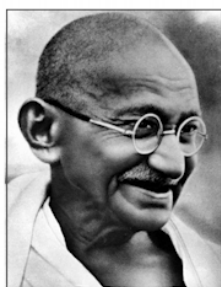


McAdams (2015)

Chapter 9 • Generative Lives, Redemptive Life Stories

Mohandas Gandhi
(1869-1948)
Leader Indian
Independence
"The Mahatma"



Oprah Gail Winfrey
(b. 1954)
Media host, Philanthropist
Oprah's Angel Network



Dolly Rebecca Parton
(b. 1946)
Singer, Philanthropist
Dollywood Foundation



Paul Edward Farmer, MD
(1959-2022)
Medical Anthropologist
Co-Founder of Partners
in Health (Care in Poor
Nations)

Generativity and the Challenges of Midlife

- Generativity (Erikson) = "an adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations" (p. 274)
 - Examples: parenting, mentoring, teaching, leadership, activities for a positive legacy in the future.
 - Tends to increase as people move from 20s to 30s to 40s.
- Different levels of generativity in different domains of life (e.g., Gandhi as high in national leadership of India and low in family relations, p. 277)
- Domains to express generativity include neighborhood, religious, and civic involvement (p. 278).

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TABLE 9.1. The Generative Adult

Adults who score high on measures of *generativity* tend to:

- Exhibit an authoritative parenting style with their children, insisting that children adhere to moral and instrumental standards while showing warmth and love (Peterson et al., 1997).
- Pass on wisdom and values to their children, and emphasize trust in their relationships with children (Hart et al., 2001).
- Be more involved in their children's schooling, as evidenced in setting aside time for homework, attending parent-teacher meetings, and having more knowledge about what happens at school (Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995).
- Raise children who grow up to show high levels of positive personality traits, such as conscientiousness and agreeableness (Peterson, 2006).
- Show higher levels of forgiveness and optimism in family relations (Pratt, Norris, Cressman, Lawford, & Hebblethwaite, 2008).
- Enjoy broader networks of friendships and social support (Hart et al., 2001).
- Be more engaged in providing care and support for other people in their families, at work, and in the community (Rossi, 2001).
- Attend religious services and/or be involved in a religious or spiritual tradition (Jones & McAdams, 2013).
- Show higher levels of moral development (Pratt et al., 1999).
- Be more involved in the political process, as evidenced in voting, writing letters to Congress, and political activism (Cole & Stewart, 1996).
- Exhibit strength and effectiveness as leaders, among late-midlife men (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, & Frese, 2011).
- Exhibit many signs of successful aging, including satisfaction with family roles and greater purpose in life (Peterson & Duncan, 2007).
- Enjoy higher levels of life satisfaction, subjective mental health, adaptive coping, and psychological maturity (Keyes & Ryff, 1998).
- Show low levels of neuroticism and high levels of traits related to warmth, altruism, positive emotions, assertive activity, achievement striving, dutifulness, and openness (Van Hiel, Mervielde, & Fruyt, 2006).
- Show higher levels of power motivation and intimacy motivation (Hofer, Busch, Chasiotis, Kärtner, & Campos, 2008).

How Highly Generative Adults Narrate Their Lives (see, also, McAdams, 2005)

- During early and middle age, there can be both excellent experiences and opportunities as well as serious misfortunes and disadvantages which accumulate [e.g., “unemployment, failed marriages, family tragedies, psychological difficulties, and a host of other debilitating factors which undermine the prospects for happiness and generativity” (p. 279)]
- “Generativity is really hard, so it takes a good story to be a highly generative adult. You need a good story about your life to sustain a strong commitment to generativity for the long haul” (p. 280)
- Americans frequently narrate their lives as “stories of redemption” and, as seen below in Table 9.2 follow a script that McAdams calls “the redemptive self” (p; 281)

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TABLE 9.2. The Six Themes That Comprise the Redemptive Self—A Common Script for the Life Narratives Constructed by Highly Generative American Adults

How does the story begin?

1. *Early advantage.* The story’s protagonist enjoys a special blessing, gift, talent, opportunity, or distinction early in life that confers a perceived advantage.
2. *Suffering of others.* The protagonist witnesses pain and suffering of others early in life, shows empathy for others, or is sensitized to social misfortune, injustice, oppression, discrimination, or the like.
3. *Moral steadfastness.* After some searching and questioning, often in adolescence, the protagonist commits the self to a personal ideology. His or her values remain strong, clear, and highly relevant in daily life for the duration of the story.

How does the plot develop?

4. *Redemption sequences.* Bad things happen, but good things follow. Negative life events are redeemed by positive outcomes, or else the narrator finds positive meanings for life in negative life experiences.
5. *Power versus Love.* The protagonist experiences strong and competing motivations for power (self-enhancement) and love (connecting to others, communion). In some stories, the competing drives lead to conflict and tension. In other stories, narrators resolve the tension and manage to integrate power and love.

How does the story end?

6. *Positive future.* As he or she looks to the future, the story’s narrator projects optimism and a continued prosocial commitment to make the world a better place. The story affirms future growth and fruition.

Trouble

- Jerome Bruner points out that good stories always involve a character’s encounter with trouble, i.e., something happens out of the ordinary.
- In redemptive stories of the self, “highly generative adults construct narratives in which trouble is often transformed into growth, insight, or enhanced well-being” (p. 284).

- How to interpret negative events in a life?
 - *Discounting the event.* Repressing memory. Mark Freeman’s (2011) notion of the “narrative unconscious” in which experience, beliefs, etc. are buried.
 - *Using “positive illusions”* – overlooking the negative or diminishing its importance. Often reflected in the experience of resilience in the face of great adversity.
 - *Exploring the negative event in depth* and thinking about its meaning, its origins, and its future role in the person’s life, as well as
 - *Committing the self “to a positive resolution of the event,* providing some temporary closure and clearing a path to the future” (p. 286).

Culture

- Across the history of the United States, there have been multiple versions of the story of personal redemption and the achievement of ultimate success. The four **major themes of redemption** in American culture involve (p. 289)
 - Redemption **via atonement**: Reflecting America’s Puritan heritage and other religious traditions, the story of moving from sin to salvation. Becoming more Godly, righteous, or enlightened.
 - Redemption via **upward social mobility**. Going from rags to riches; the Horatio Alger stories. The US as a land of endless opportunity. Oprah.
 - Redemption via **liberation**. Moving from slavery or oppression to freedom. The vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. The achievement of marriage equality in the SCOTUS decision in Obergefell v. Hodges (June 26, 2015).
 - Redemption via **recovery**. The move from sickness and other negative states (e.g., addiction, criminality) to recovery, health, finding a new state of positive living. Oprah.
- American culture’s emphasis upon *self-reliance* (e.g., Ralph Waldo Emerson) in a land of opportunity. The myth of the American West. the frontier, and “Manifest Destiny”. The efforts to spread American beliefs in democracy across the world.
- Figures in American history associated with the redemptive self: Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Jane Addams & Hull House, W.E.B. DuBois, Jimmy Carter & Habitat for Humanity, Ronald Reagan, Bill W. [Co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous], Booker T. Washington, Billy Graham, Jackie Robinson, Harriet Tubman, Helen Keller, Sojourner Truth
- The stories in different cultures and **their metaphors and images** shape how individuals will craft their life narratives.
- The **effects of division across class, gender, and race/ethnicity** will also affect how life narratives are constructed. “Narrative identity, therefore, reflects structural and cultural boundaries in society and the patterns of economic, political, and cultural hegemony that

prevail at a given point in a society's history" (p. 293). Phil Hammack refers to a culture's **master narratives** that provide the resources for identity construction.

Life Stories over the Life Course

- Stories told by younger adults are more likely to emphasize *change* while those of older adults are more usually about *stability*.
- Jefferson Singer's **self-defining memories**: older adults find "greater integrative meaning in their self-defining memories compared to younger adults...[their stories] exhibit less conflict compared to younger adults" (p. 299)

Reference

McAdams, D. P. (2005). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by*. Oxford University Press.