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The Usefulness of Tattoo Narratives for Expressing Life-Story Constructs

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ABSTRACT

Tattoos are one way that people can construct their narrative identity. This study used a Consensual Qualitative Research design to explore if and how life-story constructs are evident in participants' tattoo narratives. Seven previously identified life-story constructs were adapted, using 17 core ideas to specify how the constructs were evident in the narratives participants shared about their tattoos. The tattoo narratives revealed interactive dynamics between life-story constructs.

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Throughout time humanity has recorded its existence through storytelling, and a compilation of those stories is called history. Sacred texts, hieroglyphs, and works by ancient philosophers and scientists depict historical instances of collective story telling. More modern examples include movies, books, and television shows. Even advertising tells stories of what life could be like with a specific product or service. Through this same process, humans make sense of their experiences by incorporating lessons learned about self, others, and the world into their identity through stories they tell and retell (McAdams, 2001; McCarty & Christian, 2023; Singer, 2004). This process results in one's narrative identity or "internalized and evolving life-story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233).

Two areas of interest in relation to narrative identity are development and psychological adaptation. Development refers to the belief that individuals begin to construct their narrative identities during late adolescence and emerging adulthood in conjunction with specific cognitive and developmental tasks (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013) and then continue to maintain and revise those narratives throughout life. Psychological adaptation refers to individuals' ability to use life-stories to maintain a coherent narrative identity even in the face of adversity or suffering (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013). McAdams and McLean (2013) identified seven life-story constructs positively correlated with psychological adaptation. The purpose of this study is to explore how these constructs are evident in the narratives people share

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when discussing their tattoos. The following sections provide a definition of narrative identity, a description of the seven life-story constructs, and evidence for the presence of these constructs in tattoo-related narratives.

Narrative identity

Over the past two decades, there has been a steady increase in interest in understanding how people create narrative identities that provide meaning for life (McAdams, 2001). As part of this identity formation process, people create life-stories using their perceptions of experiences and specific aspects of autobiographical information they deem important to make sense of the past and anticipate the future in a way that is consistent with how they view themselves, others, and the world (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004). These life-stories, and the resulting narrative identity, are psychosocial constructs co-constructed by individuals influenced by their physical environment and cultural context (McAdams, 2001). Thus, life-stories reflect one's current cultural environment in meaning as well as expression. What follows is an explication of the developmental and adaptational nature of narrative identity. While both concepts are important to narrative identity research, the emphasis of this article is psychological adaptation.

Developmental nature

Narrative identity is developmental in both initiation and duration. McAdams (2001) hypothesized that people begin to form narrative identities in adolescence and emerging adulthood as they become aware that they have had a variety of experiences that may have provided conflicting information, and that based on that understanding, they could become many different, potentially conflicting things. To make meaning out of and unify these experiences into a coherent whole requires the ability to think abstractly and self-reflectively, skills developed in late adolescence and emerging adulthood (McAdams, 2001).

Further, people continually construct their narrative identity, choosing which experiences to remember and how to remember them based on perceived importance and utility (McAdams, 2001). This process often involves "considerable revising and reworking of one's life-story, even the reimagining of the distant past, in light of changing psychosocial concerns in the adult years and changing understandings of what the near and distant future may bring" (McAdams, 2001, p. 107). Because people co-construct life stories within a physical environment and cultural context (McAdams, 2001), for narrative identity to develop, individuals must be able to tell stories that are both culturally appropriate and interesting to family and peers (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Adaptational nature

People use life-stories to influence their psychological and mental state as well as their behavior as they navigate their external world (Singer, 2004). They then use their narrative identity to communicate who they are, how they came to be, and where they

are going, both intra- and interpersonally (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In particular, people use life-stories to describe their traits and characteristics, life goals, strengths and weakness, and/or life patterns. Singer (2004) reported that people express information regarding barriers to the pursuit of their life goals as well as how they did or did not overcome those barriers.

As individuals engage in the self-reflective process of creating life-stories, they encounter opportunities for insight and awareness that can lead to personal growth (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Therapy is an environment in which people can tell and re-tell life-stories to make meaning out of life experiences that will help them make desired life changes (Hennessy & Walker, 2009; McAdams & McLean, 2013). The re-storying of narratives is a key goal of therapy, whereby clients can give positive meaning and resolution to otherwise negative life experiences. In addition, Josephson et al. (1996) reported that sharing life-stories can improve mood and mental health. Finally, thematic elements—discussed in the following section—present in life-stories have been associated with positive mental well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Life-story constructs

McAdams and McLean (2013) identified seven life-story constructs prevalent in narrative identity research and linked them with psychological adaptation. The life-story constructs are Agency, Communion, Redemption, Contamination, Meaning Making, Exploratory Narrative Processing (ENP), and Coherent Positive Resolution (CPR). The following sections include definitions of the constructs and an overview of how each aids in psychological adaptation. While each construct is independent of the others, some are presented in dyads to underscore the interactive dynamic between them (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004).

Agency and communion

Agency refers to individuals' ability to control life experiences and influence others (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Highly agentic life-stories reveal the speaker's sense of mastery, power, achievement, or status of self or others. Communion refers to individuals' sense of connection to and care for other individuals (i.e., intimate partners, family members, and friends) or to a collective group of others (i.e., community, world, humanity; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Hennessy and Walker (2009) noted that belonging to a group helps form identity. Singer (2004) noted that all individuals desire both autonomy and connectedness, and that these two competing desires connect Agency and Communion (McAdams, 2001). Further, McAdams (2001) postulated that individuals with high prevalence of Agency in their life-stories might be motivated by a desire for power, whereas individuals with high prevalence of Communion might be motivated by love. Ultimately, every individual must find a balance between Agency and Communion; they strive to do so using life-stories (Singer, 2004).

Regarding psychological adaptability, individuals with a strong sense of Agency revealed through their life-stories may have more control over their own life (McAdams & McLean, 2013), experience increased mental health (Adler, 2012), and feel more connected to their community (McAdams, 2001). These individuals may

also be good caregivers, loyal friends, and faithful partners (McAdams, 2001). It is important to stress that both constructs are useful for psychological adaptation (Singer, 2004).

Redemption and contamination

Redemption refers to a life-story in which an individual moves from a perceived negative situation to a perceived positive outcome (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Stories exhibiting the Redemption construct reveal the speaker's belief in the possibility for negative life experiences to turn out good. Redemption and Contamination are similar in that they both depict perceptual shifts between good and bad, but they are distinct from one another. Specifically, Contamination refers to a life-story in which an individual moves from a perceived good situation to a perceived bad outcome (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Stories exhibiting Contamination reveal the speaker's belief in the possibility for positive life experiences to be negated by perception or belief that something went wrong. Pals (2006) identified a two-step process by which individuals construct either Redemption or Contamination life-stories. To create a Redemption life-story, individuals must engage in in-depth self-exploration regarding the experience as the first step. In the second step, individuals must identify and commit themselves to a positive resolution of the negative life event. If step one is incomplete, or they are unable to come to a positive resolution in step two, individuals are more likely to construct a Contamination life-story. Through the telling and retelling of the experience, individuals can re-cycle through the two steps and potentially end up with a revised life-story (i.e., from Contamination to Redemption or Redemption to Contamination).

McAdams and McLean (2013) emphasized the clear advantage of Redemption over Contamination for psychological adaptation by stating, "narrators who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life-stories that feature themes of personal Agency and exploration, tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity" (p. 233). Further, previous research has demonstrated that middle-aged adults with high levels of pro-social behavior and commitment to humanity's well-being tend to have life-stories replete with Redemption (McAdams, 2013; McAdams et al., 2001). The Redemption construct is thought to underlie the hope that motivates altruistic behavior in that if individuals strive for a better tomorrow, today, their work can and eventually will pay off (Kotre, 1999; McAdams, 2001). Finally, the Redemption construct predicts sustained sobriety (Singer, 1997), decreased criminal recidivism (Maruna, 1997), and increased life satisfaction, self-esteem, and coherence (McAdams et al., 2001). On the other hand, the Contamination construct is associated with increased depression and decreased well-being (McAdams et al., 2001).

Meaning Making

Meaning Making refers to individuals' ability to construct meaningful learning from life experiences and can range from none to deep personal insight (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Life-stories exhibiting the Meaning Making construct reveal the lessons speakers have gained through an experience and how they can apply that learning to their life. McAdams and McLean (2013) noted that Meaning Making is paramount to

narrative identity development, as it is the mechanism by which individuals transform life experiences into life-stories and is key to the first step in the process for constructing Redemption stories. Before moving to a positive resolution and subsequent Redemption, individuals must first reflect on experiences and glean deep understanding and insight (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Mistakes or lack of depth achieved will affect all other life-story constructs. The foundation of the ability to make meaning from life experiences is established at a young age—a time when individuals are prone to make cognitive mistakes—through early parent-child interactions (Adler, 1927; Reese et al., 2010). As individuals achieve increased cognitive ability/complexity, they are able to use Meaning Making to construct coherent stories based on myriad plots and details that make up various life experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Regarding psychological adaptability, individuals who can find positive meanings in negative experiences tend to have higher levels of psychological well-being and more optimistic outlooks (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). A key context in which people strive to make meaning out of life experiences, particularly negative ones, is psychotherapy. From a narrative perspective, “therapists work with clients to re-story their lives” by seeking deeper meaning from those life experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 235). Therefore, by being able to reflect on life experiences and construct deeper levels of meaning, individuals are able to work toward mental wellness.

Exploratory Narrative Processing & Coherent Positive Resolution

Exploratory Narrative Processing (ENP) refers to individuals’ ability to engage in the self-exploration process (McAdams & McLean, 2013). High levels of ENP in life-stories reveal the speaker’s ability to deeply explore many if not all facets of various life experiences, in an attempt to construct new learning and meaning. Meaning that allows for the dissolution of tension, thus resulting in coherent and positive outcomes, reveals the life-story construct of Coherent Positive Resolution (CPR; McAdams & McLean, 2013), the second step in the two-step process for constructing Redemption stories. If Meaning Making is the mechanism by which individuals transform experiences into life-stories, then ENP and CPR are the process. Through this process, individuals strive for causal coherence (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Regarding psychological adaptability, individuals with the ability to engage in ENP at deeper levels tend to have a stronger sense of identity (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Moving through ENP to CPR is positively related to happiness and well-being (King & Hicks, 2007; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). Specifically, ENP is linked to personal growth and CPR to happiness (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Tattoos

In western society today, it is not uncommon to see someone with tattoos. Statistically speaking, nearly a third of all Americans, half of American millennials, and 12% of Europeans are tattooed (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Piccinini et al., 2016). Individuals with tattoos in western society span all walks of life and experience broad acceptance. Unfortunately, that has not always been the case, because historically, western society has mistreated those with tattoos (DeMello, 2000). In addition, large amounts of academic research pathologizes tattoos

(Dukes, 2016). This historical mistreatment and pathologizing increases the stigma of tattoos, which has led many to “disregard the personally held meaning of tattoos, as people force their own meanings on those they stigmatize” (McCarty, 2019, p. 2).

Thought and language are connected in ways many do not understand. Vygotsky (1986) wrote that thought “does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form” (p. 219). Therefore, when marginalized peoples’ stories are ignored or suppressed, their thoughts about themselves are also affected. Throughout the years, marginalized people have been able to empower themselves through their use of tattoos (Kosut, 2000). For instance, Rudoren (2012) found that some Holocaust survivors used their tattoos to communicate a story about their time in concentration camps and their ability to survive such horrible persecution. The author even reported instances where relatives had survivors’ identification numbers tattooed as a reminder of their family identity. Another historically oppressed group that uses tattoos to communicate are indigenous people; specifically, the Māori of New Zealand use tattoos to communicate status, tribal affiliation, and family lineage (DeMello, 2000). Narrative identity research has been instrumental in giving voice to individuals from groups oft-ignored (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993) by focusing on “forms of life narrative that have traditionally been suppressed” (McAdams, 2001, p. 114). Because tattoos function to empower one’s inner reality and relational self through narrative (Littell, 2003; Tokarski, 2017), people can use tattoos to counteract the forced meaning others have attempted to place on their identity. Therefore, tattooing might be a culturally appropriate and interesting storytelling method.

Tattoos and life-stories

Hennessy and Walker (2009) proposed that writing one’s life story can allow people to give events new meaning, and that tattoos can serve such a purpose. To that end, tattoos are experiences in and of themselves. Also, they are reflective processes in the form of pictorial representations of experiences and the stories one shares about them. More precisely, people can use tattoos to construct and communicate their identity (Dickson et al., 2015) through both visual and verbal means (Kosut, 2000; Naudé et al., 2019). Expanding on Dickson et al. (2015) work, McCarty and Christian (2023) highlighted the communicative power of tattoos, finding that individuals used their tattoos to create and maintain their views of self, others, and the world—views that influenced how they approached life. This finding is consistent with McAdams (2001) claim that self-identity is a reflexive process—to establish one’s identity, one first must reflect on (tell stories about) one’s experiences.

When one considers a tattoo’s possible usefulness in narrative identity construction and adaptation, it seems reasonable to investigate how tattoos and narrative identity might relate. Additionally, in a previous article, two of the current authors (McCarty & Christian, 2023) identified a potential connection between tattoos and narrative identity development, further justifying this study.

Finally, individuals construct life-stories about their experiences to create a sense of unity and purpose (McAdams, 2001). McAdams (2001) stated that individuals often identify key self-defining experiences or memories that they give special status in their life-stories. Further, Hennessy and Walker (2009) stated that tattoos serve as emphatic outward statements of internal constructs that individuals use to provide clarity, unity, and consistency

to their identity. Considering the permanence of tattoos, it begs the question: Are tattoos a means of privileging certain life experiences or memories individuals deem as pivotal to who they are? If so, then they would be immensely useful in exploring individuals' narrative identity.

Methodology

The purpose of this deductive qualitative study is to answer the following research questions: Are life-story constructs present in narratives people share about their tattoos? If so, how are they present? To answer the research questions, the team used a Consensual Qualitative Research design (CQR; Hill et al., 1997) to analyze participants' interviews regarding their tattoos. Social constructivism served as the theoretical lens because it is the basis for narrative identity development and is consistent with McAdams (2001) belief that life-stories are meant to be heard, a task that requires social interaction.

Research team

The research team consisted of two male professors at separate counseling programs and a female graduate student. None of the authors have tattoos, and measures were taken to bracket potential biases that could influence data analysis and results. The first author has no previous experience with CQR, but does have extensive experience conducting qualitative research, usually focused on narrative inquiry. The second and third author have used CQR in two previous studies. To prepare for conducting CQR, the team read Hill et al. (1997).

Participants

After receiving permission from the university's Institutional Review Board, the first author recruited participants by visiting tattoo shops and talking with people at a university. Snowball sampling was then used to find additional participants. Participants gave written informed consent prior to engaging in the study. Selection criteria included: (1) be at least 18 years old and (2) have at least one tattoo they perceived as meaningful. Participants ($N=10$) resided in three states in the southern United States. Reported ages ranged from 20 to 40 years ($M=28$). Six participants identified as White, one as Cherokee, one as human, one as Black/African American, and one chose to not disclose. Three participants identified as female and seven as male. The number of tattoos ranged from three to 30. After completing the initial interview, each participant received a \$20 gift card. Interviews occurred in participants' hometowns.

Data collection

The first author gathered data using a relational approach to interviews (Josselson, 2013). This approach is congruent with a social constructivist lens and is appropriate because attentive listening can help people construct their narrative identity as they tell their story (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Further illustrating how the listener matters, in

experimental designs in which listener behavior is manipulated, Pasupathi and colleagues have shown that attentive and responsive listeners cause tellers to narrate more personally elaborated stories compared with distracted listeners (e.g., Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010). For the interviews, participants shared their tattoo narratives which involve the tattoo's meanings and the stories behind their tattoo, including the story of getting the tattoo and what their life was like at the time. No restrictions were placed on what they shared. See Table 1 for the interview guide. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the first author. All participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Pictures, either taken by the first author during interviews or provided by participants following the interviews, aided analysis. Because tattoos are identifiable, they are not included in this publication.

Trustworthiness

The researchers used participant photos and consensual qualitative validation (i.e., triangulation) to increase trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). They implemented a stability check (Heppner et al., 2016) by waiting to analyze the last two transcripts until after completing the analysis process (i.e., coding and cross analysis) for eight participants. Because this study was a secondary analysis of data collected over four years ago, member checks were not conducted. To aid in transferability, the authors provide rich descriptions of participants' tattoo narratives; but ultimately readers must decide for themselves whether this research transfers to their situation (Shenton, 2004).

Data analysis

Before beginning analysis, the team transferred all transcripts to an Excel workbook. Then each team member separately coded the same transcript using the start-list

Table 1. Interview guide.

Individual tattoo questions

1. Tell me the story of this tattoo
2. When did you get it?
 - a. Circumstances during the time you got your tattoo?
 - b. Who was with you?
 - c. Where?
 - d. What was going on in your life during that time?
3. What led you to get the tattoo?
4. Tell me about the experience of getting the tattoo?
5. What does it mean to you?
6. Has that meaning changed?
7. Tell me about times you've come up on a situation and thought of your tattoo?
8. Note location of tattoo.

General overview questions

1. What are your favorite and least favorite tattoos?
 2. What do you want others to think about your tattoo?
 3. How do you think people actually feel about your tattoos?
 4. Have you removed or covered a tattoo?
 5. Have you considered any new tattoos?
 6. Note how many tattoos participant has.
 7. Have you experienced stigmatization due to your tattoos?
 8. Is there anything else we haven't talked about that is important for you to include?
-

Note. Interview guide taken from McCarty and Christian (2023, p. 254).

comprised of McAdams and McLean (2013) life-story constructs. Next, the team discussed and compared coding, working toward a consensus. During the coding process, the researchers used participant words to revise the start-list, eventually developing core ideas within thematic clusters. These thematic clusters and core ideas make up a list of revised life-story constructs as they relate to tattoo narratives. See Table 2 for the start-list, original definitions of McAdams and McLean (2013) life-story constructs, and final thematic clusters and core ideas.

During each coding meeting, the team read each statement and disclosed how they coded it. When disagreement arose, each member explained their position, resulting in discussions that lasted various lengths of time. During such interactions, the researchers would discuss any biases potentially influencing their perspectives. No individual team member's opinion was elevated above another's opinion (the member with the least power often explained a position in a way that convinced the other two team members). To help ameliorate power issues and to ensure no individual's opinion was elevated above another's, the team alternated who first presented their code for a given statement. The researchers paused the process when they felt unable to reach an agreeable consensus, and resumed the discussion at a later time.

Following Hill et al. (1997) suggestion, the researchers conducted a cross-analysis of the data to evaluate the frequency and consistency of the core ideas across thematic clusters. Cross-analysis was completed before and after the stability check. The stability check confirmed the thematic clusters and core ideas identified in the previous eight transcripts.

Results

The results depict modified life-story constructs presented by McAdams and McLean (2013). While analyzing the data, the researchers were better able to understand the interviews by parsing the start list—comprised of 7 thematic clusters—into 17 core ideas. Regarding thematic clusters, the most prevalent was ENP, followed by Communion, Meaning Making, Agency, Contamination, CPR, and Redemption. Regarding core ideas, the five most frequent were ENP-low (104 statements) and -moderate (91), Communion-love (83), Agency-self (69), and Meaning Making-reminder (56). All thematic clusters were considered general frequency, meaning they were present in all cases. Core ideas ranged from variant, to typical, to general in frequency. The following sections present the thematic clusters and the associated core ideas in order of frequency (most to least). Table 3 provides additional details regarding the prevalence of each thematic cluster and core idea by participant and overall. While exemplary quotes are given in the text, due to space limitations, Table 4 contains additional quotes for all thematic clusters and core ideas.

Exploratory Narrative Processing

Exploratory Narrative Processing (ENP) accounted for 30% of participant statements and relates to self-exploration found in the person's life-story. McAdams and McLean (2013) suggested that high levels of ENP show a more complex exploration and



Table 2. Start-list, thematic clusters, and core ideas.

Start-List	Original Definition	Thematic Clusters & Core Ideas
Agency	<p>"The degree to which protagonists are able to affect change in their own lives or influence others in their environment; often through demonstrations of self-mastery, empowerment, achievement, or status. Highly agentic stories privilege accomplishment and the ability to control one's fate."</p> <p>"The degree to which protagonists demonstrate or experience interpersonal connection through love, friendship, dialogue, or connection to a broad collective. The story emphasizes intimacy, caring, and belongingness."</p>	<p>Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self: sense of control over one's own life • Others: sense of control/influence over others <p>Communion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love: family and/or significant others • Friendship • Broad Collective: sense of connection to their community or society in general • Religious/Spirituality: sense of connection to something greater than oneself. • Lack of: feeling disconnected from others • Loss of (Grief): expressions of grief <p>Redemption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus is on the process of moving from bad to good; a sequence of events; past to present; disclosure of experiences that brought participant to current state. <p>Contamination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process: negative stories about being tattooed • Experience: negative stories about living with the tattoo • Tattoo: negative stories about the esthetics of the tattoo <p>Meaning Making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminder: tattoo serves as a reminder of an experience, belief, or person • Concrete lesson: tattoo communicates a lesson to the observer • Deep Insight: tattoo communicates a deeper message than reminder or concrete lesson <p>Exploratory Narrative Processing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low: Chronological or logistical description of getting tattooed or the time around the tattooing. • Moderate: More than logistical/chronological description. Includes some exploration and self-understanding, but lacks depth. • High: Deep exploration or the development of a richly elaborated self-understanding. Indicated by high level of conviction or the ability to apply metaphor to the development of self. <p>Coherent Positive Resolution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus is on the outcome of the redemption or exploratory narrative process. Answers the questions, "What positive resolution has the participant come to? What positive direction are they now headed?"
Communion		
Redemption	<p>"Scenes in which a demonstrably 'bad' or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably 'good' or emotionally positive outcome. The initial negative state is "redeemed" or salvaged by the good that follows it."</p> <p>"Scenes in which a good or positive event turns dramatically bad or negative, such that the negative affect overwhelms, destroys, or erases the effects of the preceding positivity."</p>	
Contamination		
Meaning Making	<p>"The degree to which the protagonist learns something or gleans a message from an event. Coding ranges from no meaning (low score) to learning a concrete lesson (moderate score) to gaining a deep insight about life (high score)."</p>	
Exploratory Narrative Processing	<p>"The extent of self-exploration as expressed in the story. High scores suggest deep exploration or the development of a richly elaborated self-understanding."</p>	
Coherent Positive Resolution	<p>"The extent to which the tensions in the story are resolved to produce closure and a positive ending."</p>	

Note. Original definitions taken from McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 234).

Table 3. Frequency of participant statements by thematic cluster and core ideas.

	Mark	Jane	Cody	Chad	Lee	Jil	Jim	Pam	Wolfgang	Jay	Total	Frequency
Agency	11	28	7	6	2	9	9	5	11	5	93 (12%)	General
Self	10	22	6	6	2	4	8	5	3	3	69 (9%)	General
Others	1	6	1	0	0	5	1	0	8	2	24 (3%)	Typical
Communion	13	33	22	13	9	16	6	20	24	19	175 (23%)	General
Communion	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	4 (1%)	Variant
Love	4	26	16	8	3	4	1	11	0	10	83 (11%)	General
Friendship	3	2	1	3	0	4	3	0	2	3	21 (3%)	Typical
Broad Collective	3	5	4	2	0	2	1	8	10	3	38 (5%)	General
Religious/Spiritual	2	0	0	0	1	6	0	0	7	1	17 (2%)	Variant
Lack of	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	6 (1%)	Variant
Loss of (Grief)	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	2	6 (1%)	Variant
Redemption	4	8	2	0	2	2	2	0	2	0	22 (3%)	Typical
Contamination	24	4	4	4	5	7	6	1	3	3	64 (8%)	General
Contamination	2	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	6 (1%)	Variant
Process	5	0	0	2	0	1	3	0	0	0	11 (1%)	Variant
Experience	5	4	3	0	2	2	2	1	3	0	22 (3%)	Typical
Tattoo	12	0	0	2	3	4	1	0	0	3	25(3%)	Typical
Meaning Making	12	21	11	3	6	6	8	10	6	15	98 (13%)	General
Reminder	9	8	9	2	6	5	2	7	2	6	56 (7%)	General
Concrete Lesson	0	4	0	0	0	1	2	3	3	2	15 (2%)	Typical
Deep Insight	3	9	2	1	0	0	4	0	1	7	27 (4%)	Typical
Exp. Narrative Proc.	18	32	12	18	16	26	35	26	34	17	234 (30%)	General
Low	6	12	6	9	6	21	7	18	10	9	104 (14%)	General
Moderate	2	18	4	6	6	3	15	7	21	8	91 (12%)	General
High	9	2	2	3	4	2	13	1	3	0	39 (5%)	General
Coherent Positive Resolution	3	8	5	4	1	3	3	2	1	3	33 (4%)	General
N/A	11	14	7	4	2	2	1	2	5	1	49 (6%)	General
Total	96	148	70	52	46	71	70	66	86	63	768 (100%)	

Note. General – Applies to all but 1 case (9 to 10 cases), Typical – Applies to 6 to 8 cases, Variant – Applies to 2 to 5 cases.

self-understanding. When analyzing transcripts—specifically while attempting to come to consensus—the research team developed the three core ideas related to ENP: low, moderate, and high. Low levels only include logistical or chronological descriptions; for example, all participants included their age when they got a tattoo and where the tattoo was located on their body. ENP-moderate includes more than only logistics and chronology, in that it involves some exploration or self-understanding, but it nevertheless lacks the greater depth needed for higher levels of ENP. The team further clarified the high specifier by asking if the life-story contained a high level of conviction or ability to apply metaphor to the development of self.

For instance, Jay exemplifies ENP-moderate when describing his tattoo of the Japanese symbol for dragon. He said, “I was addicted to drugs ... and ... that was the rebellious thing to do for me.” While this statement was more than logistical or chronological information, it lacked the deep exploration and use of metaphor necessary to be coded as ENP-high evident in Lee’s narrative around his favorite tattoo, Superman. Lee said,

[My favorite one is] the Superman because of my daughter. ... There’s a lot of people that lean on me sometimes and I feel like I have to be there for them. And I try to go out of my way when they need me. ... I’d cut my arm off and give it to them if they needed it. ... A lot of times I feel guilty when I can’t do more. I really feel guilty and helpless when someone needs me and I can’t provide or deliver.



Table 4. Additional participant statements by thematic cluster and core idea.

Agency

Self

"I try to be someone who is very independent, with martial arts, with weapons, with keeping food and water stored up." (Wolfgang)

Others

"I encourage all of my clients to come in and do a consultation and let's sit on it for a week. ... it gives them time to meditate on the idea as well, and time to think, Is this what I want on my body for the rest of my life?" (Jay)

Communion

Communion

"I think it would be a positive thing ... because I touched on ... a lot of different personal things and I feel like you probably learned a lot about me and I could see that being a useful tool to get someone to open up." (Pam)

Love

"It kinda almost made me feel like a father figure. ... Being able to be that for him was really impactful for me." (Chad)

Friendship

"After everything was done and said ... we'd all get together and have our friendship back." (Cody)

Broad Collective

"It gives me ... more ways to communicate with people than anything." (Jane)

Religious/Spiritual

"This one is about faith. ... I'm not a Bible thumper, but I do believe in God and Jesus." (Jill)

Lack of

"I don't even like most people." (Wolfgang)

Loss of (Grief)

"I was feeling heavy grievance over the death of my wife." (Lee)

Redemption

"It was miserable. It resonated within me forever where I'm like, why would I ever want to do something like this again? It looks terrible. It felt terrible. ... Lucky ... I had someone fix it for me. So it's a lot better now. Much sharper, cleaner. Looks a lot better now." (Mark)

Contamination

Contamination

"I've spent my entire life doing it up until the point I had back surgery and couldn't play competitively anymore." (Cody)

Process

"I was shocked. ... You didn't get used to it the whole time. So like the whole time you felt like they were just cutting into your arm." (Chad)

Experience

"It bothers me sometimes. Honestly, it's been bothering me. ... This one was impulsive and it means nothing. And so it throws me off." (Jane)

Tattoo

"It's old. So. And you'll see how faded it is. Looks like it had some color in it. Because it did. ... This is terrible, because it's all faded." (Mark)

Meaning Making*Reminder*

"It represents when I went to spend the summer with the Hopi Indians and did the VBS with the kiddos. It was amazing." (Jill)

Concrete Lesson

"This just shows sometimes you shouldn't just rush into things." (Jane)

Deep Insight

"I like hiking a lot. ... So I got it cause nature and everything grounds me so it's on my foot." (Jane)

Exp. Narrative Proc.*Low*

"These are like six years old, if that old, these on my arms. And on the back of my neck. So, this one's like when I was 30." (Jill)

Moderate

"Some older people, I suppose, don't really care for them, maybe snub their nose at them. The younger crowd I don't think pays any attention to them, because tattoos, I believe, have become more popular. ... Before it was usually a symbol of rebellion. ... I guess through changes in our society it turned more into an art." (Lee)

High

"You're not gonna walk out and see the reflection in the water and then look up and the moon's not there. And vice versa. So you learn to think of things not as bad and good. And not as opposites. People always talk about Yin and Yang and they're usually referring to things as opposites. And they've missed the entire point of the Yin Yang idea in Taoism. They're not opposites. They are the same. You can't have hot without cold. (Wolfgang)

Coherent Positive Resolution

"I don't think I need anything else. I like it just the way it is. ... I want people to see it. ... I don't feel like I need to hide." (Jill)

Communion

Communion accounted for 23% of participant statements, and is representative of feelings of belonging. Data analysis yielded 6 core ideas related to Communion. Because McAdams and McLean (2013) included within this construct the idea of love and friendship, and a connection to a larger, or broader, collective, the researchers initially parsed Communion into three core ideas: love, friendship, and broad collective. Further analysis resulted in the addition of three more core ideas: religious/spiritual, lack of (absence of Communion), and loss of (grief).

The most prevalent core idea was love (11%) and the least prevalent were lack of and loss off (1% each). Regarding Communion-love, Chad got a tattoo of uncolored flowers that his niece and nephews color every time they visit him. He became emotional while discussing his love for them and the joy it brings him as they color his tattoo. Conversely, Wolfgang shows an example of Communion-lack of, saying that “I don’t get along with most people. They don’t get along with me” while talking about a tattoo that reads, “Only the warrior chooses pacifism, all others are condemned to it.” Jay’s narrative exemplified Communion-loss of when he discussed his teardrop tattoos. He said, “I’ve lost three real big impacts on my tattooing career. And I’ve got a tear drop for each of them.” He also chose a tattoo to represent his dead father. Regarding this core idea, he does more than simply remind himself of the people he loved, he also works through the losses. Jay lost Communion with his father, and subsequently used his Agency to represent his father in a tattoo, a decision that was redemptive and eventually brought him CPR. Jay’s narratives are an example of the dynamic connection between Communion, Agency, and Redemption leading to CPR.

Meaning Making

Meaning Making accounted for 13% of participant statements. McAdams and McLean (2013) divided meaning making into low scores lacking any meaning, moderate scores indicating that some concrete lesson was learned, and high scores suggestive of deep insight. In response to discussions during data analysis, it seemed appropriate to revise this life-story construct by replacing it with a core idea involving only a basic recall of a noun: Meaning Making-reminder. The research team kept McAdams and McLean (2013) concrete lesson and deep insight, with added descriptions as core ideas. Meaning Making-concrete lesson indicates that the individual has learned a lesson. Conversely, the tattoo can also represent a lesson to the observer. Meaning Making-deep insight represented statements depicting the recall of a noun that conveys a deeper message to the individual.

The most prevalent core idea was reminder (7%) and the least was concrete lesson (2%). Jim provides us an example of Meaning Making-concrete lesson when he discussed his door tattoo. He said that the tattoo is for him and “whoever else decides to take interest ... it’s a door of possibilities and it’s meant to be opened. You just gotta see it. ... It’s there to let you know that you have the option available.” Jill gives an example of Meaning Making-reminder when talking about a tattoo of a tree, with the words balance below the tree and faith above it. She said of its meaning,

Balance, grace, and faith in God. The tree—nature. ...The balance is the stability that God gives and in nature trees provide balance ... from the flora to the root system to the

canopy of leaves and stuff; so, it kind of incurs balance for nature. And then, God created that. And then the tree, and the birds that are exploding out of the tree.

Agency

Agency reveals beliefs in one's ability to change either themselves or others and accounted for 12% of participant statements. Congruent with McAdams and McLean (2013) definition, two core ideas emerged from the data: self and others. Participant narratives displayed a sense of Agency related to their choice of tattoos, both what the tattoo was and where it would be placed on their bodies. An example of Agency-self is Jane's narrative about choosing mountains for a tattoo, and deciding to get it on her foot. At times Agency seemed to be connected with Communion. For example, Mark seemed to use his tattoos to connect with others for the purpose of influencing them. He said,

I don't feel comfortable approaching people going, "Hey, have you heard about Jesus today?" It's not me. ... But it opens the door, and it has multiple times to people asking and being able to tell them about Jesus, tell them my story.

Mark's statement presented difficulty when coding: Was it Agency or Communion-broad collective? To answer this question the research team discussed what was learned about the participant from this statement, and concluded they learned about his sense of agency and ability to influence others. Thus, they coded it Agency-others.

Contamination

Contamination accounted for 8% of participant statements. The team kept McAdams and McLean (2013) description of Contamination and identified 3 core ideas based on the data, agreeing that there can be a general Contamination that maps directly onto McAdams and McLean (2013) description. However, discussion yielded three additional core ideas to further specify Contamination: process, experience, and tattoo. Contamination-process indicates that the event of being or getting tattooed was contaminated. For example, speaking of his tattoo artist, Jim said, "He had the hardest time with the shading. ... He just kept going over and over and over and eventually he had to give up because he was just gonna scar me at that point." Contamination-experience indicates that the experience of living with the tattoo was contaminated. For instance, Pam said, "I don't like telling people I spent this much money because it makes it sound like I'm ... wasteful. And I think people kinda judge me sometimes." And Contamination-tattoo indicates that the tattoo itself became contaminated, as evidenced by Mark's disappointment, "It was orange here and then there was a line, kind of a white above it and like yellow, but you can't tell anymore. This is terrible, because it's all faded."

Redemption and coherent positive resolution

Redemption (3%) and CPR (4%) were the least prevalent thematic clusters. The researchers kept McAdams and McLean (2013) conception of Redemption, but experienced difficulty in differentiating it from CPR, likely due to the two-step Redemption

process. The team used Redemption to code statements detailing the process of moving from bad to good—a sequence of events, past to present, or a disclosure of experiences that brought the participant to the current state. The team used CPR to code statements when the focus was on a positive outcome of ENP (an approach consistent with the two-step Redemption cycle). To help decide if it was CPR, the researchers asked each other, “What positive resolution has the participant arrived at, or in what positive direction are they headed?”

While discussing what was going on in her life when she got her Arkansas tattoo, Jane revealed a Redemption cycle, stating,

I pretty much took about a year off from theater after high school and I was really sad about it. And so, my roommate from freshman year was like, “Jane, either you get back in theater or you stop complaining to me, if you miss it just do it.” So, by that time I was back in theater.

Jane’s process of Redemption, one of defeating a certain sadness, was facilitated by Communion, yet another example of the dynamic interaction between life-story constructs.

An example of CPR came from Chad, who once questioned whether he should cover his tattoos. He was at first nervous about others seeing them. But he finally came to his conclusion, “I started to ... show my tattoos and not really worry about the reaction, because if for some reason that disqualified me from the job then I probably wouldn’t have been happy in that job anyway.” His decision not to worry anymore brought him closure and a positive ending, being able to live life as he wanted, without fear of rejection.

When participants viewed self-harm as a solution for negative feelings, the researchers departed from the participants’ perspective, determining that individuals can use self-harm to resolve tension they are experiencing but that it does not result in closure or a positive ending. Rather, the narratives they shared that included instances of self-harm seemed focused on them exploring ways to deal with intense psychological distress and thus were coded ENP-high. For example, Jim spoke of his inner, non-physical pain, and how tattooing is similar to burning himself with wax; he was emphatic that the external pain from each act brought him relief.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how life-story constructs are evident in the narratives people share about their tattoos. Results of this study indicate that life-story constructs were evident in participants’ tattoo narratives in the form of 7 thematic clusters and 17 core ideas. Through data analysis, three key conclusions emerged. First, the life-story constructs were present in tattoo narratives. Second, how they are present appears to be significant in relation to previous life-story construct research. Third, the interactive dynamic of the life-story constructs was evident in tattoo narratives.

Presence of life-story constructs in tattoo narratives

Regarding the first research question, McAdams and McLean (2013) life-story constructs were clearly evident in the stories participants shared about their tattoos. Further,

cross-analysis revealed that each thematic cluster (i.e., life-story constructs) was present in the tattoo narratives of every participant, adding to the credibility of the findings. These findings are consistent with previous literature indicating that tattoos function as a means for communicating internalized stories about how individuals view themselves (Borokhov et al., 2006; Dickson et al., 2015; Hennessy & Walker, 2009; Kosut, 2000; Littell, 2003; Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005; Tokarski, 2017). In fact, Hennessy and Walker (2009) stated that it is common for individuals to use tattoos to communicate their life-philosophy. Further, the findings are consistent with previous research (Hennessy & Walker, 2009; McCarty & Christian, 2023; McCarty & Popejoy, 2021; Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005) suggesting that individuals weave their tattoos together to tell a coherent story about self, others, and/or the world, a process similar if not the same as narrative identity development (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004). Results support the idea that tattoo narratives are a culturally appropriate (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Kosut, 2000) and interesting (Wymann, 2010) mode by which individuals share life-stories (Dickson et al., 2015; Littell, 2003; Tiggemann & Golder, 2006), an important finding based on the need for creative and culturally specific ways for individuals to share their narratives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Based on the results, it appears that tattoo narratives are indeed useful for expressing life-stories that are pertinent to narrative identity development.

Prevalence of life-story constructs in tattoo narratives

Regarding the second research question, life-story constructs varied in the qualitative and quantitative manner in which they were present in tattoo narratives. Data analysis yielded 17 core ideas related to each of the seven thematic clusters (i.e., life-story constructs). What follows is a discussion of the two most prevalent life-story constructs (ENP and Communion), least prevalent (Redemption) and the potential link between thematic cluster and core idea prevalence.

Exploratory narrative processing

Ultimately, ENP at some level is key for any of the other life-story constructs to be present. Hennessy and Walker (2009) suggested that individuals use tattoos to express life stories they are unable to verbalize. Interestingly, in the current study, ENP facilitated the verbalization of the stories participants' tattoos held, sometimes years after the fact. Therefore, it makes sense that ENP was the most prevalent theme since participants used the exploration of logistical/chronological elements surrounding the tattoo as a path toward expressing the other life story constructs.

Communion

Considering many people from western society with tattoos have experienced marginalization (DeMello, 2000), it is curious that Communion was the second most prevalent thematic cluster. Buss and Hodges (2017) explained that in the not-too-distant past, tattoos were viewed as a symbol of separation from others in western society. In fact, they explained that the word tattoo originates from

the word stigma, or mark. They further stated that tattooing in the west was historically used to set people apart. For example, Romans wanted to distinguish conquered people from Roman citizens, so they would tattoo them, an act that ultimately led to the view of those tattooed as subhuman (Buss & Hodges, 2017). At points in history, the Catholic Church linked tattooing to paganism (Marti, 2010), leading many Christians to distance themselves from those tattooed. Moreover, groups that consider themselves to be outcasts, such as prisoners, bikers, hippies, and punks have historically tattooed themselves as a means to stand apart from society (DeMello, 2000).

Though participants did discuss some negative experiences caused by people's responses to their tattoos, the main story in their narratives revolved around not division but connection, a finding consistent with Hennessy and Walker (2009) conclusion that "the most common idea about tattoos is that of belonging" (p. 129). When one looks at the prevalence of the Communion core ideas, an even more interesting story emerges. Communion-love is the most prevalent, indicating that tattoo narratives were particularly aimed at communicating a connection they feel for their families and/or significant others. This finding stands in stark contrast to the historical use of tattoos in the west. A method of othering seems to have transformed into a method for love. This conclusion is further supported by previous literature stating that individuals who share highly agentic stories are often motivated in life by power, whereas individuals who share more stories about Communion are often motivated by love or search for intimacy (McAdams, 2001). Finally, Hennessy and Walker (2009) underscored the importance of the relationship between those being tattooed and tattoo artists, a form of communion expressed by many of the participants.

CPR and redemption

According to Pals (2006), the two-step process of Redemption included ENP leading to CPR. Therefore, ENP that leads to CPR should lead to Redemption. So why, in a study where ENP is the most prevalent, is Redemption the least prevalent? The second least prevalent thematic cluster was CPR; so there seems to be a missing link from ENP to CPR. Clearly, as the most prevalent thematic cluster, ENP was present in participants' narratives. But further examination of the core ideas reveals the probable missing link: ENP-high is the least prevalent core idea in this thematic cluster. Without ENP-high, participants might have struggled to come to CPR, thus making it less likely that their life-story would include Redemption.

Interactive dynamic of life-story constructs in tattoo narratives

Results of the current study underscore the interactive dynamic of life-story constructs mentioned in previous research (Hennessy & Walker, 2009; McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Participants' narratives showed interactions in Communion and Agency, CPR and both Communion and Meaning Making, and finally in the two-step process by which individuals construct Redemption stories through ENP, Meaning Making, and CPR. While these dynamic interactions sometimes made it difficult to

know how to code, they highlighted the developmental nature of narrative identity as well as the practicality and accuracy of McAdams and McLean (2013) constructs. What follows are specific examples from the data to highlight these interactive dynamics.

Mark's tattoo narrative demonstrated how a sense of Communion can lead to heightened Agency as evidenced by his favorite tattoo on his arm that says "Worshipper of God" in Hebrew. Based on his narrative, it became evident that he uses this tattoo to connect with others; but he also uses it to influence people. The tattoo helps him approach people and connect with them—only then does he feel empowered to discuss his faith with people in a respectful way. Recall that it is important for individuals to find a balance between Communion and Agency (Singer, 2004). According to Mark's narrative, he is not trying to control others (strong Agency-others); he is attempting to connect with them and wanting to influence them toward a religion he thinks will improve their lives. The construct of Communion also interacted with Agency in participants' narratives regarding choosing and getting tattoos. Jane allowed Communion with her family to influence the timing and the type of tattoos she got (Agency-self). Cody reported his father (Communion-love) influenced his tattoos (Agency-self).

Mark's tattoo also shows an interaction between Meaning Making-deep insight and CPR. When his first child was born, he stopped playing drums at his church. A tension had manifested between various parts of his life. His tattoo narrative revealed the impact of having the new baby, working overtime, and giving up something he valued. But Mark said, "You see this [tattoo] and it's like ... you know what you're meant to do ... what your giftings and callings are. ... It's a kind of reminder of, 'You need to get back into church and get back into your calling.'" The deep meaning he gave his tattoo (Meaning Making-deep insight) reminded him of who he was, thereby bringing him to a positive resolution (CPR) of tensions when he decided to play drums again after taking a long time off.

Communion, for Chad, brought a resolution to tension about an incomplete tattoo—a flower outline lacking color. He reported that his friends consistently asked him when he would get the tattoo finished. While he initially intended to have color added, during a visit with his niece and nephews, they began coloring the outline in with markers (Communion-love). Because of that, he concluded, "I don't think I ever will ... get it filled in ... just for that reason" (CPR).

In addition, sharing a story about a tattoo can facilitate a Redemption cycle by fostering Meaning Making through ENP that results in CPR. For example, when sharing a tattoo during the interview, Jane initially regretfully stated that the tattoo had no meaning. Through ENP, she began to co-construct meaning with the interviewer, beginning with a concrete lesson of "don't be impulsive" then moving to the deep insight that she wants to be intentional about how she lives her life. She concluded her narrative by stating, "Though I don't really care for the arrow it will like, I guess it does have a meaning of don't be impulsive. So I'm glad it was a small one that I did do something super impulsive with that's, just, on my shoulder." Thus, while she desires to live her life intentionally, avoiding impulsivity, her arrow tattoo memorialized an experience where she had acted on impulse. Her story results in CPR, thus completing the Redemption cycle through not only her conclusion that if she was going to act impulsively, at least the result was a small arrow on her shoulder that she could

cover, but also, and more importantly, because she was able to experience personal growth—live life intentionally—through the re-storying of her tattoo narrative.

Implications for practice

Similar to Singer's (2004) finding that there might be "a fruitful connection of narrative identity research to clinical work in psychotherapy" (p. 448), based on the current study's results it appears that tattoo narratives have therapeutic utility. According to the current study's findings, tattoos are a significant way through which individuals give a place of privilege to key self-defining experiences or memories by permanently etching them onto their bodies. In a sense, these etchings become poles that stabilize the self (Hennessy & Walker, 2009). But though tattoos are permanent, the stories people tell about them are not. Thus, by telling and retelling the story behind the tattoo, individuals are afforded the opportunity to potentially re-story a part of their lives (Hennessy & Walker, 2009). As a primary environment in which people tell and re-tell life-stories in an effort to find meaning or make changes, it would make sense for therapists to invite individuals to share tattoo narratives as part of the therapeutic process. Further, by conceptualizing tattoos as non-verbal or pre-verbal constructs important to identity development and social behavior, therapists can better understand and help their clients (Hennessy & Walker, 2009). Additionally, using tattoo narratives in therapy has the potential to improve clients' mood and mental health, outcomes associated with the sharing of life-stories (Josephson et al., 1996; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Limitations and future research

The current study has four limitations: three related to the sample and one related to data collection. Regarding the sample, the participants were all from the southeastern United States and primarily White males. Thus, results should be interpreted with caution. Future researchers should consider using a more diverse sample from various locations in the United States and across the world. A diverse sample could add important information to the findings and might change the prevalence of thematic clusters and core ideas, or potentially necessitate revising them.

Regarding data collection, results indicated high prevalence of core ideas with lower levels of psychological depth. One explanation for this finding is that the tattoo narratives were prompted as part of a research study, not in a therapeutic context. Therefore, while the interviewer attempted to create a safe environment and used basic therapeutic skills (i.e., reflection of feeling, summarizing, paraphrasing, and clarifying questions) to facilitate open sharing of tattoo narratives, the setting and objective of the interview were not therapeutic. Thus, the interviewer did not probe for psychological depth, but rather allowed participants to share what and how they chose. It is possible that a therapeutic context would facilitate deeper levels of ENP, leading to increased frequency of CPR, and resulting in higher prevalence of Redemption. Additionally, a therapeutic setting might lead to deeper levels of disclosure resulting in higher prevalence of the core idea Meaning Making-deep insight.

Conclusion

Life-stories help people navigate their world, construct their identity, and communicate their self-coherence to themselves and others (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). These stories both create and are created by the self (McAdams & McLean, 2013) within a physical environment and cultural context (McAdams, 2001). This process continues throughout one's life. McAdams and McLean (2013) life-story constructs describe a person's journey toward construction of a coherent narrative identity. Tattoos are one way that people can construct their narrative identity (Dickson et al., 2015; Hennessy & Walker, 2009). Using a Consensual Qualitative Research design (Hill et al., 1997) to analyze participants' interviews regarding their tattoo narratives, the researchers found that those life-story constructs were indeed present in the transcripts. Data analysis yielded seven thematic clusters congruent with the life-story constructs presented by McAdams and McLean (2013), along with 17 core ideas that specify how the constructs were evident in the tattoo narratives. The tattoo narratives reveal interactive dynamics between these life-story constructs, an interaction that facilitates psychological adaptation. Future research should elicit tattoo narratives within a therapeutic setting.

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