

# What is your career story: How people's stories are influenced in times of adversity.

## INTRODUCTION

- Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2006) states that our ability to anticipate and live into the future is a fundamental human capacity. Humans possess the ability to picture alternative futures, determine desired outcomes, and adapt behavior based on reflection.
- Sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) is the process whereby people organize their priorities into patterns and schemas. At higher levels of complexity, smaller actions can be arranged into archetypal outlines to form life story arcs and overarching motivational patterns (life themes).
- For adults, one's career represents a significant part of their life and identity (Yost et al., 2015). The story arcs and themes that people proscribe to their careers can, therefore, profoundly affect their resilience and well-being.
- Cultures and research suggests that some stories and outcomes are better than others (McAdams, 2008). Stories filled with hope, peace, and joy are better than narratives which contribute to anxiety and depression; resilience is more desired than despair, well-being is better than desolation. Therefore, it is important to examine what represents a society where individuals flourish to hypothesize which arcs and themes are better.

## METHOD

274 participants (50.0% females) were recruited through Academic Prolific to complete an online survey through Qualtrics. All respondents were over the age of 23 and currently live/work in the United States of America. Participants' self-rated levels of anxiety and well-being on five measurements by means of Likert-type scales: Perceived stress (Cohen et al., 1983), Resilience (Smith et al., 2008), General Self-Efficacy-GSE (Chen et al., 2001, 2004), Psychosocial Flourishing (Deiner et al., 2010), and Social Generativity (Morselli & Passini, 2015).

## STORY ARCS AND THEMES

### Story Arcs

#### Survival

Life is a struggle to survive and figuring out a way to get from day-to-day and year-to-year throughout one's life. This arc is concerned with retaining access to limited and uncertain resources

#### Steady Upward Progress

Life is about progressively improving and a steady upward trend over the course of one's life. It assumes that progress is the rule. Culturally, the steady upward progress draws on the cultural theme of the steady upward progress of science and economic expectations that recessions and stock market corrections are characterized as temporary setbacks in a continuous upward trend.

#### Transformational

Life is a journey that requires venturing out, failure, and overcoming personal and external challenges to emerge transformed on the other side. The transformational arc includes expectations that when things are going well, problems will occur where challenges need to be confronted and weaknesses addressed if one hopes to arrive victorious on the other side.

#### Cyclical

Life is an endless cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth that repeats throughout one's life. One's career is seen in the form of short-term (e.g., years) or long-term (e.g., career journey) cycles that are repeated across all time and all people.

#### Random

Life is ultimately a series of disconnected events that people impose meaning and order upon. This arc is also culturally consistent with post-modernism that suggests one's understanding of life, work, career, and truth are socially constructed, and so an individual perspective on one's career arc is always subjective and determined by the viewer (Maglio et al., 2005).

### Story Themes

#### Security

A person is interested in having work which provides financial stability, safety, and steady employment for themselves and others.

#### Happiness

The desire to maximize the pleasure in one's life, minimize the pain, and invite others to experience the same.

#### Achievement

The drive for achievement is the desire to excel at one's work, being the best that one can be, making a contribution, and equipping others to do the same.

#### Relationships

Connecting with other people to build strong relationships and creating the conditions where everyone can connect with, support, and care for one another.

#### Growth

Pursuing lifelong learning and growth is an important driver for many people in addition to creating an environment where others can grow and develop.

#### Principles

People who make principles a driver in their careers focus on the importance of living according to ethical codes of right and wrong and creating the conditions where others can do the same.

#### Respect

Another key driver for behavior is the desire to be recognized and admired, influencing others, building a strong reputation and status, and living in a way that others will follow.

#### Spirituality

Doing work in partnership with God or a higher power and inviting others to experience the same.

#### Existential Uncertainty

The belief that work and career are dependent on individuals living with intention, making their own meaning in their work, and freeing others to do that same

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## RESULTS

**Table 1**  
Descriptives, Mean Differences (t-test significance), and Correlations of Arcs and Themes.

	Time 1		Time 2		Differences <sup>1</sup> (T2 - T1)	r
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<b>Story Arcs</b>						
Survival	2.87	1.13	3.57	1.13	0.70***	.58***
Steady building success	3.65	0.95	3.16	1.07	-0.49***	.54***
Transformational	3.56	0.99	3.38	1.07	-0.17**	.56***
Cyclical	3.07	1.19	2.97	1.16	-0.1	.65***
Random	2.80	1.01	3.09	1.16	0.29***	.71***
<b>Story Themes</b>						
Security	3.89	1.00	4.08	1.09	0.18**	.46***
Happiness	3.65	1.06	3.38	1.07	-0.27***	.60***
Achievement	3.65	1.05	3.28	1.12	-0.37***	.61***
Relationships	3.21	1.10	2.99	1.13	-0.22***	.66***
Growth	3.59	0.99	3.27	1.11	-0.31***	.52***
Principles	3.41	1.06	3.32	1.11	-0.10*	.73***
Respect	3.25	1.11	3.05	1.12	-0.12***	.66***
Spirituality	2.11	1.25	2.16	1.29	0.05	.83***
Existential uncertainty	2.56	1.16	2.75	1.30	0.19**	.69***

Note. N = 269 - 274; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

### H2a: The transformational and cyclical arcs (T1) are the most likely arcs to lead to resilience, GSE, psychosocial flourishing, generativity, and lower stress.

- The hypothesis is partially supported. Transformational is linked positively and is statistically significant with resilience, GSE, flourishing, and generativity. Steady upward progress seems to be the arc most strongly and significantly related to all outcomes. Cyclical was statistically unrelated to any of the five DVs.

### H2b: The relationship, growth, principles, and spirituality themes (from time 1) will be the most adaptive themes leading to (time 2) resilience, GSE, psychosocial flourishing, generativity, and lower stress.

- The hypothesis is partially supported. Relationships, growth, and principles were all positively correlated with GSE, flourishing, and generativity. In addition, principles and spirituality were positively correlated with resilience. Finally, spirituality was also correlated with flourishing and generativity. Contrary to predictions, achievement seems to generally be the most strongly related to all of the outcomes.

### H1a: The transformational, cyclical, and random career story arcs will be more stable over time than the other arcs.

- This hypothesis is generally confirmed. Cyclical, transformational, and random show the least change in average scores. Additionally, cyclical and random show the highest correlations from time 1 to time 2.

### H1b: The relationship, growth, principles, spirituality, and existential uncertainty career story themes will be significantly more stable over time than the other themes.

- Support for this hypothesis is mixed. Stability is shown for spirituality and principles through the lowest change in means, among all themes. Achievement, growth, and happiness appear to be less stable over time (due to higher changes in means) in comparison with the other themes. The strongest correlated themes (between time 1 and time 2) were spirituality, principles, and existential uncertainty.

**Table 2**  
Correlations of Arcs and Themes with Dependent Variables

	Perceived Stress	Resilience	GSE	Flourishing	Generativity
<b>Story Arcs</b>					
Survival	0.30 ***	-0.30***	-0.25***	-0.23***	-0.02
Steady building success	-0.17**	0.25***	0.47***	0.37***	0.26***
Transformational	-0.02	0.15*	0.28***	0.24***	0.22***
Cyclical	0.05	-0.06	-0.07	-0.07	-0.02
Random	0.23***	-0.09	-0.16**	-0.22***	-0.06
<b>Story Themes</b>					
Security	0.04	-0.10	0.03	0.03	-0.04
Happiness	-0.17**	0.19**	0.26***	0.26***	0.06
Achievement	-0.10	0.18**	0.36***	0.39***	0.30***
Relationships	0.05	0.09	0.14*	0.27***	0.22***
Growth	-0.02	0.10	0.34***	0.34***	0.21***
Principles	-0.12	0.20***	0.29***	0.29***	0.31***
Respect	-0.10	0.11	0.26***	0.32***	0.22***
Spirituality	-0.07	0.12*	0.08	0.15*	0.13*
Existential uncertainty	0.19**	-0.12*	-0.13*	-0.18**	-0.04

Note: N = 269 - 274; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

## DISCUSSION

### Practical Implications

Based upon the results, the transformational and steady building success arcs for personal career narratives are most strongly related to stability and personal well-being moving into a crisis. Likewise, from the nine themes, principles and achievement show the steadiest and strongest relationship with most outcomes.

### Future Research

- This study assumed that career prospects decreased for everyone during Covid-19. One possibility is that the steady building success and achievement narratives were for strong because people had good career prospects. Future research should assess which arcs/themes are most related to resilience and well-being for people suffering career setbacks..
- Given the correlational nature of this research, causal statements cannot be made. Future research should attempt to manipulate career story arcs/themes (e.g., have people tell their career stories using a transformational arc or relational theme) to assess the causal impact on resilience and well-being perceptions.
- Finally, future research could analyze the relationship between story arcs and themes and which combination of arcs and themes best promote reliance and well-being.