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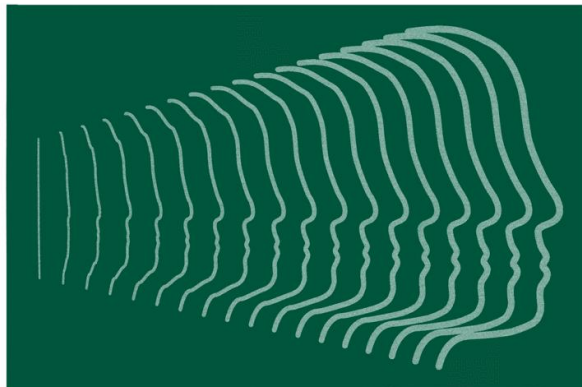
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The Eriksonian Life Story: Developmental Scripts and Psychosocial Adaptation

Joshua Wilt · Keith S. Cox · Dan P. McAdams

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Abstract An individual's life story may be conceptualized as a developmental script comprising the psychological reconstruction of one's remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future. The current study of 128 mid-life adults tested the hypothesis that individuals whose developmental scripts more closely reflected Erikson's (Childhood and society, 2nd ed. Oxford, England, Norton & Co, 1963) theory of psychosocial development would have higher levels of psychosocial adaptation. Adhering to an Eriksonian developmental script in which early life scenes conveyed a concern with interpersonal trust and adulthood scenes conveyed caring for the future of society (generativity) was related to higher levels of social connectedness above and beyond age, family income, gender, and the Big-Five traits. Examining the extent to which one's life story approximates a theoretically informed developmental script has the potential to enrich the study of narrative identity.

Keywords Narrative-identity · Psychosocial adaptation · Big-Five · Development

Introduction

One way that people potentially provide a sense of coherence in their lives is through the psychological construction and telling of life stories. Life stories bring together one's remembered past and imagined future into a narrative identity that potentially provides life with some

degree of unity, meaning, and purpose (McAdams 2008; Singer 2004). A growing number of psychologists see narrative identity as an integral feature of human personality (McAdams and Pals 2006; McAdams 2008; McLean et al. 2007; Singer 2005). In McAdams's (McAdams and Pals 2006), three-level framework for personality psychology, narrative identity resides at the third level, layered on top of (1) dispositional traits and (2) characteristic adaptations (i.e., motives, goals, values, projects).

The key scenes that comprise a life story reveal the narrator's current interpretation of the reconstructed past, experienced present, and anticipated future. Thus, examination of each life story has the potential to reveal what the narrator suggests is his or her own developmental script or trajectory. Recent research suggests that life stories may contain developmental scripts that sometimes follow a trajectory similar to Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's theory conceives of development as proceeding in eight stages revolving successively around conflicts of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and ego integrity. Reflecting an Eriksonian developmental logic, Conway and Holmes (2004) showed that autobiographical memories from the first six decades of life contain themes roughly corresponding to these stages. Conway and Holmes (2004) found that "childhood" themes indicating positive/trusting relationships with others were highly prevalent in the first two decades of life (but not in subsequent decades), whereas generativity themes (i.e., caring for others, contributing to society, leaving a legacy) were prevalent only from the third decade onward, peaking in the fifth decade of life. Findings from Miner-Rubino et al. (2004) revealed a similar developmental pattern in subjective, retrospective reports of aging; adults viewed their lives as increasingly more generative throughout middle and later adulthood before

J. Wilt (✉) · K. S. Cox · D. P. McAdams
Department of Psychology, Northwestern University,
2029 Sheridan Rd., Evanston IL60208, USA
e-mail: jaw729@northwestern.edu

leveling off in the sixties. These studies suggest that themes concerning the emotional quality of interpersonal relationships may be especially salient in life-story scenes from childhood and adolescence, and similarly that generativity may be uniquely salient in scenes from adulthood. In the present study, we examine how individual differences in adherence to this kind of Eriksonian developmental script relate to aspects of personal and interpersonal adjustment.

Research has shown that features of narrative identity relate to psychological health. For example, themes of intrinsic growth (e.g., personal growth and meaning) aggregated across narrative accounts of high points, low points, and turning points in one's life were associated with higher levels of life-satisfaction and psychological well-being in both university students and an older adult sample (Bauer et al. 2005). Redemptive imagery in life stories is positively associated with external measures of both life-satisfaction and generativity and negatively associated with depression (McAdams et al. 2001).

The present study extends previous research by testing the hypothesis that the Eriksonian developmental script should relate specifically to indicators of psychosocial adjustment. This hypothesis is based on the rationale that the Eriksonian script reflects a healthy construal of the social landscape, which should translate into advantageous psychosocial outcomes. Therefore, seeing one's life as a story wherein childhood scenes concerning interpersonal trust lead to adult scenes of generativity—as Erikson imagined the good life to develop—should be associated with better psychological and social health. Concern with interpersonal trust may be expressed through both positive and negative aspects of interpersonal relationships. Following Conway and Holmes (2004), the current study explores the content of childhood and adolescent scenes in the life story for positive interpersonal content such as trust, acceptance, being cared for, and friendship; we also assess negative counterparts that Erikson emphasized such as mistrust, abandonment, betrayal, and neglect. Following past research on themes of generativity in life narratives, (McAdams et al. 1993; Peterson and Stewart 1993), the current study explores the content of adult scenes (both experienced and imagined for the future) for indications of generativity through caring, contributing to society, and creative accomplishments. Independent assessments of psychosocial adaptation for the current study included self-report measures of generative concern, social well-being, and satisfaction with life.

Furthermore, we will examine whether the Eriksonian script has incremental validity for predicting psychosocial adaptation above and beyond demographic characteristics (age, gender, and family income) and the Big-Five traits (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) as assessed by the NEO-PI-R (Costa

and McCrae 1992). There is growing consensus that the Big-Five represents stable individual differences in personality at the highest level of abstraction (McCrae and Costa 2008). There is a vast literature showing that Neuroticism is related to poorer psychosocial outcomes, whereas the other four traits are related to positive psychosocial outcomes (Ozer and Benet-Martinez 2006; Roberts et al. 2007). Therefore, testing whether the Eriksonian script predicts psychosocial health when controlling for the Big-Five is an especially stringent test of the utility of the script.

Methods

Participants

The data for the current study come from the interdisciplinary project, "Faith, Politics, and the Life Story," described fully in McAdams et al. (2008). Participants were 128 mid-life adults (78 women) ages 28–74 ($M = 49.2$, $SD = 8.47$), recruited from Christian churches in the Chicago, IL area. Eighty-two of the participants were currently married, and 96 were currently or had at one time been parents. In terms of family income, the sample was mostly composed of upper-middle class individuals but encompassed a wide range of family incomes (less than \$20,000 to over \$100,000). The majority of the sample had completed at least a bachelor's degree ($n = 110$). The ethnicities included in the study were mostly White ($n = 92$) or African-American ($n = 33$), and also included 2 Asian-Americans and 1 Hispanic-Latino individual.

Life-Story Interview: Procedure and Coding

As part of a two-hour life-narrative interview, participants described (a) a positive childhood scene, (b) a negative childhood scene, (c) a vivid adolescent memory, (d) an important adult scene, and (e) an imagined idealized scene for the future. For each of the five scenes, participants were asked to describe what led up to the event, what happened, where and when the event took place, who was involved, thoughts and feelings during the event, and what importance and impact the event had on the person's life.

Each scene was coded for whether its respective themes were absent (0), peripheral (1), or central (2) in the memory, by two coders blind to all information on participants. Final scores were calculated as the average of the two coders' ratings.

The positive childhood, negative childhood, and vivid adolescent scenes were coded for positive and negative interpersonal content, in keeping with Erikson's (1963) conception of early stages in development and the

procedure developed by Conway and Holmes (2004). The positive interpersonal content code included any reference to positive qualities about one's relationships with other people, such as love, friendship, acceptance, caring, and trust. The negative interpersonal content code included any reference to negative qualities about one's relationships, such as isolation, alienation, abandonment, betrayal, abuse, mistrust, and neglect. Scores were summed across the three early memories for each participant for each theme to arrive at composite positive interpersonal and negative interpersonal content theme codes: both the positive interpersonal content code and negative interpersonal content code had possible ranges from 0 to 6. Inter-coder reliabilities, computed as intraclass correlations for the average of fixed coders (Shrout and Fleiss 1979), were .78 for both positive and negative interpersonal themes.

The important adult scene and imagined future scene were coded for generativity content. Generativity codes assessed care expressed for one's family, contributions to society, and creative endeavors. Just as for positive and negative interpersonal content in the three early scenes, the three generativity theme scores were summed across the adult memory and idealized future scene to arrive at three general theme codes with possible ranges from 0 to 6. Interrater reliabilities (calculated again as the averages of fixed coder intraclass correlation) were: .91 for family care, .89 for societal contribution, and .78 for creative accomplishments.

Assessment of Psychosocial Adaptation

In this mid-life adult sample, psychosocial adaptation was conceived as including generative concern, social well-being, and satisfaction with life. The first scale is the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS; McAdams and St Aubin 1992), which assesses concern for and involvement with young people and the next generation. The LGS is a 20-item self-report questionnaire. For each item, participants respond on a 4-point scale (0–3), on which higher numbers indicate that the item is more applicable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). The second measure of psychosocial adaptation is social well-being (SWB), assessed with a 15-item scale designed by Keyes (1998). The SWB scale assesses the extent to which the participant feels that he or she is making a positive contribution to society, the extent to which the participant feels accepted by society, and the extent to which he or she feels social coherence and actualization. Each item presents a 1–6 scale, with higher numbers indicating greater agreement ($\alpha = .70$). The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al. 1985) is a 5-item self-report measure containing items asking participants to evaluate how pleased they are with their lives. Participants responded on a 1–7 scale with higher numbers indicating more agreement with the item ($\alpha = .88$).

Assessment of the Big-Five Traits

All participants completed a self-report version of the NEO-PI-R (Costa and McCrae 1992). The NEO-PI-R uses a 5-point scale, from 0 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree.” It contains 240 items and assesses 30 lower-order facets, 6 for each of the Big-Five factors. Domain scores on the Big-Five are calculated as the sum of their respective six facet scales. The reliability and validity of NEO-PI-R scales have been widely established (Costa and McCrae 1992).

Results

For the three early life-story scenes, positive interpersonal content showed a mean of 3.10 ($SD = 1.24$), and negative interpersonal content showed a mean of 2.21 ($SD = 1.20$). Although these themes were negatively correlated ($r = -.32$, $p < .001$), they were combined into a composite theme reflecting overall concern with interpersonal trust mean of 3.10 ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.43$) based on the rationale that such concern may be expressed through both positive and negative aspects of relationships. Therefore, despite the fact that positive and negative interpersonal content scores were negatively associated with each other, we reasoned that both nonetheless reflect a concern with the emotional quality of early relationships. For the two adult scenes, family care showed a mean of 1.74 ($SD = 1.29$), societal contribution showed a mean of 0.78 ($SD = 0.95$), and creative accomplishments showed a mean of 1.11 ($SD = 0.99$). Family care was not reliably correlated with societal contribution ($r = -.13$, $p = .14$) and negatively correlated with creative accomplishments ($r = -.37$, $p < .001$), whereas societal contributions were positively correlated with creative accomplishments ($r = .19$, $p < .05$). Because we were concerned with overall generativity expressed in adulthood scenes, a generativity theme composite was created by summing across generativity themes ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.63$).

For psychosocial adaptation, generative concern (LGS) items showed a mean of 2.31 ($SD = 0.37$), social well-being (SWB) items showed a mean of 4.31 ($SD = 0.58$), and satisfaction with life (SWLS) items showed a mean of 4.93 ($SD = 1.32$). The psychosocial adaptation scales were intercorrelated between .24 and .44; because the LGS, SWB, and SWLS were on different metrics, the composite psychosocial adaptation score for each individual was computed by summing participant z-scores across scales.

Item means and standard deviations for Big-Five traits were: for Neuroticism ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.43$); Extraversion ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.36$); Openness ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 0.35$); Agreeableness ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.30$); and Conscientiousness ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.40$).

The prototypical Eriksonian developmental script contains high levels of concern with interpersonal trust in early scenes and generativity in later scenes. Thus, we summed the composite theme reflecting overall concern with trust and the composite generativity theme to create a composite variable reflecting how closely each participant's script matched the Eriksonian script. The Eriksonian script variable had a possible range of 0–18 ($M = 9.01$, $SD = 2.33$). The correlation between the composite trust theme and composite generativity theme ($r = .17$, $p = .06$) trended in the positive direction, indicating that concern with trust in early life scenes moderately associated with generativity in later life scenes. Importantly that interpersonal themes and generativity themes share only 2.9% of their variance suggest that they are not redundant, interchangeable constructs. Further supporting this notion is the finding from Conway and Holmes (2004) that themes similar to our interpersonal themes do not occur frequently in adulthood memories, and generativity themes do not occur frequently in childhood or adolescent memories.

Our main hypothesis was that developmental scripts that more closely approximate the Eriksonian script of having interpersonal content in early scenes and generativity content in later scenes would be related to indicators of psychosocial adaptation. Supporting this hypothesis, the correlation between the Eriksonian script variable and the composite psychosocial adaptation variable was positive and significant ($r = .29$, $p < .001$). Correlations between the Eriksonian script and the LGS ($r = .24$, $p < .001$), SWB scale ($r = .29$, $p < .001$), and SWLS ($r = .14$, $p = .11$) suggest that the Eriksonian script may be

especially relevant to measures of social connectedness rather than personal satisfaction

We next examined two threats to the validity of these findings. The first threat was that the Eriksonian script would not retain its relationship to psychosocial adaptation when accounting for demographic variables (such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status) and the Big-Five traits. Indeed, Table 1 shows that various demographic variables and Big-Five traits were also significantly associated with psychosocial adaptation, calling into question whether the relationship between the Eriksonian script and psychosocial adaptation may be spurious. We tested this possibility by conducting a simultaneous multiple regression entering the Eriksonian script along with gender, age, family income, and each of the Big-Five as predictors of psychosocial adaptation. Predictor variables were standardized, and thus the Betas (b) below are standardized partial regression coefficients. The overall model explained 51% of the variance in psychosocial adaptation, $F(9, 118) = 13.85$, $p < .001$. The Eriksonian script retained its relationship to psychosocial adaptation ($b = .21$, $p < .001$). Family income ($b = .23$, $p < .001$), Neuroticism ($b = -.20$, $p < .05$), Extraversion ($b = .36$, $p < .001$), and Conscientiousness ($b = .17$, $p < .05$) were also uniquely related to psychosocial adaptation, whereas being male ($b = -.11$, $p = .12$), age ($b = .10$, $p < .18$), Openness ($b = .04$, $p = .65$), and Agreeableness ($b = .03$, $p = .70$) were not.

Another threat to the validity of our findings is that individual themes may have relationships with measures of adjustment over and above the contribution of the

Table 1 Zero-Order Correlations between the Eriksonian Script, Demographic Variables, the Big-Five, and Psychosocial Adaptation

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Eriksonian Script	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Age	–0.17	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Gender	–0.14	–0.05	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Family income	0.14	0.19	0.15	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Neuroticism	0.02	–0.27	–0.10	–0.20	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Extraversion	0.18	–0.02	0.11	0.21	–0.20	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
7. Openness	0.13	0.13	–0.05	0.25	0.05	0.41	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
8. Agreeableness	0.07	0.22	–0.21	0.02	–0.40	0.03	0.14	–	–	–	–	–	–
9. Conscientiousness	–0.05	0.19	–0.02	0.08	–0.42	0.10	0.04	0.23	–	–	–	–	–
10. Loyola generativity scale	0.24	0.18	–0.12	0.16	–0.25	0.45	0.38	0.11	0.29	–	–	–	–
11. Social well-being scale	0.29	0.17	0.03	0.39	–0.32	0.38	0.23	0.16	0.27	0.29	–	–	–
12. Satisfaction with life scale	0.14	0.09	–0.03	0.36	–0.35	0.28	0.02	0.21	0.16	0.24	0.44	–	–
13. Psychosocial adaptation composite	0.29	0.20	–0.06	0.40	–0.41	0.50	0.29	0.22	0.33	0.69	0.78	0.76	–

Note Correlations with absolute values of .18 and above are significant at the $\alpha = .05$ level; correlations with absolute values of .23 and above are significant at the $\alpha = .01$ level; correlations with absolute values of .28 and above are significant at the $\alpha = .001$ level

Eriksonian script. If this were the case, it would weaken our findings by suggesting that understanding one's life in terms of Eriksonian developmental theory does not capture the unique effects of each theme included in the script. To examine this possibility, we conducted a simultaneous multiple regression predicting psychosocial adaptation from the Eriksonian script and each individual theme contained within the script (positive interpersonal content, negative interpersonal content, family care, civic-care, and creative endeavor). The Eriksonian script retained its relationship to psychosocial adaptation, whereas none of the individual themes were uniquely related to measures of adjustment. Taken as a whole, our results largely support our hypothesis that the combination of themes representing the Eriksonian script is positively associated with interpersonal adjustment.

General Discussion

The goal of this study was to test the hypothesis that individuals whose life stories adhered more closely to an Eriksonian developmental script would have relatively high psychosocial adaptation compared with individuals whose stories less resembled the Eriksonian script. Our findings supported this hypothesis and suggested that the Eriksonian script is perhaps more strongly related to measures of social connectedness than personal satisfaction. People whose narratives were permeated with (emotionally positive or negative) interpersonal relationships in childhood and generative themes in adulthood were more likely to be concerned with the welfare of others, give back to their communities, and have more satisfying interpersonal relationships. However, the Eriksonian script did not translate into a higher amount of overall satisfaction with one's life. A straightforward reason that the Eriksonian script differentiates between interpersonal and personal adjustment is that the script is specifically about one's relationships with others and one's concern for society. Future research could identify developmental scripts focusing more on personal successes, and then testing whether those scripts are more highly related to satisfaction with life and other indicators of personal adjustment relative to social connectedness.

The developmental script is a new concept in narrative research that allows researchers to explicitly examine the implications of aggregating across conceptually distinct themes. An inherent limitation of this method (and this study in particular) is that individual themes within scripts may not relate positively to each other, calling into question the reliability and consequently the validity of developmental scripts as psychometrically viable constructs. However, convincing arguments have been set forth for

why classic psychometric reliability is not necessary for validity for all models of measurement (Blashfield 1984), particularly when characteristics that are not positively correlated with each other may be functionally substitutable (Barton 1994). An example of functional substitution is the challenge of measuring caffeine intake—drinking coffee and tea may well be negatively related to each other and unrelated to drinking cola, yet there is no question that these drinks are functionally substitutable and could reasonably be aggregated into a composite measure of caffeinated beverages. We propose that, similar to each beverage containing caffeine, the themes in the Eriksonian script share common aspects that contribute to their relationship with interpersonal adjustment. A task for future research is to identify these aspects.

Attesting to the validity of the Eriksonian script is its unique utility in predicting theoretically relevant outcomes. In the current study, salience of interpersonal relationships in early scenes and concern with others in later scenes are not individually diagnostic of psychosocial adaptation, yet in concert they support a healthy view of the social landscape. The Eriksonian scripts are therefore not reducible to its component themes. Furthermore, the script demonstrated incremental validity for predicting psychosocial health even after accounting for age, gender, income, and the Big-Five. That the analysis of the Eriksonian script yielded important information above and beyond its individual themes suggests that research investigating scripts has the potential to address pressing questions regarding new and more intricate ways in which identity might be conveyed through narratives (McLean et al. 2007). The finding that the Eriksonian script has predictive power beyond demographic characteristics and broad dispositions suggests that developmental scripts may be especially potent constructs in narrative research.

Possibly limiting the generalizability of these findings is that this study was conducted on a sample of individuals that were highly involved in their communities, as inclusion criteria for the "Faith and Politics" study included voting in the 2004 U.S. Presidential election and regularly attending church. There is thus some concern that the findings in this study would not generalize to a sample of individuals who were less civically minded as a whole, and this possibility awaits future research. Having said that one might also argue that an especially religious and politically involved group of adults might show greater social connectedness overall and thus less variation in psychosocial adaptation. If that were true, then demonstrating a positive relationship between developmental scripts and adaptation might be seen as especially noteworthy. From this study nonetheless, it can be concluded that, within a sample of highly religious community adults, the way in which one understands early and late life episodes together is related

to psychosocial adaptation, particularly generative endeavor and social health.

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