MEMORY STUDIES

Narrating political participation: How do lifetime activists remember their political experiences?

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Abstract

Narrative approaches have gained popularity as a way to understand the construction and development of political identities over a person's life span. However, little is known about how lifetime activists remember and make sense of different types of political experiences. To overcome this gap, this study aims to explore thematic and structural features of the narratives of lifetime activists about political experiences (O1), as well as examining differences in these features according to the type of experience described and the life stage at which the event narrated occurred (O2). Forty political activists aged 65 years or older were invited to explain a positive event, a negative event and a turning point in their political participation. The motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements of the narratives were analysed. Results show significant variations in these narrative features according to the type of political experience described and the life stage at which the event narrated occurred. Our study adds to the previous literature on political identities showing that, far from being monolithic, lifelong activists' narratives about political experiences show significant variations according to these two features. Overall, the structural variations that we found in lifetime activists' narratives about political experiences largely mirrored previous literature on general autobiographical narratives. This means that, regardless of whether life stories are general or domain-specific, their structural characteristics and the variations they show by life stage and type of narrated events are largely similar.

Introduction

Like many others social sciences, political science has used narrative as a resource to help resolve some of its longest-standing questions. The use of a narrative perspective has provided new ways to approach old problems, such as understanding how leaders use political rhetoric to gain supporters for a political cause or how collective memory is created, reproduced and challenged (Hammack and Pilecki, 2012).

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Among the myriad of political subjects that have been addressed through a narrative lens, the construction and development of political identities has become the subject of growing research attention in recent decades (e.g. Fillieule, 2019; McAdams et al., 2008). To date, this line of research has explored aspects such as why people become politicised (Taft, 2017) and how political participation develops over a person's life span (Serrat et al., 2020). However, a thorough understanding of how lifetime activists remember and make sense of different types of political experiences is still lacking.

To overcome this gap, this study aims to explore thematic and structural features of lifetime activists' narratives about political experiences, as well as examining differences in these features according to the type of experience described and the life stage at which the event narrated occurred. In the following sections, we begin with a discussion of the concept of narrative identity, highlighting recent approaches to understanding its thematic and structural features. Then, we move on to analyse differences in the structural features of life narratives according to the life stage in which the narrated event occurred and the type of event recalled. Third, we discuss recent trends in narrative research specifically focusing on the construction and development of political identities. Finally, we provide an overview of the Catalan political context in which our participants' narratives about political experiences are rooted.

What is narrative identity? Thematic and structural features

Contemporary understanding within narrative research defines identity as an '. . . internalised and evolving life story' (McAdams, 2018: 361). Narrative identity scholars therefore focus on how individuals build an understanding of themselves through the creation, development and sharing of a life story (Adler et al., 2017). This construction of a life story implies selecting key past events and creating links between them and the present self (Habermas and Bluck, 2000). Accordingly, the collection and analysis of narratives of autobiographical experiences and events has gained popularity as one of the best ways to approach the study of personal identity (McAdams, 2018; McLean et al., 2020).

Notwithstanding the wide range of approaches to analysing narratives (Phoenix et al., 2010), narrative identity scholars highlight that what matters most for understanding identity development is not what autobiographical past events the person tell but rather how they construct them (McLean et al., 2020). Therefore, several analytical features have been proposed to understand this subjective construction of autobiographical past events. In this study, we use the theoretical framework developed by Adler et al. (2016). This is a parsimonious framework for analysing autobiographical narratives, which covers all the key narrative elements identified by previous studies. Moreover, it has recently been empirically tested by McLean et al. (2020). This framework classifies narrative features into four primary categories: motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements.

Motivational themes refer to differences in the broad orientation of life goals (Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2020). Affective themes refer to the emotional quality of narratives, considering the whole story (e.g. overall affective tone) or parts of the story (e.g. ending valence) (Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2020). Themes of integrative meaning refer to the degree to which the person evaluates and interprets the event, connecting it to themself (Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2020). Finally, structural elements refer to how the person tells the story in terms of coherence and complexity (Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2020).

Although building up a life story is the central psychosocial task of adolescence and early adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Pasupathi and Hoyt, 2009), and most narrative identity research has therefore focused on these life stages, identity development continues over a person's life span (Kroger,

2015). As stated by narrative gerontologists Randall and Kenyon (2010), we get old not only biologically but also biographically. Indeed, Erikson's last life stage, integrity vs. despair, revolves around the challenge of looking back and taking stock of one's life story, with the objective of finding meaning and coherence and reconciling with the path chosen for one's life (Erikson et al., 1986). As argued by Pasupathi et al. (2006), autobiographical remembering should thus be conceived as a key developmental process in later life.

The narrative construction of autobiographical experiences: influence of life stage at which the event occurred and the nature of the narrated event

A number of emerging studies have shown that, far from being monolithic, individuals' narrative constructions of autobiographical experiences vary considerably depending on aspects such as the life stage at which the event occurred (Pasupathi and Mansour, 2006; Pillemer, 2001) or the nature of the event that is recalled (McLean et al., 2017; Pasupathi et al., 2020).

Regarding motivational themes, research shows that themes of agency, defined as an individual's striving to master the environment and to experience self-control, achievement and empowerment (McAdams et al., 1996), are more frequent in young and middle adulthood than in older adulthood (Bühler et al., 2020; Diehl et al., 2004). In contrast, communion themes, defined as an individual's desire to relate, cooperate with and care for others (McAdams et al., 1996), become more prevalent in older age (Bühler et al., 2020; Diehl et al., 2004). To the best of our knowledge, no study has reported associations between agency and communion themes and the nature of the event recalled. Nevertheless, these associations may vary according to whether agency and communion are narrated as achieved or failed (Philippe et al., 2011).

There is scant evidence of the association of affective themes with the life stage at which the narrated event occurs. However, research shows that middle adults' life stories tend to show a less positive affective tone and a more negative affective tone than the life stories of young and older adults (Kirkegaard et al., 2019). Moreover, Dunlop et al. (2016) showed that the tendency of narrating redemptive sequences, defined as the transformation from a bad, affectively negative scene to a subsequent good, affectively positive scene (McAdams et al., 2001), increases as people advance into young adulthood and remains stable in middle adulthood. Conversely, contamination sequences, defined as a movement from a clearly good, affectively positive scene to an explicitly bad, affectively negative scene (McAdams et al., 2001), decrease from young adulthood to middle adulthood (Dunlop et al., 2016).

As for the influence of the type of event that is recalled on affective themes, there is general agreement that negative episodes tend to be saturated with negative feelings, like sadness, fear and anxiety, while positive episodes usually convey positive feelings such as happiness or excitement (Fivush et al., 2008; McLean et al., 2017). Moreover, redemption sequences are usually more frequent in the narration of turning point and positive events than in the narration of negative ones (Dunlop, 2021; McAdams et al., 2001). In contrast, contamination sequences are usually more present in the narration of negative episodes (McAdams et al., 2001).

Research has shown that narratives from young adulthood tend to convey greater integrative meaning processes, as they often depict identity-defining milestones that are linked to the long-term definition of self-concept and to the establishment of long-term life goals (Luchetti and Sutin, 2018). There is some evidence that negative events are more likely to foster meaning-making processes than positive ones (e.g. McLean and Thorne, 2003; Weststrate, 2018). Moreover, it has been suggested that turning points may be prone to show integrative meaning processes, as they are often depicted as identity-defining moments in life stories (McLean and Pratt, 2006).

In terms of structural elements, research shows that narratives of young adulthood tend to show greater coherence than narratives from other life periods. Coherence is defined as the extent to which different parts of a narration logically and fluidly work together to create an understandable, unitary and clear account (Baerger and McAdams, 2010). Some of the reasons for this finding are that narratives of young adulthood usually describe self-defining moments that have a long-term impact on identity-development processes, and they are remembered and explained to others more often than other (more) trivial stories (Luchetti and Sutin, 2018). However, the recency of the narrated event could also affect the narrative's coherence, as more recent events are generally better remembered than past events (Gardner et al., 2015). Complexity, which is defined as the structural differentiation and integration level shown by the narrative (McAdams et al., 2004), usually increases from young to middle adulthood (Sengsavang et al., 2018) and declines in older adulthood (Diehl et al., 2001). Finally, research shows that narratives about negative events are usually more coherent and complex than narratives about positive events (Habermas et al., 2009).

The narrative construction of political identities across the life span

Conceived as a bridge between mind and society (Hammack and Pilecki, 2012), narrative approaches have proven useful for understanding the construction and development of political identities across the life span. This line of research dates back to Erik Erikson's (1969) analysis of the life story of Gandhi and continues in contemporary narrative explorations of the lives of George W. Bush (McAdams, 2011), Barack Obama (Hammack, 2010), or more recently, Donald J. Trump (McAdams, 2020), among others. Beyond this line of inquiry on professional politicians, studies on political identities have mainly focused on the engagement of ordinary citizens in political activities. Overall, these studies highlight that the concept of identity is key to understanding many aspects of citizens' political participation, such as why people become politicised (Viterna, 2006) or how political participation develops across their life span (Accornero, 2019).

The process of becoming engaged in political activism has been by far the most explored topic in research on political identities. Mirroring general research on narrative identity, most studies in this area have focused on adolescents (Taft, 2017) and young adults (Bosi et al., 2022; Matsuba and Walker, 2005), with fewer studies addressing politicisation processes occurring later in life (Guillemot and Price, 2017). Overall, these studies support the idea that those who become involved in political activities construct a life story that supports their identity as activists (Ruiz-Junco, 2011) and significantly differs in its narrative features from the life stories of nonengaged individuals (Alisat et al., 2014; Matsuba and Walker, 2005). However, these differences vary across studies because of the type of political participation analysed, the characteristics of the sample and the analytical strategy pursued, among other factors, and certain themes that commonly appear in activists' life stories include prosocial orientation (Bond et al., 2008; Matsuba and Walker, 2005), awareness of inequalities (Matsuba and Walker, 2005; Taft, 2017), agency and communion goals (Bond et al., 2008; Harré et al., 2009), redemptive imagery (Matsuba and Walker, 2005) and meaning-making efforts (Alisat et al., 2014).

Dating back to the seminal work by Molly Andrews (1991) on lifetimes of political activism, a second line of inquiry focuses on how political identities develop across the life span. Life stories have been used from this perspective to analyse aspects such as patterns of change in political interest and participation across the life span, factors associated with retention or withdrawal from participation or spillovers between life course transitions in work and family domains and trends in political participation throughout the life cycle (e.g. Serrat and Villar, 2020). In recent decades, there has also been increasing interest in understanding how activists' life stories vary according to

factors such as class origins (Valocchi, 2013), gender (Serrat and Villar, 2020) or political orientation (McAdams et al., 2008).

Despite these advances in our understanding of the politicisation processes and political trajectories of individuals, little is known about how lifetime activists remember and make sense of different types of political experiences. To the best of our knowledge, no study has focused on analysing structural differences with respect to life stage and event type in lifetime activists' narratives about political experiences. Most studies examining such differences are focused on general rather than domain-specific autobiographical narratives. Therefore, we do not know whether what we know about general autobiographical narratives also applies to domain-specific narratives, such as narratives of political participation.

The role of socio-political context: the case of Catalonia

Autobiographical remembering is not an isolated individual activity but rather the result of a social, culturally embedded process. Although life stories are profoundly personal (ultimately, they are what makes us unique), they are also strongly shaped by cultural norms and expectations (Dunlop et al., 2018). Every culture provides a limited number of master narratives that individuals identify with and internalise as their own, which they can also challenge and resist (McLean and Syed, 2016). These include master political narratives, which are embodied in the discourses of political leaders, media representations and other cultural products and practices. Master political narratives provide individuals with narrative tools to interpret the political world, assume political positions and engage in political behaviours (Hammack, 2010). Social and political events are building blocks with which people construct their political identities. This context opens some opportunities to participate while it restricts others.

In Catalonia, the Spanish region from which participants of this study were recruited, older generations lived at least part of their young adulthood during Franco's dictatorship. Franco's regime severely restricted associational and political life and limited personal and collective rights. Civil society could not participate in public and political affairs, which contributed to its impoverishment (Encarnación, 2003). The situation changed dramatically after the death of the dictator and the transition to democracy. In these years (roughly from 1975 to 1982), many civil society organisations including political parties, trade unions, neighbourhood associations and senior organisations, whose activities had been very limited during the dictatorship, began to grow and mobilise to achieve their objectives. Their goals included promoting their political agendas in the case of parties; improving work conditions in the case of trade unions; obtaining better transport, education or health services for their communities in the case of neighbourhood associations or advocating and providing services for older people in the case of senior organisations.

After a period of creation of new organisations and intense mobilisation, the rate of participation grew steadily; however, it never reached the high rates of other Western European countries (Morales and Mota, 2006). This process varied widely across regions. Catalonia was perhaps the region of Spain with the most structured civil society and higher rates of participation (Nogué and Wilbrand, 2010).

More recently, the 2008 global financial crisis had dramatic economic and social consequences in Spain. As unemployment rates increased dramatically (reaching almost 27% in 2013), in parallel with risk or poverty (which affected almost 30% of Spaniards in 2014), the government implemented strict austerity policies prompted by the European Union, including cutbacks in public-based health, education and social care services and benefits (León and Pavolini, 2014). The situation contributed to the development of a wave of social movement organisations (the 'indignados' movement, Castañeda, 2012), which had their senior version in the 'yayoflautas' (Schwarz,

2022) and the reactivation of existing political organisations. In Catalonia, this was also one of the factors, among others, that propelled activism aimed at the independence of the region from the rest of the country (Burg, 2015). From 2012 to 2017, independentist civil society associations organised massive mobilisations supporting political steps towards that aim. As a consequence of the political turmoil in relation to the organisation by the regional government of Catalonia of a public consultation on the independence of Catalonia, explicitly banned by the Spanish government and the Spanish Constitutional Court, nine Catalan political leaders were judged and condemned to prison, and seven more left the country to avoid judicial prosecution. In 2021, the nine imprisoned political leaders were pardoned by the Spanish government.

The current Spanish landscape of older adults' political participation is therefore comprised of a complex mix of more traditional political organisations, such as neighbourhood organisations, trade unions and political parties that re-emerged after being banned during Franco's dictatorship, social movement organisations arising from the 2008 financial crisis and civil society organisations supporting Catalonia's independence.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows: first, to explore thematic and structural features of Spanish lifetime activists' narratives about political experiences (O1), and second, to examine the thematic and structural differences in narratives according to the type of experience described (positive, negative or turning point) and the life stage at which it occurred (young, middle or older adulthood) (O2).

Design and methods

Participants

A total of 40 older people (21 men and 19 women) participated in this study. Participants ranged in age from 65 to 86 years old (mean age of 71.8 years; standard deviation [*SD*] = 6.4). Notwithstanding the diversity of the Spanish political landscape depicted above, for this study, we selected the political organisations where Spanish older adults are most likely to be members. These are neighbourhood organisations, trade unions and political parties (33.5%, 9.2% and 7.7%, respectively; according to the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research, 2019). Participants were therefore active members of these three types of organisations in Catalonia (Spain). The sample was evenly divided in terms of educational level, with 13 having completed up to primary education, 12 participants with complete secondary education and 15 participants having a university degree. With respect to their health status, 11 of the participants self-rated their health as satisfactory, 27 as good and two as excellent. No participant considered their health as bad or very bad. Participants reported involvement in their organisations for a mean of 12.8 hours per week (*SD* = 9.1) and for a mean period of 27.8 years (*SD* = 14.2).

Procedure

The sample was obtained from a previous study on lifetime activists' involvement with political organisations (Serrat et al., 2017a). In that study, 192 participants completed a written questionnaire about different aspects of their political activism (e.g., motivations and barriers to political participation). Inclusion criteria were (1) age 65 years or older, (2) being a member of the managerial committee or a board member of a political organisation, (3) having held this role for at least 1

year and (4) devoting at least 1 hour per week to the organisation. For the current study, we contacted the 40 participants with the longest history of political participation and invited them to participate in a narrative interview. All participants agreed to participate.

The ethics committee of the University of Barcelona approved this study. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, data collection procedures, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to decline to answer any questions and withdraw from the study at any time. All of them agreed to participate and signed a written consent form before being interviewed. Data were anonymised before analysis.

Narrative prompts

As a part of a life story interview on lifetime stories of political participation, which was adapted from McAdams (1993), participants were invited to explain three experiences of political participation: a positive event, a negative event and a turning point. Positive events were described as events in activists' background of political participation that involved intense joy, inner peace, wellbeing or any other type of positive emotion. In contrast, negative events were described as political experiences in which the emotion was predominantly negative, such as disillusionment, despair, guilt, shame or any other negative emotion. Finally, turning points were described as political experiences that marked a watershed in the participants' stories and that implied significant changes in their way of thinking or behaving. We explicitly asked participants to report these events in detail, for which we provided a list of questions they had to consider when describing the event (e.g. 'What happened?', 'Who was involved?' and so on). We asked them to remember biographical episodes of their political participation career, which had occurred at a specific time and place, and to explain specific actions, feelings, thoughts and characters, instead of more global narratives that happened over long periods of their lives. The mean years passed from the event recalled was 18.9 (*SD* 17.0).

Narrative coding

We transcribed all audio recordings of the interviews verbatim and analysed them using the qualitative analysis software Atlas-ti. In accordance with the framework proposed by Adler et al. (2016), we examined the motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements of the narratives. We operationalised each of these themes in several categories adapted from previous studies on narrative identity development (see Table 1 for an overview of categories and subcategories).

The analysis involved the following steps. First, we developed a coding manual and trained coders in line with the recommendations for coding narrative data developed by Syed and Nelson (2015). Second, authors 1 and 3 independently coded all the positive and negatives episodes and turning points. Third, we obtained interrater reliability indices, kappa indices for categorical codes and interclass correlation indices for ordinal and interval codes (Syed and Nelson, 2015). Finally, to establish the final codes, authors 1 and 3 negotiated differences in coding until a consensus was reached. Author 2, who was not involved in the coding process, participated in this consensus agreement when deemed necessary.

The coding manual included the followings categories:

Life stage
- Narratives were assigned to one of the following categories according to the life stage at which the story occurred: (1) young adulthood, for experiences occurring before 30 years of age; (2)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the narrative codes of motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements (N = 117).

Codes	n (%)	M (SD)
Years from the event recalled	—	18.9 (17.0)
Type of episode		
Positive event	40 (34.2)	—
Negative event	39 (33.3)	—
Turning point event	38 (32.5)	—
Life stage		
Young adulthood	26 (22.2)	—
Middle adulthood	49 (41.9)	—
Older adulthood	42 (35.9)	—
Motivational themes		
Communion	76 (65)	—
Achieved	35 (30)	—
Failed	41 (35)	—
Agency	68 (58.1)	—
Achieved	49 (41.9)	—
Failed	19 (16.2)	—
Affective themes		
Affective tone (range 1–5)	—	2.8 (1.1)
Ending valence (range 1–5)	—	3.2 (1.2)
Redemption	35 (29.9)	—
Contamination	13 (11.1)	—
Themes of integrative meaning	—	—
Meaning making (range 1–4)	—	2.6 (1)
Exploratory processing (range 1–3)	—	2.1 (.8)
Structural elements		
Coherence (range 1–3)	—	2.4 (.4)
Orientation (range 1–3)	—	2.6 (.6)
Structure (range 1–3)	—	2.6 (.6)
Affect (range 1–3)	—	2.4 (.6)
Integration (range 1–3)	—	2.1 (.7)
Complexity (range 1–3)	—	2 (.7)

M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

middle adulthood, for experiences occurring between 30 years and 65 years of age or retirement and (3) older adulthood, for experiences taking place after 65 years of age or retirement. The kappa index was 1 for all episodes, indicating excellent reliability (Fleiss, 1981).

Motivational themes

- *Communion*: Narratives high in communion emphasise themes of friendship, love, dialogue, union, caring for others and a sense of community. These stories describe protagonists who experience positive romantic and friendship relationships, including nurturing and caretaking, and have plenty of themes of unity and togetherness (McAdams et al., 1996). Communion was coded as '1' if these themes were present and as '0' if they were not. The kappa index was .71 for the positive event, .84 for the negative event and .91 for the turning point, indicating excellent reliability (Fleiss, 1981). In addition, narratives coded as

communal were further codified according to whether communion was achieved (stories describing the achievement of love, dialogue, caring for others or a sense of community) or failed (stories describing difficulties to achieve union, dialogue, care for others or a broken sense of community) (Philippe et al., 2011).

- *Agency*: Narratives high in agency emphasise themes of self-control, status, victory, achievement, responsibility and empowerment. These stories describe protagonists who seek to assert themselves as independent, competent or active people and who achieve some degree of control over the course of their experiences (McAdams et al., 1996). Agency was coded as '1' if these themes were present and as '0' if they were not. The kappa index was .94 for the positive event, .85 for the negative event and .95 for the turning point event, indicating excellent reliability (Fleiss, 1981). Moreover, narratives coded as agentic were further codified according to whether agency was achieved (stories describing the effective achievement of the self-control, status, victory, achievement, responsibility or empowerment) or failed (stories describing the difficulties for achieve self-control, status, victory, achievement, responsibility or empowerment) (Philippe et al., 2011).

Affective themes

- *Affective tone*: This reflects the overall emotional tone of narratives. It refers to the general emotional quality of the story, in terms of positivity versus negativity and the expression of positive feelings (e.g., happiness, excitement) versus negative feelings (e.g., sadness, fear, anxiety) (McAdams et al., 1997). Affective tone was coded using a five-point scale from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). A score of 3 reflected a neutral emotional tone. The intraclass correlation (ICC) index was .92 for the positive episode, which indicates excellent reliability, and .88 for the negative event and turning point, which indicates good reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).

- *Ending valence*: the emotional and evaluative tone conveyed in how the interviewee ends the story regardless of the objective circumstances of the episode (Pals, 2006). Ending valence was coded using a five-point scale from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). A score of 3 indicated a neutral, ambiguous or mixed ending tone. The ICC index was .96 and .98 for the positive event and turning point, respectively, which indicate excellent reliability, and .87 for the negative episode, indicating good reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).

- *Redemption*: the transformation from a bad, affectively negative scene to a subsequent good, affectively positive scene (McAdams et al., 2001). Stories were coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of redemption sequences. The kappa index was .84 for the negative event and .93 for the turning point, which indicates excellent reliability, and .75 for the positive event, indicating good reliability (Fleiss, 1981).

- *Contamination*: a movement from a clearly good, affectively positive scene to an explicitly bad, affectively negative scene in which good things deteriorate into a bad ending (McAdams et al., 2001). Stories were coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of contamination sequences. The kappa index was 1 for the positive event, .83 for the negative event and .80 for the turning point, indicating excellent reliability (Fleiss, 1981).

Themes of integrative meaning

- *Meaning-making*: the extent to which the narrator learns lessons or insights from past events (McLean and Pratt, 2006). Meaning-making was coded using a four-point scale: (1) no meaning reported, (2) behavioural lessons which do not extend beyond the specific event, (3) meanings that transcend lessons but are vague or very general and (4) narratives with insight, which imply a transformation in one's understanding of themselves, their

relationships or the world. The ICC index was .98 for the positive event, .90 for the negative event and .96 for the turning point, indicating excellent reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).

- *Exploratory processing*: the extent to which the narrator analyses past events to understand their self-changing potential (Pals, 2006). Six indicators of exploratory processing were considered (McLean et al., 2020): reflection and analysis of thoughts and feelings surrounding the experience, discussions with others that motivate exploration, consideration or juxtaposition of varied or contrasted ideas, acknowledgement of ambiguity and uncertainty, efforts to understand changes in oneself as a result of the experience and acknowledgement of differential positions in the past and present. Exploratory processing was coded using a three-point scale: (1) low exploration, no or one indicator was present; (2) moderate exploration, two indicators were present and (3) high exploration, three or more indicators were present. The ICC index was .92 for the positive event and .94 for the turning point, which indicates excellent reliability, and .82 for the negative event, indicating good reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).

Structural elements

- *Coherence*: the extent to which different parts of a narration logically and fluidly work together to create an understandable, unitary and clear account. Coherence includes four interrelated aspects: orientation, structure, affect and integration (Baerger and McAdams, 2010):
    - ○ Orientation: the degree to which the story provides background information, including three elements – introduction of central characters, location of the story in time and description of relevant past events that led to the moment described. Orientation was coded using a three-point scale: (1) low orientation, when only one element was included; (2) moderate orientation, when two elements were included and (3) high orientation, when all elements were included. The ICC index was .80 for the negative event and .77 for the turning point, which indicate a good reliability, and .96 for the positive event, indicating excellent reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).
    - ○ Structure: the degree to which the story displays a linear, chronological or causal structure. This narrative arch typically includes an initial predicament followed by a series of dramatic events which eventually leads to a conclusion or resolution of the tension. Structure was coded using a three-point scale: (1) low structure, when the story lacked a clear narrative arch; (2) moderate structure, the story showed some elements of a narrative arch but not all of them and (3) high structure, the story showed a clear narrative arch. The ICC index was .90 for the turning point and .83 for the negative event, which indicate good reliability, and .71 for the positive event, indicating moderate reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).
    - ○ Affect: the consistent affective tone, stance or theme that organises and makes emotional sense of the events being narrated and provides an assessment of why this story is meaningful for the person. Affect was coded through a three-point scale: (1) low affect, the story has little relevance or significance for the person; (2) moderate affect, the story transcends the level of the everyday but its meaning is moderate for the person and (3) high affect, the event is highly relevant or significant for the narrator. The ICC index was .86 for the positive event, .77 for the negative event and .88 for the turning point, indicating good reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).
    - ○ Integration: the degree to which the information conveyed by the story is well integrated and coherent with the motivations, conflicts or central themes of the narrator's overall life story. Integration was coded through a three-point scale: (1) low integration, stories

showing evident contradictions or inconsistencies; (2) moderate integration, stories in which some but not all contradictions or inconsistences are resolved and (3) high integration, integrated stories with a good resolution of contradictions and inconsistencies. The ICC index was .97 for the positive event and .96 for the turning point, which indicate excellent reliability, and .76 for the negative event, indicating good reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).

- *Complexity*: the structural differentiation and integration level shown by the narrative (McAdams et al., 2004). Two indicators of complexity were considered: the presence of diverse points of view or motivations and the description of complex emotional experiences or contradictory aspects of the self. Complexity was coded through a three-point scale: (1) low complexity, when neither element of complexity was present; (2) moderate complexity, when only one element of this category was present and (3) high complexity, when both elements were present in the story. The ICC index was .88 for the positive event, .84 for the negative event and .89 for the turning point, indicating good reliability (Koo and Li, 2016).

Statistical analyses

To explore the thematic and structural features of the narratives of lifetime activists about political experiences (objective 1), we obtained descriptive statistics for all the categories of motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements included in the analyses. To compare thematic and structural differences according to the event type and life stage (objective 2), we carried out a series of χ^2 tests for categorical codes and one-way analysis of variance for repeated measures for ordinal and interval codes. In addition, as the time interval spanning from the events recalled could potentially affect narratives' thematic and structural features (e.g. Manzanero et al., 2021), we conducted a series of *t* test, Spearman correlations and Pearson correlations to assess the associations between the years passed from the remembered events and the categorical, ordinal and interval narrative codes, respectively. To disentangle the effect of the type of event, life stage and years passed from the event recalled on the narratives' thematic and structural features when more than one of these variables was significant in bivariate analyses, we carried out a series of logistic regressions for categorical codes and linear regressions for ordinal and interval codes.

Results

Narratives' thematic and structural features of experiences (O1)

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the type of episode and life stage and narrative codes of motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements.

Narratives' thematic and structural differences according to event type and life stage (O2)

Table 2 shows differences in the thematic and structural features of the activists' narratives according to the type of experience described. Stories about negative, positive and turning point experiences of political participation showed significant differences in almost all the categories of motivational themes included in the analysis. Negative experiences displayed a focus on communion ($\chi^2(2, N=117)=7.58$, $p=.023$), and particularly on failed communion ($\chi^2(2, N=76)=33.22$, $p<.001$), more frequently than on positive events and turning points, while achieved agency was

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the narrative codes of motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements.

Codes	Positive event (n = 40)		Negative event (n = 39)		Turning point (n = 38)		χ^2		ANOVA		
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)	χ^2	p	F	p	η^2
Motivational themes											
Communion	55	–	82.1	–	57.9	–	7.58	.023	–	–	–
Achieved	47.5	–	7.7	–	34.2	–	33.22	<.001	–	–	–
Failed	7.5	–	74.4	–	23.7	–	33.22	<.001	–	–	–
Agency	72.5	–	51.3	–	50	–	5.17	.075	–	–	–
Achieved	72.5	–	15.4	–	36.8	–	28.84	<.001	–	–	–
Failed	0	–	35.9	–	13.2	–	a	–	–	–	–
Affective themes											
Affective tone[b]	–	3.9 (.7)	–	1.8 (.6)	–	2.6 (.9)	–	–	71.63	<.001	.557
Ending valence[b]	–	4.2 (.9)	–	2.4 (1.1)	–	3.1 (1)	–	–	31.60	<.001	.357
Redemption	45	–	17.9	–	26.3	–	7.24	.027	–	–	–
Contamination	0	–	17.9	–	15.8	–	a	–	–	–	–
Themes of integrative meaning											
Meaning making[c]	–	2.7 (1.1)	–	2 (.9)	–	3 (.9)	–	–	10.56	<.001	.156
Exploratory processing[d]	–	2.1 (.7)	–	2.1 (.8)	–	2.2 (.7)	–	–	0.50	.608	.009
Structural elements											
Coherence[d]	–	2.5 (.3)	–	2.3 (.5)	–	2.6 (.4)	–	–	5.80	.004	.092
Orientation[d]	–	2.7 (.5)	–	2.5 (.7)	–	2.7 (.6)	–	–	2.00	.140	.034
Structured	–	2.7 (.5)	–	2.5 (.7)	–	2.7 (.5)	–	–	2.92	.058	.049
Affect[d]	–	2.5 (.6)	–	2.3 (.7)	–	2.5 (.6)	–	–	2.22	.113	.038
Integration[d]	–	2.1 (.7)	–	1.8 (.7)	–	2.3 (.6)	–	–	5.11	.008	.082
Complexity[d]	–	1.7 (.7)	–	2.3 (.7)	–	1.9 (.6)	–	–	9.73	<.001	.146

χ^2, Chi-squared test; ANOVA, analysis of variance; M, mean; SD, standard deviation.
Comparison between positive, negative and the turning point episodes (N = 117).
[a]The χ^2 test was not performed as one of the categories has a value of 0.
[b]Range 1–5.
[c]Range 1–4.
[d]Range 1–3.

more frequent in positive experiences ($\chi^2(2, N=68)=28.84$, $p<.001$). With respect to affective themes, significant differences were present for all the analysed categories. Negative experiences showed a more negative affective tone on average ($F(2, 114)=71.63$, $p<.001$) and ending balance ($F(2, 114)=31.60$, $p<.001$) than positive and turning point experiences. In contrast, redemption sequences were more frequent in positive experiences ($\chi^2(2, N=68)=7.24$, $p=.027$).

With respect to themes of integrative meaning, only the category of meaning-making showed significant differences, with turning point experiences scoring higher on average than positive and negative experiences ($F(2, 114)=10.56$, $p<.001$). In terms of structural elements, overall coherence ($F(2, 114)=5.81$, $p=.004$) and one of its dimensions (integration) ($F(2, 114)=5.11$, $p<.008$) were significantly higher in turning point experiences, while negative experiences received the highest scores in complexity on average ($F(2, 114)=9.73$, $p<0.001$).

Table 3 shows differences in the thematic and structural features of the activists' narratives according to the life stage at which the event occurred. There were not significant differences in

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the narrative codes of motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements.

Codes	Young adulthood (n=26)		Middle adulthood (n=49)		Older adulthood (n=42)		χ^2		ANOVA		
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)	χ^2	p	F	p	η^2
Motivational themes											
Communion	65.4	–	59.2	–	71.4	–	1.49	.474	–	–	–
Achieved	38.5	–	24.5	–	31	–	1.46	.482	–	–	–
Failed	26.9	–	34.7	–	40.4	–	1.46	.482	–	–	–
Agency	65.3	–	65.3	–	45.3	–	4.47	.107	–	–	–
Achieved	53.8	–	44.9	–	31	–	1.19	.551	–	–	–
Failed	11.5	–	20.4	–	14.3	–	1.19	.551	–	–	–
Affective themes											
Affective tone[a]	–	2.9 (1)	–	2.6 (1.2)	–	2.9 (1.1)	–	–	1.08	.344	.019
Ending valence[a]	–	3.5 (1.4)	–	3 (1.3)	–	3.3 (1.1)	–	–	1.27	.285	.022
Redemption	46.2	–	34.7	–	14.3	–	8.68	<.001	–	–	–
Contamination	15.4	–	18.4	–	0	–	[b]	–	–	–	–
Themes of integrative meaning											
Meaning making[c]	–	3 (1)	–	2.4 (1)	–	2.5 (1.1)	–	–	3.79	.025	.062
Exploratory processing[d]	–	2.5 (.6)	–	2.2 (.8)	–	1.8 (.7)	–	–	7.11	<.001	.111
Structural elements											
Coherence[d]	–	2.7 (.3)		2.4 (.4)		2.3 (.5)	–	–	6.04	.003	.096
Orientation[d]	–	2.9 (.3)	–	2.6 (.5)	–	2.5 (.7)	–	–	3.52	.033	.058
Structure[d]	–	2.9 (.3)	–	2.6 (.5)	–	2.5 (.7)	–	–	4.69	.011	.076
Affect	–	2.5 (.5)	–	2.5 (.7)	–	2.3 (.6)	–	–	1.72	.184	.029
Integration[d]	–	2.4 (.7)	–	2 (.6)	–	2 (.7)	–	–	2.79	.065	.047
Complexity[d]	–	2 (.8)	–	2.2 (.7)	–	1.6 (.6)	–	–	6.84	.002	.107

χ^2 Chi-squared test; ANOVA, analysis of variance; M, mean; SD, standard deviation.
Comparison between young adulthood, middle adulthood and older adulthood episodes (N=117).
[a]Range 1–5.
[b]The χ^2 test was not performed as one of the categories has a value of 0.
[c]Range 1–4.
[d]Range 1–3.

motivational themes between stories taking place in young, middle and older adulthood. With respect to affective themes, redemption sequences were more frequent in young adulthood stories ($\chi^2(2, N=117)=8.68, p<.001$).

With regards to themes of integrative meaning, both meaning-making ($F(2, 114)=3.79, p=.025$) and exploratory processing ($F(2, 114)=7.11, p<.001$) scored higher in young adulthood stories than in the narratives from other life stages. In terms of structural elements, while overall coherence ($F(2, 114)=6.04, p=.003$) and two of its dimensions, orientation ($F(2, 114)=3.52, p=.033$) and structure ($F(2, 114)=4.69, p=.011$), were rated higher in young adulthood stories, narratives from middle adulthood scored higher in terms of complexity ($F(2, 114)=6.84, p=.002$).

With respect to the influence of the years passed from the event recalled on narratives' thematic and structural features, six codes showed significant associations. Years passed from the remembered event were negatively associated with redemption sequences ($t(99)=-3.88, p<.001$) and

positively associated with exploratory processing ($r=.36$, n=101, $p<.001$), overall coherence ($r=.35$, n=101, $p<.001$), orientation ($r=.28$, n=101, $p=.005$), structure ($r=.43$, n=101, $p<.001$) and complexity ($r=.25$, n=101, $p=.013$).

Finally, we carried out a series of logistic and linear regressions to disentangle the effect of the type of event, life stage and years passed from the event narrated on the features of narratives. Because life stage and years passed from the events remembered were significantly correlated ($F(2, 100)=89.65$, $p<.001$), we only entered life stage into the regressions, to avoid collinearity. Regression analyses were therefore conducted only in cases in which type of event and life stage proved to be significant in bivariate analyses. This was indeed the case for redemption sequences, meaning-making, overall coherence and complexity. With respect to redemption sequences, life stage was the only significant variable in multivariate analyses, with the odds of presenting this characteristic being over five (odds ratio=5.46, $p=.006$) and three (odds ratio=3.33, $p=.029$) times as high for stories occurring in young and middle adulthood, respectively, than for stories from older adulthood. With regards to meaning-making, both variables were significant in multivariate analyses, with higher scores for meaning-making being significantly associated with turning point episodes (beta=.42, $p<.001$), positive episodes (beta=.32, $p<.001$) and episodes occurring in young adulthood (beta=.24, $p=.008$). With respect to overall coherence, both variables were also significant in multivariate analyses, with turning point episodes (beta=.29, $p=.004$), positive episodes (beta=.26, $p=.009$) and experiences occurring in young adulthood (beta=.20, $p=.034$) being significantly associated with higher scores for coherence. Finally, the same was true for complexity, with negative episodes (beta=.45, $p<.001$) and experiences from young (beta=.26, $p=.005$) and middle (beta=.38, $p<.001$) adulthood being significantly associated with higher scores in terms of complexity.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the thematic and structural features of the narratives of lifetime activists about political experiences (O1), as well as examining differences in these features according to the type of experience described (positive, negative or turning point) and the life stage at which it occurred (young, middle or older adulthood) (O2).

With regards to our first objective (O1), the results showed that the events of political participation narrated by older activists were spread across the whole life cycle, with a higher concentration during midlife years and, to a lesser extent, in later life. On one hand, this could simply be an effect of the longer span of years considered, at least in the case of middle adulthood, or could be due to the fact that some of our participants were not politically active in their youth, so they simply did not provide any autobiographical accounts from this period. On the other hand, there may also be conceptual grounds for this imbalance.

We may have expected a higher concentration of autobiographical events occurring during young adulthood, in accordance with previous literature on the phenomenon of the so-called 'reminiscence bump' (Munawar et al., 2018) and the coincidence of that period with the transition to democracy in Spain (which led to the growth of political activism). However, this was not the case for the autobiographical narratives of lifetime activists analysed in this study. While the construction of a politicised identity is likely to occur early in adulthood (Matsuba and Walker, 2005; Ruiz-Junco, 2011; Taft, 2017), in line with Erikson's ideas on the development of identity (Erikson, 1968), it is also true that political activism relates to the expression of generative concerns and goals (Serrat et al., 2017b), and these are likely to peak in midlife and continue through later life (Villar, 2012).

With regards to the thematic and structural features that more commonly appeared in our inter-viewees' narratives, these mirror previous studies with younger samples (Alisat et al., 2014; Bond et al., 2008; Harré et al., 2009; Matsuba and Walker, 2005), which highlights that themes such as agency and communion goals, redemptive imagery or meaning-making efforts are at the core of political activists' narratives, regardless of their age.

However, results for our second objective (O2) show that these features differ according to the type of experience described and the life stage at which the event narrated occurred. This extends emerging research showing that general autobiographical narratives vary according to these fea-tures (McLean et al., 2017; Pasupathi et al., 2020) to the specific case of activists' narratives about political experiences. Indeed, these variations were present in all the narrative features considered in the study: motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning and structural elements.

With respect to motivational themes, our results show that narratives about negative events focus on failed community more frequently than stories about positive events and turning points. As showed by previous research (Harré et al., 2009; Serrat et al., 2021), one of the most frequent negative aspects of political activism is related to experiencing conflicts with one's own commu-nity or perceived allies. These conflicts may be one of the reasons behind the higher frequency of a failed community focus in older activists' narratives about negative events. The clash between high (and probably naïve) political expectations during the Spanish transition to democracy and the difficulties of putting them into practice could also give some context to these negative stories. In any case, this finding suggests that for long-term activists, social interactions within the organisa-tion, which help to create and maintain a sense of community, are highly valued and even more important in some of their stories than politics per se. This is in line with previous research on general autobiographical narratives showing that communion themes are more prevalent in older age than in other life periods (Bühler et al., 2020; Diehl et al., 2004).

Conversely, stories about positive experiences of participation tended to focus on achieved agency more frequently than narratives about negative events and turning points. Previous studies have shown that a sense of agency is central in activists' stories on successes and rewards linked to political activism (Bond et al., 2008; Harré et al., 2009). Acting as a reminder of what could be potentially achieved, these stories may also help political activists to keep committed to their goals despite failures and drawbacks (Serrat et al., 2023).

With regards to affective themes, both the affective tone and the ending valence were signifi-cantly more positive in older activists' stories on positive events than in their narratives about nega-tive events. As we explicitly asked participants to tell stories in which the predominant emotion was either positive (joy, inner peace, wellbeing) or negative (disillusionment, despair, guilt, shame), it comes as no surprise that the emotional tone and the ending valence of the stories they told were aligned with the elicitation prompts used. This mirrors previous research on general autobiographi-cal narratives, which show that negative episodes tend to be saturated with negative feelings, while positive episodes usually convey positive ones (Fivush et al., 2008; McLean et al., 2017).

The association of redemption sequences with stories about events occurring in young adult-hood is somewhat more difficult to account for. It may be possible that redemption sequences are more frequent during young adulthood, as this is typically the life stage at which most activists start their political career. As highlighted by McAdams et al. (2001), redemption imagery is a key fea-ture in the life story of highly generative individuals, and political activism has been associated with generative concerns and goals (Serrat et al., 2017b), so the higher presence of sequences of redemption in young adulthood could reflect older activists' initial construction of a generative life story. More generally, this may reflect the tendency found in the previous literature to narrate redemptive sequences as people advance into young adulthood (Dunlop et al., 2016).

With respect to themes of integrative meaning, we found that meaning-making was less common in older activists' stories about negative events than in stories about positive events and turning points. In previous research, an association was found between emotionally negative events and meaning-making processes in general samples of midlife adults (e.g., Weststrate et al., 2018). However, our study suggests that this is not the case for older activists' narratives about negative experiences of political engagement. According to our data, negative experiences generate less meaning-making processes than other types of events. Previous research has shown that lifetime activists frequently recall, and share with others, stories of achievement, recognition and growth, as this may help them to remain committed despite the difficulties and drawbacks usually associated with political activism (Serrat et al., 2023). These positive stories may be important for the development and maintenance of political identity. Consequently, they may be more likely to generate meaning-making processes. The association between meaning-making processes and turning point events may be explained by the fact that these types of events often depict self-defining moments, so they are also more prone to meaning-making processes (McLean and Pratt, 2006).

With regards to the positive association between themes of integrative meaning and meaning-making processes in young adulthood stories of political engagement, this is in line with previous research showing that early generative expressions, such as political participation in this case, are positively associated with meaning-making and self-reflective processes in emerging adults (Lawford and Ramey, 2015; McLean and Pratt, 2006). This also reflects the literature on general autobiographical narratives. Narratives from young adulthood tend to convey greater integrative meaning processes as they often depict identity-defining milestones, such as the self-concept of life goals and their long-term definition (Luchetti and Sutin, 2018).

Finally, regarding structural elements, older activists' narratives about negative events were less coherent and more complex than narratives about positive events and turning points. Stories about negative experiences of political participation were, therefore, less understandable, unitary and clear in their structure and tended to present contrasting points of view, complex emotional experiences and even contradictory aspects of the narrator. These features contradict the literature on general autobiographical narratives, which show the opposite relationship (Habermas et al., 2009), and may explain why they did not focus as often on meaning-making processes as positive and turning points events did.

As for the influence of the life stage at which the event occurred on the structural elements of narratives, our results show that young adulthood stories were more coherent than stories from middle and older adulthood. Occurring during a period of construction of a political identity (Ruiz-Junco, 2011; Taft, 2017), the first experiences of political activism are likely to be told and shared with others more often than experiences from subsequent periods, which could explain why young adulthood narratives of political experiences were more orientated, structured and integrated than stories from other life stages. This also mirrors the literature on general autobiographical narratives, which shows that narratives of young adulthood tend to show greater coherence, as they usually describe self-defining moments and are explained to others more often than trivial stories (Luchetti and Sutin, 2018). We need to consider that the political context when our participants were young facilitated this coherence. At this time, enemies (the situation under the dictatorship and Francoist values) and aims (the transition to democracy and towards a more equalitarian and freer country) were clearly identified. However, stories of political experiences occurring during middle adulthood tended to be more complex than narratives from other periods, which could reflect the greater difficulties, barriers and limitations that the assumption of leadership and responsibility roles may bring to political activism during this life stage. This is in line with previous studies on general autobiographical narratives showing that narrative complexity usually increases from young to middle adulthood (Sengsavang et al., 2018). Moreover, the political context that

Spanish lifetime activists experienced in those years tended to be fuzzier, at least until the 2008 financial crisis and, in Catalonia, the boom of the independentist movement.

The results of this study should be interpreted cautiously because of several limitations. First, our focus on older Spanish activists limits generalisation to other geographical areas and/or younger cohorts of political activists. Second, our focus on lifelong activism within political organisations prevents results from being applied to other profiles of political activism or to other types of civic activities. Third, our selection of participants who were still politically active in older age also limits our conclusions, which may be different for those who have dropped out from political participation earlier in life. Moreover, the differences in the length of time passed from the events narrated could have potentially influenced some of the structural features of participants' narratives. Finally, and in line with the previous limitation, it may be possible that the results are influenced by other variables that we have not controlled for in our analysis.

Conclusion

Our study adds to the previous literature on political identities showing that, far from being monolithic, lifelong activists' narratives about political experiences show significant variations according to the type of experience described and the life stage at which it occurred. This study also extends the previous literature on general autobiographical narratives to the case of autobiographical narratives of political participation. Overall, the structural variations that we found in lifetime activists' narratives about political experiences largely mirrored previous literature on general autobiographical narratives. This means that, regardless of whether life stories are general or domain-specific, their structural characteristics and the variations they show by life stage and type of narrated events are largely similar. Our results suggest that future studies on political activism could therefore benefit from the literature on narrative identity to make assumptions about aspects such as the development and construction of political identities and the characteristics of life accounts on political participation and their variations across life stages and types of events depicted.

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