Agency, Identity Development, and Subjective Well-Being, among Undergraduate Students at a

Central US University

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Abstract

Humans are driven by fundamental, agentic motivations to accomplish goals and have control over their lives (McAdams et al., 1996). Agency is especially salient for young adults and has implications for how they understand themselves and feel about the direction of their lives (Diehl et al., 2004; Grysman et al., 2016). We tested two measures of undergraduate students' agency as expressed in autobiographical narratives: global, narrative-wide agency; and agency displayed within a redemptive arc, where narratives turn from negative to positive. We expected each display of agency to inform reports of subjective well-being and identity development. We recruited 162 traditional-age undergraduate students (73.5% women, *M* age = 19.3 years) from a central U.S. university to provide narratives about negative high school experiences and reports about subjective well-being and identity development. Global agency informed reports of subjective well-being, whereas redemptive agency informed reports of identity development. Hence, the different ways students tend to focus on their goals and successes may be important for different aspects of their lives. We discuss how these findings fit with existing research and additional considerations of college student success and persistence.

*Keywords*: Agency, Redemption, Identity, Well-Being

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For traditional-age undergraduates (~18-24 years), the college career brings opportunities to explore the self and gain control over one's future prospects (Arnett, 2000; Côté, 2006). However, college also presents challenges and demands across academic, social, and professional domains—these challenges can threaten how students see themselves as capable of improving their standing and controlling their surroundings, with implications for college persistence (e.g., Graham et al., 2013). However, students who face life's challenges with a clear focus on agency and who feel that they are in control should also be making more progress in exploring and committing to aspects of their identity (see Schwartz et al., 2005) and have greater well-being (e.g., McLean et al., 2019). In this study, we were interested in considering two indices of undergraduates' agency in addressing subjective well-being and identity development.

Agency is a fundamental motivational drive that is reflected in the ways individuals make sense of their life experiences (McAdams et al., 1996). Individuals who maintain a greater emphasis on agency should feel that they are better in control of their lives, have a clearer sense of who they are, and have greater self-efficacy for life's challenges. Agency is especially salient for younger adults who are in the process of exploring and coming to terms with their place in the world (Arnett, 2000). There are multiple approaches for measuring agency. Many of these measures involve autobiographical narrative tasks. We compared two such indices of agency: *global displays* of agency—whether individuals emphasize having more or less control over their lives, regardless of other evaluations about the event (Grysman et al., 2016); and displays of *agency within a redemptive narrative arc*—emphasis on how one has more control and mastery in the course of a negative experience becoming positively resolved (McAdams et al., 2001).

**The Current Study**

This study addresses the ways a) global agency and b) redemptive agency within narratives of painful life experiences inform college student identity development (exploration and commitment) and subjective well-being (SWB; positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction). We focus on negative autobiographical experiences, where agency is likely to be challenged (McAdams et al., 1996). We hypothesized that each display of agency would be associated with greater identity development and SWB. We also tested whether these displays of agency would be uniquely associated with outcomes when considered simultaneously.

## Method

**Sample**

As part of a larger project about how high school experiences are informative for campus engagement and student well-being, participants were recruited from a public, central U.S. university ($n$ = 162; 73.5% women, $M$ age = 19.3 years, SD = 3.0). Most participants identified as White (70.4%), followed by those who identified as Black (11.1%), Multiracial (11.1%), Southeast Asian (4.3%), Latinx (1.2%), and Middle Eastern (1.2%). Most participants were first-year students (73.3%). Most participants (96.7%) represented majors other than Psychology.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited through the Psychology department's SONA system for Introductory Psychology—a general education course for many majors on-campus—and completed a set of online measures. Procedures took no more than one hour to complete. Participants received credit toward a research exposure requirement in Introductory Psychology.[1]

**Measures**

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[1] Students had additional options for receiving credit that did not involve research participation and were expected to require similar amounts of time and effort.

### Narrative Task

Each participant was asked to provide a narrative of "an experience from [their] high school years that stands out as an especially negative event in some way." Participants were asked to detail the event and discuss how they felt at the time and at the present, as well as discuss what the memory of the event says about their life. There was no time or word limit.

### Narrated Agency

Narratives were manually rated for displays of global agency and redemptive agency. Global agency was determined based on an approach by Grysman and colleagues (2016), where each narrative was rated on a 0-3 scale (0 = the narrative displayed helplessness, passiveness, and/or a lack of control; 3 = the narrative included mentions of displayed agency and asserted control/goal pursuit in the moment and addressed the ways the narrator changed as an agentic individual going forward in time). Redemptive agency was determined based on work by McAdams and colleagues (2001). Narratives were first rated for the display of redemptive imagery—whether the narrative shifted from a focus on the negative experience to a positive resolution. Within redemptive narratives, raters then determined whether individuals displayed agentic themes *within* the redemptive arc (0 or 1). Forty-eight (29.6%) participants expressed redemption in their narratives and 33 (68.8%) of those individuals also displayed redemptive agency. Approximately 20% of narratives were coded by two- to three-person coding teams for consensus. Global agency (McDonald's $\omega$ = .85) and redemptive imagery (96% agreement) showed strong inter-rater reliability. The remaining narratives were coded independently.

### Subjective Well-Being

Participants completed the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (Su et al., 2014), which included subscales of SWB. This scale shows associations with other measures of psychological

and physical health (Duan et al., 2018). We focused on the subscales of life satisfaction (3

items), positive affect (3 items), and negative affect (3 items). Items were completed on a 5-point

Likert-type scale. Internal consistency was good (McDonald's ωs = .87-.91).

### Identity Development

Participants completed the short form of the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire

(Zimmermann et al., 2010). This scale was designed with considerations toward Marcia's (1966)

status paradigm of identity, and included 16 items about the ways participants were actively

*exploring* their identity (8 items; McDonald's ω = .74) and *committed* to their current identity (8

items; McDonald's ω = .74). Items were completed on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

## Results

### Analytical Plan

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Preliminary analyses included bivariate

correlations among study variables (e.g., gender, global agency, life satisfaction). To address the

primary research question about the ways global agency and redemptive agency informed reports

of well-being and identity, Bayesian linear regression models were conducted.

### Bivariate Correlations

Table 1 presents the bivariate correlations. Gender and academic level were not

associated with either display of agency. Redemptive agency and global agency were positively

associated. Redemptive agency was positively associated with identity exploration. Global

agency was positively associated with life satisfaction and positive affect, and negatively

associated with negative affect. Significant correlations were in the expected directions.

### Hypothesis Tests

Using the JASP software program (JASP Team, 2019), Bayesian linear regression models addressed whether displays of redemptive and/or global agency inform well-being and identity development. Multiple nested models compared model support given configurations of the independent variables of gender, academic level, redemptive agency, and global agency.

### Subjective Well-Being

For life satisfaction, the best-supported model ($R^2 = .08$) included the predictors of academic level (95% Credible Interval [CI]: -.325, -.021) and global agency (95% CI: .025, .420). Academic level was negatively associated with life satisfaction, whereas global agency was positively associated with life satisfaction. The inverse Bayes Factor for this model was 5.70, suggesting substantial support over the null model (see Jarosz & Wiley, 2014).

For positive affect, the best-supported model ($R^2 = .05$) included only global displays of agency (95% CI: .076, .527). Global agency was positively associated with positive affect. The inverse Bayes Factor for this model was 7.94, suggesting substantial support.

For negative affect, the best-supported model ($R^2 = .04$) included only global displays of agency (95% CI: -.506, -.046). Global agency was negatively associated with reports of negative affect. The inverse Bayes Factor was 7.57, suggesting substantial support.

### Identity Development

For identity exploration, the best-supported model ($R^2 = .03$) included only redemptive displays of agency (95% CI: 3.723, 3.959). Redemptive agency was positively associated with identity exploration. The inverse Bayes Factor was 4.27, suggesting substantial support.

For identity commitment, the best supported model ($R^2 = .05$) included academic level (95% CI = -.002, .231) and redemptive agency (95% CI: -.026, .447). Academic level had a marginal, positive association with identity commitment, and redemptive agency had a marginal,

positive association with identity commitment. The inverse Bayes Factor was 2.66, suggesting weak or anecdotal support for this model.

## Discussion

This study addressed the ways agency informed identity development and subjective well-being (SWB) among traditional-age undergraduates. We were interested in comparing two indices of narrated agency: global agency, regardless of other evaluations of the event; and redemptive agency, within the context of an event shifting from negative to positive.

### Assessment of Hypotheses

Overall, findings supported hypotheses that agency would be positively associated with student identity development and SWB, replicating previous work (McAdams et al., 1996; McLean et al., 2019). Global agency and the ways individuals broadly emphasized their environmental control and self-mastery was associated with SWB—how students may feel about the direction of their lives. Agency in the context of redemptive reasoning—focuses on self-improvement and control specifically within events that began negatively and resolved in a positive fashion—was positively associated with identity development, a key aspect of the college student experience and a major task during early adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Côté, 2006).

The findings suggest that these different expressions of agency are capturing distinct, yet similarly important aspects of students' experiences. Global agency may better represent broad motivations and individual differences in personal goal needs (McAdams et al., 1996), and as students feel they are making progress toward their goals, they may feel better about the broad direction of their lives (McLean et al., 2019). Redemption is a reflection of autobiographical integration and reasoning. Agency in the service of this reasoning—finding new goals, new aspects of personal strength and opportunities for goal pursuit in response to a challenging

experience being positively resolved (see McAdams et al., 2001)—may complement the other ways students reconsider and explore aspects of their selves. That is, finding ways one has shown resolve and found efficacy—specifically in moving on from setbacks—could be important to the other ways students are exploring roles and opportunities in the college setting.

**Relevance of Agency for College Student Success and Student-Focused Initiatives**

Agency is important for feelings of efficacy and control that are key to students' persistence within their majors and at their college institutions. Using approaches like narrative to assess students' agency and promoting agentic activities (e.g., encouraging out-of-class group involvement and leadership) could be key to identifying at-risk students and elevating academic performance for students, respectively (Kuh et al., 2008). Such approaches would fit with efforts by instructors, staff, researchers, and administrators to encourage active learning experiences and early laboratory/hands-on exposure that contribute to persistence by reinforcing students' views that they are capable of pursuing and achieving their college goals (see Graham et al., 2013).

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study had limited ethnic minority representation, fewer men than women, and a limited focus to a single college setting and single time-point of data collection. This limits the generalizability of these findings to other college populations and prevents considerations on the potential a) stability of these agentic measures among college participants and b) potential directionality of effects between student adjustment and approaches for incorporating agency. Future studies will benefit from addressing these deficits, considering multiple geographic regions, purposefully recruiting underrepresented ethnic minorities, and considering the ways students may provide multiple narratives within and beyond time points for a richer view of agency and longitudinal student adjustment in the forms of identity development and well-being.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations among Study Variables*

|  | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.  Gender | -.05 | .14 | .11 | .00 | .13 | .09 | .09 | -.04 |
| 2.  Academic Level | -- | -.01 | -.10 | .05 | .14 | -.21** | -.11 | .09 |
| 3.  Redemptive Agency | | -- | .22** | .19* | .15 | .14 | -.01 | -.05 |
| 4.  Global Agency | | | -- | .14 | .00 | .19* | .21** | -.19* |
| 5.  Identity Exploration | | | | -- | .11 | .32** | .27** | -.23** |
| 6.  Identity Commitment | | | | | -- | .08 | .10 | -.02 |
| 7.  Life Satisfaction | | | | | | -- | .72** | -.67** |
| 8.  Positive Affect | | | | | | | -- | -.85** |
| 9.  Negative Affect | | | | | | | | -- |
| Mean | -- | .31 | .83 | 3.86 | 4.57 | 3.64 | 3.65 | 2.30 |
| SD | -- | .46 | .66 | .73 | .65 | .86 | .95 | .97 |

*Note.* * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. For Gender, women received the higher value.