

## Special Article

# More Vulnerable? The Life Story Approach Highlights Older People's Potential for Strength During the Pandemic

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Older adults have repeatedly been referred to as more *physically* vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, however, is not only about becoming physically ill. It has many *psychosocial* aspects: people are exposed to myriad life challenges. The life story approach does not ignore physical status but also emphasizes psychosocial strengths. It highlights that older people are likely to have developed resilience through experiencing life challenges and living across history.

**Method:** We used the narrative method to review research on three strengths: tendency toward life reflection, adaptive use of personal memory, and temporal focus encouraging generativity.

**Results:** For each, we (a) present evidence that this strength manifests in the second half of life, and (b) identify how it may specifically be applied in dealing with the challenges of the pandemic. In considering their life stories, the picture that emerges is one of older adults as having the potential to show considerable psychosocial strength despite the adversities of the pandemic.

**Discussion:** We conclude that during this period of sweeping change in the lives of individuals of all ages, our older citizens may act as valuable societal anchors.

**Keywords:** Generativity, Life reflection, Life story, Memory function, Strengths

I've seen just about everything that can happen on this planet. If you haven't lived as long as I have, you might think this was the worst thing that ever happened. But people who know history know the difference. (85-year-old woman, [Leland, 2020](#))

Politicians, health officials, and the media have repeatedly referred to older adults as more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. As COVID-19 is a health crisis, this view understandably focuses on *physical* vulnerability. We certainly recognize the importance of protecting physically vulnerable persons from COVID-19. Individuals older than 80 years, particularly with pre-existing conditions, are

five times more likely to die from the virus than the global average ([UN COVID and Aging Brief, 2020](#)). Fortunately, not all community-dwelling older persons will contract the virus: all will, however, need to react to the pandemic's effects on their lives. We therefore turn away from a solely biological view. We embrace the multidimensionality of life span development ([Baltes, 1997](#)) by also focusing on older people's potential for *psychosocial* strength ([Charles, 2010](#)). In doing so, we offer a counternarrative to the bleak portrayal of older adults as merely vulnerable (see also [Ayalon et al., 2020](#)).

We do this through a *life story approach* that highlights people's creation of an evolving self-narrative ([McAdams](#)

and McLean, 2013). The life story is grounded in one's *biographical identity* (Erikson, 1959; Habermas and Bluck, 2000). Older adults have a life story that spans decades, creating temporal continuity that grounds them in present life. We argue that many older adults, having lived through both personal challenges and difficult historical periods, have crafted a life story that reflects them as persevering and thriving even in the face of adversity. Three aspects of older people's life stories provide them with strengths. Using a narrative review method, the current paper: (a) provides evidence of these psychosocial strengths, and (b) delineates how older adults may apply them during the pandemic. Voices of older people themselves from the literature and from community-dwelling older adults are used to exemplify these strengths. While acknowledging the heterogeneity of older adults and their unique experiences (e.g., Ayalon et al., 2020), note that the focus here is on general tendencies in the second half of life.

### Strength: Life Reflection

One strength derived from the life story, from the vantage point of later life, is that one can "take the long view" (Pillemer, 2011), reflecting on the significant portion of life already lived. Older adults are generally more past-focused than the young (Webster et al., 2014). They review and meaningfully integrate positive and challenging events into an acceptable whole (Erikson, 1959). The ability to make meaning of one's past, including challenging events, increases with age (i.e., peaking in midlife; Bauer and McAdams, 2004). Older people's memories can be more phenomenologically rich (Luchetti and Sutin, 2018) and they find purpose in reviewing their personal past (Hedberg et al., 2013). Their self-defining memories are more positive and show greater integrative meaning (Singer et al., 2007), providing a context for weaving together positive but also negative life events (Bauer et al., 2005). In addition, older people often reminisce to elicit, maintain, or amplify positive feelings (Carstensen et al., 1999), thereby using memory to regulate emotion (Cappeliez et al., 2008). This includes showing a positive narrative tone even when recalling difficulties (Pennebaker and Stone, 2003).

### Applying This Strength During the Pandemic

When you have lived a long time you have more to draw on. You realize not all the ups, or downs, last forever. I'm not sure what will come of this time we are in, but I've seen really difficult times end up producing some positive changes in society (75-year-old community-dwelling man, personal communication, May 20, 2020).

One challenge at this time is the experience of sadness and anxiety due to the myriad consequences of the pandemic. Life reflection is vital to older people in regulating negative

emotion. Having lived through numerous challenging events, they are skilled at identifying positive meaning in negative situations. Older people can also integrate difficult periods by contextualizing them within their large set of life events, to feel that "this too shall pass." Beyond this ability to contextualize negative events, they also have a positive reminiscence style (Cappeliez et al., 2008). This allows down-regulating negative emotion through recalling periods when they prevailed through difficulty but also remembering past happy times that can bolster current mood.

### Strength: Adaptive Use of Personal Memory

A second strength derived from the life story in later life is the ability to adaptively draw on specific memories of past challenges that bear some similarity to the current situation (Bluck and Alea, 2011). The use of personal memories to direct current behavior may be prominent due to the breadth and depth of older people's experience (Lind et al., 2019). Their memories can be used to inform and direct present behavior or may carry a life lesson that can be applied now (Pillemer, 2009). People of all ages use personal memory as a resource but older adults' functional memories, regardless of the type of function, were more positive and talked about more often, than the young (Alea et al., 2013). Using specific memories in this directive way has been linked to subjective well-being more so for older than younger adults (Alea and Bluck, 2013).

One type of memory older individuals adaptively use to direct current behavior involves past times they responded well or wisely in facing serious negative events or making life decisions. Those in later life phases are more likely to report learning life lessons from past events that can be applied today (Bluck and Glück, 2004). When asked particularly about having responded well to a difficult experience, older people emphasize a different form of wisdom than the young (Glück et al., 2005). They tell stories in which they drew on their own life knowledge and maintained personal flexibility to effectively manage a life situation.

### Applying This Strength During the Pandemic

We do what has to be done...moved away from family to Florida in 1967 to weather Vietnam War protests, equal rights movement, and integration. We've seen a lot of changes, adjusted and moved on. We are flexible. (77-year-old community-dwelling woman, personal communication, May 28, 2020).

Another pandemic challenge is adapting to an unpredictable, potentially unsafe world, including disruptive effects on daily life. Older people may, however, see some parallels between the current pandemic and remembered experiences. For example, depending on their age, they may have witnessed societal values changing rapidly

after the horror of World War II, experienced widespread fears concerning the global nuclear threat during the Cold War, lived through the restrictive tension of the McCarthy Era, or served in Vietnam or Korea. Specific to public health, they may have lived through the Polio and AIDS epidemics. Each of these periods caused waves of fear and death and feelings of social distance. For today's older people, these are not simply historical events. They lived and breathed through them, day by day: They personally carry specific memories from these periods and can draw on them today.

As such, older adults have the strength of experience. They have seen the world fall apart and come back together again. They have dealt before with months, or years, of anxiety about invisible threats, frustration at restrictions on activities, financial insecurity, isolation, and the illness of loved ones. Specific memories of how they handled these times can guide their behavior now (Pillemer, 2009).

### Strength: Generativity

A third strength of the life story is that it provides a foundation for awareness of one's movement through time. Older people have gradually become aware that they, like all generations before, are living in historical time (Erikson, 1959). This directs older people to focus on emotionally meaningful interactions (Carstensen et al., 1999) including generativity (Rubinstein et al., 2015). Paradoxically, sensitivity to the limitation of one's own personal future corresponds with extension of one's sense of the world's future. Older adults have begun to orient their life story to include the passing down of accrued world knowledge, hard-won life experience, and/or personal values (Pillemer, 2009). They may weave this generative tone into their life story as a way of feeling they will live on symbolically. Generativity is thus a personal asset: It involves having the ego strength for self-transcendence (McAdams, 2006) that can guide one's sense of purpose. As people age, generativity becomes an important, authentic aspect of their storied sense of self (McAdams, 2019) vital to their well-being (e.g., Cheng, 2009; Serrat et al., 2017).

### Applying This Strength During the Pandemic

Personal immortality may not matter at all...Is it not possible that by living our lives we create something fit to add to the store from which we came? Our sense of being more than ourselves is our most precious possession. (82-year-old woman, Scott-Maxwell, 1969, p. 26).

The spread of the virus continually prompts awareness of life's finitude. Though people's health and finances are being differentially affected across sectors of society, most people are struggling to envision a purposeful future. Older adults are at an advantage as they likely began working on this

issue before the pandemic. They were already more aware of their own (Carstensen et al., 1999) and loved ones' mortality (Bluck and Mroz, 2018). Most have already begun to think of the future of the world without them, that is, to take a generative stance. This life-phase-specific tendency toward telling one's life story in terms of generativity may partially fulfill a need for purpose during these uncertain times. Older people's conceptualization of life as involving not only their own future but the continuation of human culture for years to come may provide some older people with a sense of ego enrichment and well-being (Serrat et al., 2017).

### Conclusion

The life story approach highlights psychosocial strengths older people may have developed through past challenges in their own lives and by having lived through decades of historical time. The strengths to be derived from one's life story in later life include life reflection, adaptive use of personal memory, and a focus on generativity. Older people vary in the extent to which they are utilizing these strengths to maximize adaptation during this pandemic. We offer this paper as a counternarrative to societal views of older adults as solely vulnerable. Instead, we suggest that their life expertise, gathered in their life story, is a strength. Indeed, older people may act as important anchors in society during this time of sweeping change.

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### Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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