The Problem of Meaning in Personality Psychology from the Standpoints of Dispositional Traits, Characteristic Adaptations, and Life Stories

Dan P. McADAMS
Northwestern University

In recent years, personality psychologists have focused increasing attention on the problem of meaning in human lives. Considering personality from the standpoint of the three layers of dispositional traits (the person conceived as a social actor), characteristic adaptations (the person as a motivated agent), and integrative life narratives (the person as author), this article identifies important features of personality that are associated with a person’s sense that he or she is living a meaningful life. Dispositional traits associated with extraversion and conscientiousness appear to enhance meaning, whereas neuroticism is associated with lower levels of meaning in life. Characteristic adaptations, such as motives and goals, tend to specify what kinds of meanings people make and the specific areas in life where they make meaning. Strongly shaped by culture, integrative life stories show how the person authors a broad meaning for his or her entire life as seen over time.

Key words: meaning, traits, characteristic adaptations, life stories

In 1945, shortly after his release from a Nazi concentration camp, Viktor Frankl spent nine intense days writing a psychological account of his three years in Auschwitz, Dachau, and other Nazi prison camps. Eventually given the English title, Man’s Search for Meaning (Frankl, 1959/1992), the book detailed Frankl’s harrowing experiences as a prisoner of war and described his desperate efforts, and those of many inmates, to sustain hope in the face of unspeakable suffering. Prisoners who lost meaning simply gave up and died at Auschwitz. But those who managed to wrench some semblance of purpose amidst the wretchedness maintained at least some chance for survival, Frankl asserted, although luck played a major role as well. Frankl argued that the human quest for meaning is a fundamental human propensity. Under certain extreme conditions, furthermore, finding meaning could make the difference between life and death.

In Man’s Search for Meaning, Viktor Frankl helped to usher in a new way to think about human personality. He proposed an existential psychology of meaning and purpose that aimed to replace psychoanalysis and behaviorism. As Frankl saw it, Freud’s libidinal instincts and Hull’s stimulus-response habits were no longer up to the task of ex-
plaining why people do what they do and what people really want from life, especially in the wake of the holocaust and in the midst of the angst and the uncertainty that characterized the post-war years. The human quest for meaning became a central theme in an array of personality theories that began to gain currency in the 1950s and 1960s. Various termed humanistic, phenomenological, and existential theories, these included broad perspectives on personality offered by Carl Rogers (1951), Abraham Maslow (1954), George Kelly (1955), Ludwig Binswanger (1963), and Rollo May (1967) among others.

Fifty years after Frankl’s landmark contribution, personality psychologists are more interested than ever in the problem of meaning in human lives. In a development that would surely have pleased Frankl, psychological theorists, researchers, and therapists of many different persuasions today focus their inquiries and their interventions on how people make meaning in life (e.g., Angus & McLeod, 2004; Bering, 2002; Molden & Dweck, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001; Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004; Wong & Fry, 1998). Some investigators even claim that chimpanzees make meaning, at least in a primitive way (Povinelli & Bering, 2002). When it comes to human personality, one is hard pressed to find a perspective in the current scientific literature that does not allow for the prospect of meaning making. The proposition that human beings are largely about the psychological business of making sense out of their own experiences and their interactions in the world is, therefore, an implicit (or in many cases explicit) assumption in many different theories and research programs in personality psychology today (McAdams, 1997, 2009).

In what follows, I will highlight some of the most important and interesting efforts on the part of theorists and researchers to understand the role of meaning in human personality. My account will be organized according to an emerging integrative framework for personality psychology (McAdams & Pals, 2006; McAdams & Olson, 2010; Singer, 2005). From this perspective, personality may be viewed as consisting of three different layers. At the first layer, broad dispositional traits provide a general sketch of psychological individuality. At the second layer, more contextualized characteristic adaptations fill in many of the details. Layered over traits and adaptations, integrative life stories speak to the overall narrative pattern of a life. For any individual, personality is a unique arrangement of (1) dispositional traits, (2) characteristic adaptations, and (3) integrative life stories, evolving in a complex social and cultural context. Human meaning making happens at all three layers of personality, but in different ways.

**Layer 1: Dispositional Traits; The Person as “Actor”**

Personality begins with traits. From birth onward, psychological individuality may be observed with respect to broad dimensions of behavioral and emotional style that cut across situations and contexts and readily distinguish one individual from another (Casi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Through repeated and complex transactions between genes and environments over developmental time, early temperament differences morph into the broad traits of personality that may be observed in adulthood, and that go by such names as “extraversion,” “dominance,” and the tendency toward “depressiveness.” Typically assessed via self-report scales, dispositional traits account for broad consistencies in behavior across situations and over time. A considerable body of research speaks to the longitudinal
continuity of dispositional traits, their substantial heritability, and their ability to predict important life outcomes, such as psychological well-being, job success, and mortality (McAdams, 2009; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Roberts & Pomerantz, 2004). Decades of factor-analytic studies conducted around the world suggest, furthermore, that the broad universe of trait dimensions may be organized into about five regions or clusters, now routinely called the Big Five (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1999). The most well known conception of the Big Five divides traits into the categories of extraversion (vs. introversion), neuroticism (vs. emotional stability), conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience.

Dispositional traits account for psychological individuality from the standpoint of the person as an actor in the social world. From birth onwards, human beings perform on a social stage in ways that are driven by basic temperament dispositions. Dispositional traits like extraversion and agreeableness sketch out general consistencies in behavioral performance, providing an overall characterization of the actor's general behavioral style.

When it comes to the psychology of meaning, one of the most frequently invoked trait concepts is hardiness. In their original conception of hardiness, Kobasa (1979) and Maddi (1998) drew upon existential theory to describe a tendency to strive for meaning and purpose in the face of life's most daunting demands. People with a strong disposition towards hardiness, they argued, welcome challenges in life, exert control over difficult events, and aim to make lasting commitments amidst uncertainty and change. A hardy disposition should promote healthy behavior and the ability to cope well with stress. Self-reports scales designed to assess individual differences in the three components of hardiness—challenge, control, and commitment—predict corresponding differences in people’s responses to stress. For example, Kobasa (1979) found that executives who experienced high levels of stress on the job showed significantly lower levels of physical illness and overall better health if they were high on hardiness, compared to those low on hardiness. Hardy college students report lower levels of illness than their peers who are lower in hardiness, regardless of stress level, and lawyers who score high on the commitment scale of hardiness report lower levels of physiological strain (Kobasa, 1982). According to Maddi (1998), hardy attitudes and habits do more than make us happy, however. Following Frankl, Maddi (1998) believes that they also stave off existential despair and help modern people find meaning in life.

In terms of the five-factor model of dispositional traits, hardiness appears to be part conscientiousness, part low neuroticism, and perhaps part high openness to experience. These well-established trait domains have themselves been shown to link to health and meaning-making in important ways. Conscientiousness is a strong predictor of health-related behaviors, such as physical exercise, better diet, and lower levels of substance abuse, smoking, and risky sexual practices (Bogg & Roberts, 2004). Conscientiousness also predicts meaningful, prosocial involvements in the community, such as church attendance and volunteerism (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). High levels of openness to experience tend to be associated with preferences for complex and challenging environments (McCrae & Costa, 1997). High levels of neuroticism are a risk factor for a wide range of problems in life, including those implicated in both personal meaning and physical health. People high in neuroticism tend to feel vulnerable and insecure and are more apt, than
those low in neuroticism, to report guilt, shame, anguish, despair, and alienation in life.

Surveying the full panoply of Big Five traits reveals a surprisingly powerful connection between meaning and a disposition toward extraversion. Traditional conceptions of extraversion have suggested that this trait is mainly about being gregarious and sociable. For example, Jung (1936/1971) argued that extraverts tend to draw energy from people and social relationships whereas introverts tend to draw energy from the inner life of the mind. A substantial body of research now shows, however, that extraversion is just as much about the tendency to pursue rewards and to experience positive emotion as it is about being with people (Smillie, Pickering, & Jackson, 2006; Watson & Clark, 1997). Again and again, studies show that people high in extraversion report more positive emotions in life, even when they are not with people (Lucas & Diener, 2001). And high levels of positive emotion tend to be strongly associated with feeling that life has meaning and purpose. Whether considering the short-term effects of a situationally induced experience of positive emotion or considering the long-term effects of trait-based dispositions towards positive emotionality, people who are experiencing positive emotion tend to report that their lives feel more meaningful to them, compared to individuals who experience lower levels of positive emotion (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Fredrickson (2001) has argued that positive emotions “build and broaden” a healthy and meaningful life. The dispositional tendency to enjoy life, to find joy and excitement in what life has to offer, may promote the search for meaning; likewise, striving for meaning may cultivate traits of positive emotionality.

In sum, a broad range of dispositional traits in personality, ranging across the Big Five spectrum, appear to have implications for meaning in life. Certain dispositional profiles—high hardness, for example, high levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience, and low levels of neuroticism—tend to be associated with the actor’s overall feeling that life has purpose and value, that one is connected to others and to society in meaningful ways, and that obstacles in life can be overcome. Basic dispositional traits in personality appear to provide psychological resources upon which individuals draw in the quest for human meaning. If one is blessed with high levels of extraversion, for example, or a strong conscientiousness trait, one may be better equipped, psychological speaking, to find ways to make life feel meaningful and purposeful.

That said, precisely what form such meaning-making may take, however, can typically not be deduced from the actor’s traits. One hardy person may find meaning in an activist life of social change. Yet another may find it in the family. A third may believe that the deepest meanings in life come from spiritual longings and religion. A fourth may locate meaning primarily in a life dedicated to work. Dispositional traits can take us only so far in understanding how personality relates to meaning in life. To articulate a more nuanced understanding, one must move from the dispositional sketch provided by personality traits to a second layer of personality.

**Layer 2: Characteristic Adaptations; the Person as “Agent”**

From middle childhood onwards, human beings build a second layer of personality upon the dispositional base, even as that base continues to develop thereafter. As children become more self-consciously focused on personal goals in their grade-school years, they become motivational agents. To
be an agent is to act in accord with self-determined plans, rooted in decisions, choice, and goals. From the standpoint of the person as a motivated agent, personality begins to encompass a second layer in mid-childhood. The second layer consists of a wide assortment of motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental constructs that are more specific than dispositional traits and that are contextualized in time, place, and/or social role (McAdams, 2009; McAdams & Pals, 2006). These constructs may be termed characteristic adaptations, and they include motives, goals, strivings, personal projects, values, interests, defense mechanisms, coping strategies, relational schemata, possible selves, developmental concerns, and other variables of psychological individuality that speak directly to what people want and do not want (e.g., fear) in life and how they go about getting what they want and avoiding what they do not want in particular situations, during particular times in their lives, and with respect to particular social roles. Characteristic adaptations speak to the person as a motivated agent in the world, striving to accomplish goals over time. Characteristic adaptations have typically been the constructs of choice for classic motivational (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991; Murray, 1938/2008), social-cognitive (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995), and developmental (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Loevinger, 1976) theories of personality. Whereas broad personality traits, then, provide a dispositional sketch for psychological individuality, characteristic adaptations fill in many of the details.

A great deal of what people mean when they use the word “meaning” can be discerned in the kinds of characteristic adaptations they ultimately develop. For many people, meaning in life is tied up with their most cherished values. Political conservatives and liberals, for example, understand themselves and their worlds in very different ways. In the United States, conservatives show higher levels of mortality concerns and greater needs for order and closure than do liberals (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Liberals are more likely to say that a moral person should promote justice and alleviate suffering above all else, whereas conservatives are more likely to affirm the values of authority, loyalty, and purity of the self (Haidt, 2007; McAdams, Albaugh, Farber, Daniels, Logan, & Olson, 2008). Religious values and interests shape how people the world over make meaning in life. For many people, religious traditions provide a source of ultimate life meaning and purpose (Emmons, 1999). Take religious faith away and life would suddenly be bereft of meaning, many people say.

Among those characteristic adaptations that are most instrumental in shaping life meanings are personal goals and projects (Freund & Riediger, 2006; Little, 1998). Goals and projects are always about the future—the imagined ends for tomorrow that guide behavior today. As situations change, as people grow older, as individuals move from one social role to the next, goals and projects change to meet new demands and constraints. Research suggests that goals in early adulthood often focus on expanding the self and gaining new information, whereas goals in later adulthood may focus more on the emotional quality of ongoing relationships (Carstensen, 1995; Helson, Soto, & Cate, 2006).

At any given point in the life course, the content of people’s goals reflects important sources of personal meaning. Personality psychologists have examined those sources at the broad levels of motivational categories (e.g., intrinsic versus extrinsic goals; motives for power, achievement, and intimacy) and with respect to the particularities of a given person-situation ecology. Studies of the for-
mer type have found, for example, that intrinsic, growth-oriented goals and strong needs to care for others and make positive contributions to society are often associated with greater psychological well-being and reports of higher life meaning (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Emmons, 1999; Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Beyond content, process variables are just as important for life meaning. People tend to feel that their lives are most meaningful when they are making steady progress on their personal goals and when their goals are viewed to be congruent rather than conflicting (Emmons & King, 1988; Little, 1998).

Theories of personality development suggest that the meaning of “meaning” changes with developmental time. In her highly influential theory of ego development, Loevinger (1976) conceives of the “ego” as a person’s characteristic framework for making meaning of self and society. Young children and individuals at the lowest stages of ego development make sense of the world in terms of their egocentric needs and their primitive calculations of personal hedonism. What is good is what meets my needs; what is bad is what brings me punishment and pain. In the middle stages of her scheme, people mature into a conventional framework for meaning-making, as they take the perspectives of their self-defining groups and eventually the perspectives of society as a whole. Deep sources of meaning come from one’s conformity to society’s most-cherished scripts for productive and responsible behavior at work, at home, and in the broader societal context. At higher stages, one comes to construct more personalized frameworks of meaning that may defy conventions and incorporate self-evaluated standards and abstract ethical principles. Love, work, family, citizenship—these are all powerful sites for meaning-making at almost all stages in Loevinger’s scheme. But precisely what these meaningful domains actually mean depends on the stage of ego development wherein one finds oneself at any given point in the life course.

Loevinger (1976) suggested that as one moves up the ego-developmental ladder, one is likely to become more and more concerned with establishing an identity. In his theory of psychosocial development, Erikson (1963) located this move within the developmental epoch that now goes by the name of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). In the late-teens and 20s, and especially in modern societies, the most pressing psychosocial challenge is to construct and begin to live a coherent and vivifying ego identity. Erikson viewed identity to be a special arrangement of the self. The arrangement functions to integrate disparate roles, goals, needs, fears, skills, and inclinations into a coherent pattern, a pattern that specifies how the emerging adult will live, love, work, and believe in a complex and changing world.

The virtue of the identity stage is fidelity, Erikson maintained. One must show fidelity to a particular arrangement of selfhood. One must commit oneself to a particular kind of meaningful life. At the very heart of identity, then, is the problem of meaning and purpose in life (McAdams, 1985). What does my life mean in full? Who am I today? How am I different today from what I was in my past? Who will I be in the future? These large questions regarding the meaning of one’s life in full developmental time—past, present, and future—cannot be fully answered through dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations. Instead, they require a story of who I am, was, and will be. One way to read Erikson’s idea of identity is to see it as an internalized and evolving story of the self that people begin to construct in the emerging adult years (Habermas &
Beyond dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations, then, lies the realm of narrative identity, wherein life meanings reach their most extended and elaborated forms.

**Level 3: Narrative Identity; the Person as “Author”**

Even as dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations continue to develop through the emerging adulthood years, a third layer of personality begins to form in order to meet the psychosocial challenge of modern identity. Layered over the Big Five traits and the panoply of goals, motives, projects, fears, strategies, values, and beliefs that heretofore comprised psychological individuality is an emerging narrative identity—an internalized and evolving story of the reconstructed past and imagined future that aims to provide life with unity, coherence, and purpose. For both the self and others, the life story explains how I came to be, who I am today, where I am going in the future, and what I believe my life means within the psychosocial niche provided by family, friends, work, society, and the cultural and ideological resources of my environment. It is a story that distinguishes me from all others and yet shows how I am connected to others as well. It is a story that narrates the evolution of a particular self, but it is a self in cultural context.

Every life story says as much about the culture within which a person lives as it does about the person living it. In authoring a life story in late adolescence and young adulthood, people choose from the menu of images, themes, plots, and characters provided by the particular environments to which they are exposed (McAdams, 2006; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). They make meaning within the milieu of meanings provided by culture. What Frankl called man’s search for meaning takes place in an existentially circumscribed arena, wherein certain culturally favored meanings already exist and the individual is challenged to pick and choose and appropriate in order to make a story that makes sense to the self and the social world within which the self is embedded (McAdams, 2006).

What prompts the emergence of narrative identity in late adolescence and young adulthood? Why does the person become an author of the self at this time? Cognitive factors are surely important. With the advent of what Piaget called formal operational thought, adolescents are now able to take their own lives as objects of systematic reflection (Breger, 1974; McAdams, 1985). Whereas young children can dream about what might someday be, adolescents can think through the possibilities in a hypothetico-deductive manner. They can now ask themselves questions like these: What is my life really about? Who might I be in the future? What if I decide to reject my parent’s religion? What might my life mean if I am gay or lesbian? This newfound philosophical inclination requires a narrative frame for self-construction.

The earliest drafts young people author for narrative identity may take the form of what Elkind (1981) called the personal fable—fantastical stories of the self’s greatness. But later drafts become more realistic, as reality-testing improves and the author’s narrative skills become further refined. Habermas and Bluck (2000) have shown how adolescents gradually master the cognitive skills required for constructing a coherent narrative of the self. By the end of their teen-aged years, they regularly engage in sophisticated forms of autobiographical reasoning. They can link together multiple autobiographical scenes in causal sequences to explain what they believe to be their own development in a given area of life. And they can extract underlying themes that
they believe characterize unique aspects of their lives in full.

Social and cultural factors also help to bring narrative identity to the developmental fore at this time. Their peers and their parents expect adolescents to begin sorting out what their lives mean, both for the future and the past. Given what I have done up to this point in my life, where do I go now? What kind of life should I make for myself? Parallelizing the cognitive and emotional changes taking place within the individual are shifts in society’s expectations about what the individual, who was a child but who is now almost an adult, should be doing, thinking, and feeling. Erikson (1959) wrote, “It is of great relevance to the young individual’s identity formation that he be responded to, and be given function and status as a person whose gradual growth and transformation make sense to those who begin to make sense to him” (p. 111). In general, modern societies expect their adolescents and young adults to examine occupational, ideological, and interpersonal opportunities around them and to begin to make some decisions about what their lives as adults are to be about. This is to say that both society and the emerging adult are ready for his or her explorations in narrative identity by the time he or she has, in fact, become an emerging adult. As Erikson described it:

The period can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him. In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community’s recognition of him (Erikson, 1959, p. 111).

For the past 15 years or so, personality psychologists and other social scientists have examined the content, the structure, and the functions of the narrative identities that people begin to construct in the emerging adulthood years and continue to construct as they move through the adult life course. Researchers have catalogued common narrative forms and themes, connected features of narrative identity to personality traits and characteristic adaptations, examined developmental change in narrative identity, and explored the interpersonal and cultural contexts within which life stories are constructed and performed (McAdams, 2008; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Singer, 2004; Thorne, 2000). With respect to personal meaning, an important theme in this research is the construction of life narratives in the face of suffering. As Frankl knew, pain and suffering challenge human beings to make sense out of that which seems senseless, random, and tragic. Not surprisingly, therefore, researchers have focused a great deal of attention on the narration of negative events.

Pals (2006) has argued that making sense out of negative events in one’s life ideally involves a two-step process. In the first step, the narrator explores the negative experience in depth, thinking long and hard about what the experience feels or felt like, how it came to be, what it may lead to, and what role the negative event may play in one’s overall understanding of self. In the second step, the narrator articulates and commits the self to a positive resolution of the event. Pals (2006) warned that one should not pass lightly over Step One. When it comes to narrative identity, Pals suggested, the unexamined life lacks depth and meaning.

Consistent with Pals (2006), a number of studies have shown that exploring negative life events in
detail is associated with psychological maturity. For example, King and her colleagues have conducted a series of intriguing studies wherein they ask people who have faced daunting life challenges to tell stories about “what might have been” had their lives developed in either a more positive or more expected direction. In one study, mothers of infants with Down Syndrome reflected upon what their lives might have been like had they given birth to babies not afflicted with Downs. Those mothers who were able to articulate detailed and thoughtful accounts, suggesting a great deal of exploration and meaning-making in their processing of this negative life event, tended to score higher on Loewingr’s (1976) measure of ego development than did mothers who discounted what might have been (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000).

In a study of how midlife women respond to divorce, the elaboration of loss in narrative accounts interacted with time since divorce to predict ego development (King & Raspin, 2004). Among women who had been divorced for an extended period of time, vivid and highly elaborate accounts of the married life they had lost were associated with higher ego development at the time of their life-telling, and narrative elaboration predicted increases in ego development measured two years later. In a methodologically similar study, King and Smith (2004) found that the extent to which gay and lesbian individuals explored what might have been had their lives followed a more conventional (heterosexual) course predicted high levels of ego development at the time of their life-narrative accounts and increases in ego development two years later.

Narrative studies of life transitions have also shown that self-exploration and elaboration are associated with higher levels of ego development. Bauer and McAdams (2004b) examined narrative accounts from people who had undergone major life changes in either work or religion. People high in ego development tended to construct accounts of these difficult transitions that emphasized, learning, growth, and positive personal transformation. The extent to which personal narratives emphasizing self-exploration, transformation, and integration are positively correlated with ego development has also been documented in studies of narrative accounts of life’s high points, low points, and turning points (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). In another study linking development to narrative processing, McLean and Pratt (2006) found that young adults who used more elaborated and sophisticated forms of meaning-making in narrating turning points in their lives tended also to score higher on an overall identity maturity index.

If the first step in making narrative sense of negative life events is exploring and elaborating upon their nature and impact, Step Two involves constructing a positive meaning or resolution (Pals, 2006). Numerous studies have shown that deriving positive meanings from negative events is associated with life satisfaction and indicators of emotional well-being. For example, King and colleagues demonstrated that attaining a sense of closure regarding negative experiences from the past and/or lost possible selves predicts self-reported psychological well-being among mothers of Down Syndrome children and divorced women. In her analysis of longitudinal data from the Mills study, Pals (2006) found that coherent positive resolutions of difficult life events at age 51 predicted life satisfaction at age 61 and were associated with increasing ego resiliency between young adulthood and midlife.

Finding positive meanings in negative events is the central theme that runs through McAdams’s
(2006) conception of the redemptive self. In a series of nomothetic and idiographic studies conducted over the past 15 years, McAdams and colleagues have consistently found that midlife American adults who score especially high on self-report measures of generativity—suggesting a strong commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations and improving the world in which they live (Erikson, 1963)—tend to see their own lives as narratives of redemption (Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; see also, Walker & Frimer, 2007). Compared to their less generative American counterparts, highly generative adults tend to construct life stories that feature redemption sequences, in which the protagonist is delivered from suffering to an enhanced status or state. In addition, highly generative American adults are more likely than their less generative peers to construct life stories in which the protagonist (a) enjoys a special advantage or blessing early in life; (b) expresses sensitivity to the suffering of others or societal injustice as a child; (c) establishes a clear and strong value system in adolescence that remains a source of unwavering conviction through the adult years; (d) experiences significant conflicts between desires for agency/power and desires for communion/love; and (e) looks to achieve goals to benefit society in the future. Taken together, these themes articulate a general script or narrative prototype that many highly generative American adults employ to make sense of their own lives. For highly productive and caring midlife American adults, the redemptive self is a narrative model of an especially good and meaningful life.

The redemptive self is a life-story prototype that serves to support the generative efforts of midlife men and women. Their redemptive life narratives tell how generative adults seek to give back to society in gratitude for the early advantages and blessings they feel they have received. In every life, generativity is tough and frustrating work, as every parent or community volunteer knows. But if an adult constructs a narrative identity in which the protagonist's suffering in the short run often gives way to reward later on, he or she may be better able to sustain the conviction that seemingly thankless investments today will pay off for future generations. Redemptive life stories support the kind of life strivings that a highly generative man or woman is likely to set forth.

At the same time, the redemptive self may say as much about American culture and tradition as it does about the highly generative American adults who tend to tell this kind of story about their lives. McAdams (2006) argued that the life-story themes expressed by highly generative American adults recapture and couch in a psychological language especially cherished, as well as hotly contested, ideas in American cultural history—ideas that appear prominently in spiritual accounts of the 17th-century Puritans, Benjamin Franklin’s 18th-century autobiography, the American romantic tradition developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in the early 1800s, slave narratives and Horatio Alger stories from the 19th century, and the literature of self-help and American entrepreneurship from the 20th century. Evolving from the Puritans to Emerson to Oprah, the redemptive self has morphed into many different storied forms in the past 300 years as Americans have sought to narrate their lives as redemptive tales of atonement, emancipation, recovery, self-fulfillment, and upward social mobility. The stories speak of heroic individual protagonists—the chosen people—whose manifest destiny is to make a posi-
tive difference in a dangerous world, even when the world does not wish to be redeemed. The stories translate a deep and abiding script of American exceptionalism into the many contemporary narratives of success, recovery, development, liberation, and self-actualization that so pervade American talk, talk shows, therapy sessions, sermons, and commencement speeches. It is as if especially generative American adults, whose lives are dedicated to making the world a better place for future generations, are, for better and sometimes for worse, the most ardent narrators of a general life story script as Americans as apple pie and the Super Bowl.

The challenge for future research is to examine how highly generative adults in cultures outside of North America construct stories that give their lives meaning and purpose. It would be expected that the most generative adults in any society are likely to reprise and work through that particular society's most important cultural narratives in the stories they author for their own lives.

**Conclusion**

What Victor Frankl first described as “man's search for meaning” plays itself out at three different layers of human personality. At the layer of dispositional traits (the person as actor), human beings draw upon basic psychological resources to support their efforts to find happiness and meaning amidst life's struggles. These resources, however, are not distributed in a random or egalitarian manner. The dispositional traits that group themselves together within the Big Five cluster of neuroticism may breed alienation and undermine people's best efforts to cope with adversity and loss. By contrast, traits associated with extraversion and positive emotionality appear to enhance meaning-making and promote positive coping whereas traits associated with conscientiousness promote positive life-style habits that enhance health and make for productive and meaningful work. At the second layer of personality (the person as agent), meaning is captured in goals, projects, strategies, and other motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental facets of personality that are contextualized in time, place, and social role. As trait dimensions provide basic resources upon which people draw to construct a meaningful life, the characteristic adaptations at the second layer of personality spell out what kinds of meanings people make and the specific areas in life wherein they make them.

The human quest for meaning reaches its developmental and epistemic apex with the construction of narrative identity, a process that begins in the emerging adulthood years. Beyond dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations, life stories (the person as author) convey what people believe their lives mean in full, and in time. Who am I? How did I come to be who I am? Where is my life going? What does my life mean in full? It takes a story to answer the big questions like these. People begin to author internalized and evolving life stories in the emerging adulthood years, and they continue the process of narrative identity construction for pretty much the rest of their lives. The stories they construct are strongly shaped by culture. Indeed, culture provides the canonical set of images, themes, plots, and characters from which people draw in fashioning their own unique stories—stories that, at the end of the day, say as much about culture as they do about the storytellers themselves.

Recent research suggests that a favored life-narrative form in American society is the redemptive self—a narrative about a gifted and morally steadfast protagonist who journeys forth into a dangerous world, transforms suffering into growth,
aims to leave a positive legacy of the self for future generations. Epitomized in American stories of atonement, liberation, recovery, and upward social mobility, the redemptive self provides a good example of one way that many highly generative American adults make meaning in their lives. Indeed, this kind of story is a very meaningful story for many people, and research suggests that it is a story that promotes a caring and productive adult life, at least among many Americans. But there are many ways to make a meaningful life, many different kinds of meaningful stories of life that can be told and lived. Culture provides a range of possibilities for life-story constructions, and each culture provides its own unique range. Recalling his experiences in the concentration camps, Frankl knew that different prisoners made meaning in different ways. Personality psychology has always affirmed the vast variability of psychological functioning. There are many different ways to live a meaningful life, and many different kinds of stories to tell about it.

References


