample was 0.79.

Generativity

To measure the participants' level of generativity, we used the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS; McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992). In this measure, participants are asked to rate 20 statements (e.g., *I try to pass along the knowledge I have gained through my experiences*) on a four-point scale from 0 (*the statement never applies to you*) to 3 (*the statement applies to you very often or nearly always*). To our knowledge, the LGS has not been used in Sweden before. For the FIECA project, the measure was translated from English into Swedish by a professional translator and back translated by two researchers to ensure that no meaning had been lost in translation. The internal consistency for the current sample was 0.85.

Narrative Prompt

In a semi-structured background interview, participants were asked about difficult and challenging experiences. The procedure here was the same as in a previous study from GoLD (Eriksson et al., 2020), and the prompt was adapted from the "Challenges" prompt of the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008). Participants were asked the open question "When you look back over your entire life, what is the most difficult experience, or one of the most difficult events, you have faced?" Open follow-up questions were used when needed: "Can you describe it?" and "How do you think this has affected you?" We also asked when the event had taken place.

Data Analysis

We coded the narrative framing (emotional sequencing and an additional narrative theme) of the participants' narratives about their life's greatest challenge as well as the content of these stories. In statistical analyses, (ANOVAs and *t* tests) categories from the coding were related to measures of satisfaction with life and generativity, as well as the timing of the challenge. Interviews were transcribed by the first and second author. When coded narratives were treated as whole entities (Riessman, 2011), and consensus coding was applied (Syed & Nelson, 2015). Here, we describe the coding of the narrative framing and the content of the challenges.

Narrative Framing of Challenges

Emotional Sequencing

To code for emotional sequence, we used a previously established codebook with four categories: negative, neutral/vague, redemptive, and a combination of positive and negative sequence (Eriksson et al., 2020). These sequences were defined as how the narrator framed the challenging event, focusing on the emotional tone.

In narratives with a *Negative* sequencing, the challenging event was framed by negative emotions. These narratives could involve negative growth or be solely negative. *Neutral/Vague* sequencing was represented by narratives that were framed by the narrator as not having an impact on the narrator's present life, or that had an unclear, more vague, emotional tone. *Redemptive* sequencing represented an overall positive framing of the challenge, which could involve either growth of some kind or simply being positive. *Combination of Positive and Negative* sequencing involved a framing of the challenge with two separate emotions toward the negative event and emphasis on both positive and negative emotions. To differentiate between redemptive sequencing and combination of positive and negative sequencing following the codebook, the difference was noted in which emotional tone the narrator highlighted in the framing of the event. For example, redemptive narratives could show mixed emotions but solely highlighted a positive framing of the experience at the end of the narrative, whereas combination narratives could include personal growth but concluded the overall framing of the event with an emotional tone that combined both positive and negative emotions towards the narrated challenge. Examples and quotes from the coding of emotional sequencing for the present study is available in the online supporting material (<https://osf.io/cbx4q/>).

We started the coding of emotional sequencing with a random selection of 20 narratives, which both authors coded. A second and third set, each consisting of a random selection of ten narratives, were added sequentially to broaden the dataset for this initial review. From this initial review of 40 narratives in total, we established that we were able to code for emotional sequences using the existing codebook, and then coded the remaining narratives into the mutually distinct nominal categories as described in the codebook. During the coding, we kept an open approach to the data but found no new emotional sequences in the participants' narratives.

Additional Narrative Theme

Throughout the coding process of emotional sequence, we noted other ways that participants framed their experiences apart from emotional tone. Excerpts of these narratives were

collected in a separate document and then coded. In our analyses, we decided that the codes—rough period part of life, loss as nothing out of the ordinary, life has gone on since the challenging event, challenges as part of life, and death as part of life—all concerned similar aspects and grouped them into one additional narrative theme. This theme was not an additional emotional sequence, but a narrative framing of the challenges that involved the participants’ metareflections about hardship and challenges being a part of life and nothing out of the ordinary. See <https://osf.io/cbx4q/> for codes and narrative excerpts related to this theme. After defining the additional narrative theme, we coded all narratives for presence or no presence of this theme.

Types of Challenges

In addition to the narrative framing of the challenges (i.e., emotional sequencing and the additional narrative theme), we were also interested in their content, that is what types of experiences the participants talked about. When coding the content of the narratives, we first noted codes and then merged these into categories (see <https://osf.io/cbx4q/> for codes and narrative excerpts).

In a second step of the content coding, we deductively coded the content of the narratives into three categories describing the adversity of the narrated event: normative or expected; not expected or normative but not disruptive; and not expected or normative and potentially having had a disruptive effect on the individual.

For this secondary coding, we first worked together with a random selection of 20 narratives and based on previous research (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Cowan et al., 2019; Jansen & Rubin, 2011; Robinson & Stell, 2015) discussed and decided which types of narratives should be coded into each of the three categories depending on the timing of the challenge (i.e., if the challenge diverged from what could be an expected or normative challenge at a certain age; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003) and the adversity of the challenge.

Expected or normative events could be the death of an aged parent, one’s own or one’s partner’s illness in late adulthood, relational difficulties (such as going through a hard time in the relationship, but also involving divorce or infidelity), life adjustments, or work-related problems. Not expected or normative but not disruptive events included, for example, planned migration experiences or less severe illnesses in the family. Not expected and potentially disruptive events could involve the loss of a parent at an early age; other deaths or severe illnesses (both somatic and mental disorders) involving oneself or family members, including children; or having experienced hardship during upbringing (e.g., being exposed to alcoholism, abuse, unstable home environment). When we had defined the categories, we coded all narratives to one of the three adversity categories.

Results

Narrative Framing of Challenges

Emotional Sequencing

We coded for all four emotional sequences described by Eriksson et al. (2020), with the most common among the 84 participants being negative sequencing ($n = 29$), followed by neutral/vague ($n = 22$) and redemptive ($n = 22$), and the least common being a combination of positive and negative ($n = 11$). A chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed that the categories were not equal— $\chi^2(3, N = 84) = 7.91, p = 0.048$ —and that it was the negative sequencing that was more common than expected, and that a combination of positive and negative was less common than expected had there been equal frequencies between the four categories.

Metareflections of Challenges as Part of Life

We also coded for the additional narrative theme metareflections of challenges as a part of life and narratives coded to this theme ($n = 20$) were often either neutral/vague (40.0% of participants coded to the additional narrative theme) or negative (35.0% of participants coded to the additional narrative theme) in their emotional sequencing (see Table 1 for all cross-tabulations) combined with the conclusion related to the additional narrative theme “but that’s life,” as Jakob said to illustrate the view that negative and difficult experiences are a part of life.

Types of Challenges—What the Participants Talked About

The types of challenges the 84 participants narrated were (from most to least common): events relating to the family of origin, such as deaths or harsh upbringing ($n = 27$); one’s own or one’s partner’s disease or illness ($n = 21$); experiences relating to one’s children ($n = 15$); events relating to separation, divorce, or other relational difficulties ($n = 10$); work-related experiences ($n = 9$); and migration experiences ($n = 2$).

In the secondary deductive coding, we coded the adversity of the challenges into events that were normative or expected ($n = 50$); not expected or normative but not disruptive ($n = 9$); and not expected or normative and potentially had a disruptive effect on the individual ($n = 25$).

Cross-tabulations (Table 2) revealed that separation or relational difficulties and work-related events were typically coded as normative, whereas experiences relating to family of origin and experiences involving their children had close to equal distributions between expected challenges and

Table 1 Cross-tabulations of frequencies for emotional sequencing and the additional narrative theme: metareflections of challenges as part of life and the adversity of challenges

	Emotional sequencing				Total
	Negative	Neutral/vague	Redemptive	Combination of positive or negative	
Additional narrative theme: metareflections of challenges as part of life					
Metareflections present	7	8	3	2	20
No metareflections	22	14	19	9	64
Adversity of challenges					
Expected	16	16	12	6	50
Not expected potentially disruptive	11	4	6	4	25
Not expected, not disruptive	2	2	4	1	9
Total	29	22	22	11	84

Table 2 Cross-tabulations of frequencies for the types of challenges and the secondary coding of the challenges' adversity

Types of challenges	Expected challenges	Not expected, potentially disruptive challenges	Not expected, not disruptive challenges	Total
Own or partner's disease/illness	14	4	3	21
Separation/relational difficulties	9	1	0	10
Events relating to family of origin (death, harsh upbringing)	13	13	1	27
Experience relating to one's children	6	7	2	15
Work-related experiences	8	0	1	9
Migration experiences	0	0	2	2
Total	50	25	9	84

non-normative, potentially disruptive experiences. Importantly, the same type of experience in the first coding could be coded to either category in the secondary coding depending on whether it could be expected or disruptive. For example, for relational difficulties Edvin, whose experience was coded as expected, said "Well... no, of course it is always hard to get a divorce, but it was me who initiated it, so I did not experience it as that hard, but it was a tough period so to say." Peter, on the other hand, whose narrative was coded as not expected and potentially disruptive, described a separation involving suspicions concerning infidelity and intricate family relations/dynamics that was still complicated many years after the divorce. For events relating to one's own children that was coded as expected Henrik talked about simply being a parent and having children as life's greatest challenge "not that I ruminated about it being bad or anything but honestly, when I think about it, because I think most things are quite clearcut in life, and I have a clear view of what I want to do. But for that [being a parent] there are no templates really, when you have children." As a comparison, Einar's story concerned his children and was coded as not expected, potentially disruptive as he talked about his son's

serious illness and in particular his experience of taking him to the hospital not knowing if he would survive or not.

Emotional Sequencing and Adversity of Challenges

We further explored the data by cross-tabulating adversity of challenges by emotional sequence (see Table 1). Visual inspection of the cross-tabulations revealed no apparent pattern, and this was confirmed by statistical analyses, $X^2(6, N = 84) = 4.34, p = 0.63$.

Narrative Framing and Adversity of Challenges in Relation to Life Satisfaction, Generativity, and Timing of the Challenges

For the continuous variables, we found significant correlations between satisfaction with life and generativity, $r(80) = 0.23, p = 0.041$. There were no associations between either satisfaction with life or generativity and the timing of the challenges. There were no associations between the participants age when interviewed for any of the continuous variables and no age differences for either emotional

sequence, the additional narrative theme, or the adversity of the challenges.

Satisfaction with Life

Satisfaction with Life and Emotional Sequencing All mean values for satisfaction with life across the emotional sequences (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics) were within the range for high satisfaction with life, but the statistical analyses showed marginally significant differences in satisfaction with life depending on emotional sequence: $F(3, 78)=2.70, p=0.051, \omega^2=0.06$. Although these analyses were only marginally significant, we followed up with post hoc comparisons with Tukey HSD showing a difference ($p=0.033$) where the participants with a neutral/vague emotional sequence scored higher on SWLS than the participants with a negative emotional sequence.

Satisfaction with Life and the Additional Narrative Theme For satisfaction with life and the additional narrative theme metareflections of challenges as part of life, means were close to equal between narratives that were coded to this theme and those that were not, and this was confirmed by the statistical analyses: $t(80)=-0.79, p=.433, d=0.21$.

Satisfaction with Life and Adversity of Challenges For adversity of challenges, analyses showed that there was a significant difference between the categories: $F(2, 79)=4.19, p=0.019, \omega^2=0.07$. Post hoc comparison using Tukey

HSD showed that those whose experiences were coded as not expected, potentially disruptive had significantly lower ($p=0.014$) satisfaction with life than those whose experiences were coded as not expected, not disruptive. The differences between the participants with challenges coded as expected and the other two groups were not significant.

Generativity

Generativity and Emotional Sequencing Means (Table 3) were similar for generativity across the emotional sequences and analyses showed no associations between generativity and the four emotional sequences: $F(3, 79)=0.93, p=0.430, \omega^2=0.00$. Given that previous research has found associations between generativity and redemption (McAdams & Gou, 2015), and that the descriptive data were in line with these previous findings, we merged the two emotional sequences redemptive and combination of positive and negative experience to explore whether narratives indicating some kind of positive emotion were associated with generativity. Surprisingly, analyses showed that there were no significant differences in generativity between positive ($M=1.91; SD=0.40$), negative ($M=1.73; SD=0.44$), and neutral/vague sequencing ($M=1.76; SD=0.46$): $F(2, 80)=1.40, p=0.252, \omega^2=0.01$.

Generativity and the Additional Narrative Theme Analyses revealed no difference in levels of generativity between

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for satisfaction with life, generativity, age at challenge, and time since challenge for the categories from the coding of emotional sequence, the additional narrative theme, and the challenges’ adversity

Narrative coding	Satisfaction with life				Generativity			Age at challenge (in years)			Time since challenge (in years)		
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Emotional sequence													
Negative	29	28	5.21 _a	0.89	29	1.73	0.44	25	40.46	16.65	25	27.16	16.75
Neutral/vague	22	22	5.82 _b	0.62	22	1.76	0.46	19	44.54	17.83	19	25.21	16.69
Redemptive	22	21	5.58 _{ab}	0.79	21	1.91	0.40	17	39.08	15.86	17	28.88	17.72
Combination of positive and negative	11	11	5.58 _{ab}	0.58	11	1.89	0.42	10	40.02	16.13	10	27.00	20.12
Additional narrative theme: Metareflections of challenges as part of life													
Metareflections present	20	20	5.64	0.82	20	1.67	0.37	15	43.48	18.20	15	23.87	16.41
No metareflections	64	62	5.48	0.66	63	1.85	0.45	56	40.51	16.13	56	27.87	17.35
Adversity of challenge													
Expected	50	49	5.53 _{bc}	0.80	50	1.75	0.38	40	46.46 _b	14.25	40	22.10	14.79 _b
Not expected, potentially disruptive	25	25	5.29 _{ab}	0.70	25	1.85	0.52	23	30.76 _{ac}	16.83	23	36.56	17.57 _{ac}
Not expected, not disruptive	9	8	6.17 _c	0.58	8	2.04	0.39	8	44.56 _{bc}	16.50	8	24.25	17.21 _{bc}
Total	84	82	5.52	0.78	83	1.81	0.43	71	41.16	16.50	71	27.03	17.12

Means with different subscripts differ at the $p<0.05$ level by post hoc comparison using Tukey HSD. For the comparison between emotional sequence and Satisfaction with life, the overall ANOVA was not significant ($p=0.51$)

those who were coded to the additional narrative theme and those who were not ($t(81)=1.63, p=0.106, d=0.42$).

Generativity and Adversity of Challenges Analyses showed that there were no associations between generativity and adversity of challenges: $F(2, 80)=1.85, p=.164, \omega^2=0.02$.

Timing of Challenges

The participants stated that the challenges had occurred from the present year up to 66 years ago, $M=27.0, SD=17.1$, and the participants' age at the challenge varied from 10 to 78 years: $M=41.1, SD=16.5$. The participants' distribution across the age span when the challenge occurred is illustrated in Fig. 1. Based on visual inspection, there were no apparent patterns as to when challenges were most likely to occur; rather, besides some small "bumps" in late adolescence and middle adulthood, they were spread out across the whole age span.

Timing of Challenges and Emotional Sequencing Analyses showed that there were no significant differences between the emotional sequences (see Table 3) with regard to the mean age when the challenge occurred, $F(3, 67)=0.377, p=0.770, \omega^2=-0.03$, or the time since the challenge: $F(3, 67)=0.133, p=0.940, \omega^2=-0.03$.

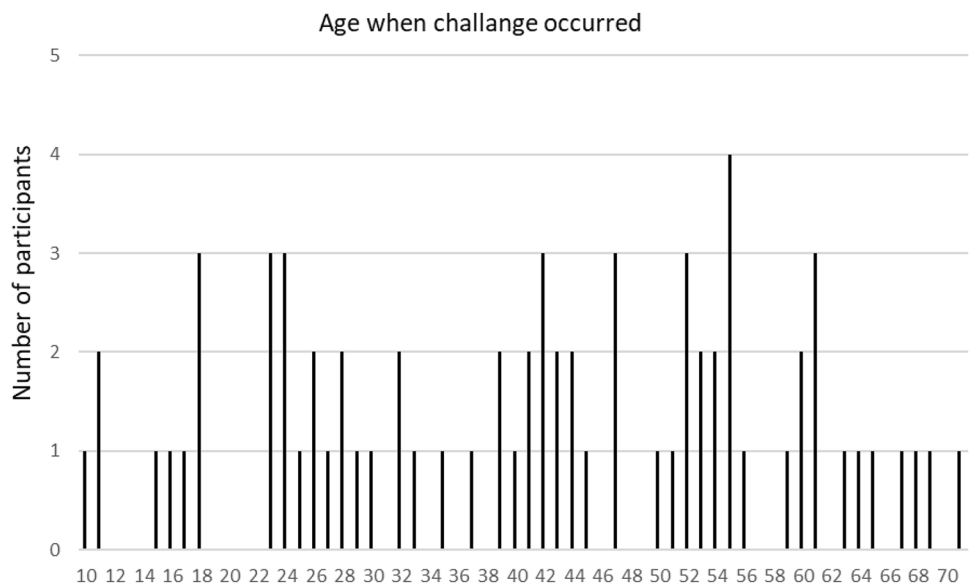
Timing of Challenges and the Additional Narrative Theme Statistical analyses showed that there was no difference between those coded to the additional narrative theme and those who were not (see Table 3) for either the age when the challenge occurred, $t(69)=-0.637, p=0.526, d=-0.18$, or the time since the challenge: $t(69)=0.803, p=.425, d=0.23$.

Timing of Challenges and Adversity of Challenges Analyses showed that there was a significant difference between the categories concerning the adversity of the challenges with regard to the age when the challenge occurred (see Table 3): $F(2, 68)=8.210, p<0.001, \omega^2=0.17$. Post hoc comparison using Tukey HSD confirmed that those whose experiences were coded as not expected and potentially disruptive had significantly lower ($p<0.001$) mean age when the challenge occurred compared to those whose experiences were coded as expected. There was no difference between mean age when the challenge occurred among participants whose narratives were coded as not expected and not disruptive and either of the two other groups. Similarly, analyses revealed a significant difference between the groups for the time since the challenge occurred, $F(2, 68)=6.108, p=0.004, \omega^2=0.13$, with post hoc analyses using Tukey HSD revealing that the difference ($p=0.003$) was between those whose challenges were coded as not expected and potentially disruptive and those whose challenges were expected. For these analyses of time since the challenge as well, we found no difference between the group coded as not expected but not disruptive and the other two groups.

Discussion

In this study of narratives of life's greatest challenge from men in late adulthood, we found four emotional sequences in line with a previous Swedish study with early adults (Eriksson et al., 2020), but some sequences appeared to be more common in this group of later adult men compared to the younger sample in the previous study. The analyses showed associations between the adversity of the narrated challenges and satisfaction with life and the timing of the challenges.

Fig. 1 Age of Participants When the Narrated Life's Greatest Challenge Occurred (x-axis), and How Many Participants Indicated Each Age (y-axis). Total Age Span 10–71 Years



Surprisingly, we did not find associations between emotional sequencing in the narratives and either satisfaction with life or generativity, even though previous research would suggest this to be the case (Cox et al., 2019), particularly for the redemptive sequence (McAdams & Guo, 2015; McAdams et al., 2001).

Redemption can be found in stories about challenges among adults from the United States and is described as a master narrative guiding people in how to tell their stories (McLean & Syed, 2015). Studies like the present one are, therefore, important for examining whether the status of redemption as a master narrative is dependent on culture and context. In line with previous research based on trauma narratives in the UK (Blackie et al., 2023) and challenge narratives among early adults in Sweden (Eriksson et al., 2020), results from this study showed that redemption was not the only common theme for how men in later adulthood in Sweden narrated their life’s greatest challenge and satisfaction with life and generativity was not higher for the redemptive sequence than for the other emotional sequences. These results are not in line with previous research from the United States indicating that higher well-being is associated with redemptive sequencing (Adler & Poulin, 2009; McAdams et al., 2001; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008), that redemption can predict well-being (Cox et al., 2019), and associations between generativity and redemption (McAdams & Guo, 2015; McAdams et al., 2001). Contrary, in the Swedish context redemption does not appear to stand out among later adult men as a narrative process connected to higher satisfaction with life or generativity.

The present study found several narrative framings of challenges, four emotional sequences (Eriksson et al., 2020) and one additional narrative theme with metareflections of challenges as part of life. A cross-cultural study by Turner (2022) also found other themes besides redemption in narratives of challenges. For example, focusing on how people from Denmark, a country geographically close to Sweden and part of the northern countries in Europe, narrated their stories, Turner (2022) found narrative themes that involved reasoning about both positive and negative outcomes (balanced affect) and highlighting universality of lived experience (normality). The first theme, balanced affect, resembles the combination of positive and negative sequencing as they both concern highlighting two separate emotions in the outcome of the negative event. Interestingly, the additional narrative theme found in the present study concerning metareflections of challenges as part of life share notable similarities with the theme normality found in the Danish sample in Turner’s study as the themes both concern the participants view of negative experiences as something normal and part of life. Together the present study, the study by Eriksson and colleagues (2020), and the study by Turner (2022) show that other narrative themes, aside

from redemption, are part of how people narrate challenging experiences in cultural contexts outside of the United States (maybe in the US as well?) and indicate that narrative themes may be related to cultural contexts.

As discussed by Eriksson and colleagues (2020), the way that people in Sweden narrate their challenges could be related to the Swedish context. For example, words like *lagom*, that is often used in Sweden, meaning that things are not too much or too little (The Swedish National Encyclopedia, 2023), indicate a norm that could imply that redemption is considered “too much” in its emphasis on the positive side of challenging or negative events. Eriksson and colleagues (2020) also discussed the law of Jante (“Jantelagen”; Sandemose, 1933) that informs the culturally appropriate way to behave in the Swedish context, which is to not stand out. Narrating a challenge with a redemptive framing of the event may put the individual at risk of standing out compared to others as redemption can involve personal gains for the individual (e.g., new insight, development). Theoretically, it can therefore be argued that redemption is not as highly valued in the Swedish context as in the United States. Future research could examine what type of stories are preferred in the Swedish context (see McLean et al., 2020b). There were, however, also differences between the present study and the previous study from Sweden (Eriksson et al., 2020) and these differences indicate that age and gender, alongside cultural context, may play a role in the narration of challenges.

Given that the participants in the present study were in later adulthood, from a life-review perspective one would expect their narratives to be biased toward positive emotions (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014), rather than negative ones as the present study showed. Research has shown that older adults engage in more positive autobiographical reminiscing than younger adults (Agostino & Sheldon, 2023). It is therefore surprising that the negative sequencing was this common in a sample of older adults. The additional narrative theme, metareflections of challenges as part of life, could have a role in maintaining the negative framing of the narratives. If challenges are framed as a part of life, leaving the story with a negative sequencing might not be experienced as problematic. Moreover, the additional narrative theme, as it concerned retrospectively reflecting on challenges as a part of life, might be related to life review (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014), as some of the participants were more focused on situating their experiences in the context of their whole life than on the particular experience in itself.

Gender could also help explain the differences in emotional sequencing compared to other studies, as the participants were men in later adulthood. Previous research has found men to have lower levels of processing in autobiographical reasoning (McLean, 2008). A potential explanation for negative sequencing being common in our study

could be that older men tend to reflect less over their challenging and negative experiences and let them stay as they are, negative. Framing challenges as part of life as captured by the additional narrative theme, may aid the acceptance of negative events just being negative. The participants coded to the additional narrative theme often described challenges as negative when they happened but from the retrospective perspective nothing that stood out or something that could be expected from life. As this study only included later adult men from Sweden, future research would be needed in order to determine whether the additional narrative theme is related to gender, age, and culture, however. Furthermore, McLean (2008) showed that men in the older age group tended to display less autobiographical reasoning involving change, and more reasoning that showed stable aspects of their identity. As redemptive narratives often involve some silver lining and growth, the results from the present study could also be interpreted in the light of this tendency to show less reasoning about positive change. Importantly, it should also be noted that several studies have not found gender differences in narrative processes among adults (Bauer et al., 2005; Cox et al., 2019), but this may be due to the age of the adults and the possibility that older age groups may show more gender differences (McLean, 2008). It would therefore be valuable to further examine gender differences in narrative identity in later adulthood.

Regarding the content of the challenge narratives, we found a diversity of types of challenges, representing the different challenges individuals may be expected to go through as well as more idiosyncratic challenges that were sometimes potentially disruptive or traumatic. The normative challenges we identified in this study were in line with what could be expected from theory and previous research on challenges across the lifespan (Robinson & Wright, 2013), life scripts and normative negative events later in life (Janssen & Rubin, 2011) as well as challenges that may be common in later adulthood (Cowan et al., 2019; Robinson & Stell, 2015). Challenges that deviated from cultural or age normative events (see e.g., Rubin & Berntsen, 2003) were more often potentially disruptive and the study illustrated that the adversity of an event depends on its timing, its relation to life scripts, as well as its more in-depth content.

Our analyses revealed that the participants who narrated adverse challenges were younger when the challenge occurred compared to those whose stories were expected or normative, who instead narrated challenges that were closer in time. It is reasonable to assume that there had been more normative challenges throughout the participants' lives (Robinson & Wright, 2013), but that these memories might fade away in one's memory as time goes by. The integration of memories so that they do not stand out as extraordinarily challenging in retrospect was also what the participants coded to the additional narrative theme metareflections of

challenges as part of life often referred to, exemplified in the quote in the present study's title, "Every day has enough of its own torment."

The adversity of the challenges was not related to either generativity or emotional sequencing, but satisfaction with life was lower among those who narrated adverse experiences compared to those whose stories were coded as not expected but not disruptive. This could be seen as a potential indicator of the challenge actually having had a disruptive impact on the individual. As life script research indicates (Janssen & Rubin, 2011), most people are aware of the type of experiences that are expected at a certain age or developmental period, thus experiences that diverge from such scripts may impact individuals' well-being both through the awareness of deviation and through its actual adversity (see e.g., Felitti et al., 1998 on the detrimental consequences of severe adversity). However, our results are cross-sectional and the associations may just as well be reciprocal. For example, Specht et al. (2011) investigated personality and majors life events (i.e., not just challenges) and found both selection effects where personality predicted the occurrence of major life events and socialization effects where personality changed following a major life event. Although not grounded in the present analyses, similar complex associations could hold for the relations between adversity of the challenges and satisfaction with life as well. Of course, there are many different factors that may have an impact on an individual's satisfaction with life, but this finding indicates its association with adverse challenges.

Limitations

As with any study, our study has limitations. For a qualitative analysis, the number of participants is quite large; however, as the qualitative analyses were mainly deductive or descriptive and the main analysis was quantitative, the potential depth lost by having a great deal of data to analyze is outweighed by the benefit of being able to perform the statistical analyses. On the contrary, from a quantitative perspective, the analyses we were able to perform were restricted by the number of participants, with a strength still being the coding of qualitative data for the statistical analyses. Additionally, as the sample size was small it could also be that we did not detect the expected associations between, for example, redemption and generativity due to power issues. Nonetheless, neither the statistical analyses nor descriptive mean comparisons indicated that there would be differences with a larger sample. However, in previous studies (e.g., McAdams & Guo, 2015; McAdams et al., 2001) showing associations between redemption and generativity, redemption was coded across several narratives yielding

continuous scores. This approach might be recommended for future studies wanting to shed more light on the present findings.

Another limitation in the study is the age range. Besides from culture the findings of no associations between redemptive sequencing and satisfaction with life and generativity could be related to the age of the participants. Many of the studies showing these association in the United States are with midlife adults (see e.g., McAdams et al., 2001). Our study is with later adult (male) participants and the other Swedish study (Eriksson et al, 2020) included early adults. Our results revealed no associations with age, but there is still a need for investigations of the role of redemption and other emotional sequences among midlife individuals in Sweden.

Conclusion

This study of life’s greatest challenge among men in later adulthood demonstrates several aspects of importance for narrative identity and developmental psychology. The analyses of these identity narratives revealed that the timing and adversity of the challenges were connected to satisfaction with life. Furthermore, negative framing was common in the challenge narratives of these men in later adulthood, without being negatively associated with either satisfaction with life or generativity. From a life-review perspective, this study highlights a new perspective on negative emotional sequencing in later adulthood and adds nuances to the emphasis on the importance of redemption and positive emotionality for well-being and generativity in this part of life. The study adds to the body of research that investigate emotional sequencing and redemption from a cultural and narrative perspective (Blackie et al., 2023; Eriksson et al., 2020; Turner, 2022), and indicate that the status of redemption as a master narrative may depend on culture and context. The differences in emotional sequences within the same cultural context indicate that alongside culture, age, and gender might impact to the narration of challenges and their consequences.

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Data Availability Analytic code and codebooks are available at <https://osf.io/cbx4q/>. The data are not publicly available, and no aspect of this research was preregistered.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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