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Parent–Child Relationships in Emerging Adults' Life Stories: A Narrative Inquiry into Identity and Well-Being-Related Meanings

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Abstract

Background

This study aimed to examine how emerging adults select and make sense of experiences involving their parents within their life stories, the self-related meanings they derive from these experiences, and how those meanings are reflected in their current identity, relationships, and subjective experiences related to psychological well-being.

Methods

The study employed a narrative inquiry design. Participants were 15 volunteer undergraduate students aged 20–23 years who were enrolled in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling program at Eastern Mediterranean University. Participants' written life stories constituted the primary data source, while researcher notes taken during semi-structured interviews were used to contextualize and elaborate the narratives. Guided by McAdams's life story approach, participants provided narratives concerning a low point, a high point, a turning point, and a major life challenge. Excluding three prompts for which no narrative was provided, 57 life-story events were examined using thematic analysis.

Results

Family-related experiences were more prominent in low-point narratives (9/15), whereas academic and educational experiences were most prominent in high-point narratives (11/15) and turning-point narratives (9/15). Narratives of life challenges showed a more heterogeneous pattern, encompassing relational, academic, health-related, and other forms of adversity. Participants did not merely recount past events; they constructed self-related meanings involving growing independence, assuming responsibility, recognizing their own worth, re-evaluating family relationships, and establishing interpersonal boundaries. These meanings were reflected in their current self-narratives through themes related to perceived competence, relational trust, interpersonal boundaries, and self-awareness.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that the meaning of parent–child relationships in emerging adulthood may be understood not only in terms of the quality of past relationships, but also through how individuals select, reinterpret, and connect these experiences to their current sense of self within their life stories. Because psychological well-being was not assessed directly, conclusions regarding well-being are limited to the subjective meanings expressed in participants' narratives.

Background

Parent-child relationships provide an important relational context in which individuals construct meaning about themselves and their life experiences. Yet the significance of earlier relational experiences in adulthood cannot be understood solely in terms of what happened. From a narrative identity perspective, individuals do not reproduce every detail of their lives exactly as it occurred; rather, they select experiences that are personally significant, reinterpret them from the standpoint of their current life circumstances, and integrate them into an evolving account of the self [1]. The past therefore becomes part of a life story that is revisited in light of the individual's current understanding of who they are, rather than remaining a fixed sequence of events. The continued reinterpretation and narration of personal experiences can enable individuals to derive self-relevant meanings from what they have lived through and to incorporate those meanings into their identity narratives [2]. Accordingly, understanding how experiences with parents are related to identity and psychological well-being requires attention not only to the nature of past relationships, but also to how those experiences are remembered, interpreted, and connected to the present self.

Identity development is a central psychosocial process through which individuals establish a sense of continuity and coherence in their understanding of themselves [3]. Narrative identity theory extends this developmental perspective by conceptualizing identity as an evolving life story through which individuals integrate past experiences with their present lives and anticipated futures [1, 2]. Life events, in this view, are not simply memories of the past; they become part of how individuals understand who they are and how they make sense of continuity and change across their lives. The Big Three model of narrative identity proposed by McLean et al. [4] organizes core narrative features into three broad domains: motivational and affective themes, autobiographical reasoning, and structural characteristics. Autobiographical reasoning is particularly relevant to the present study because it involves connecting past events to the self and deriving broader self-relevant meanings from personal experiences [4, 5].

The relevance of narrative identity to psychological well-being lies not only in what individuals have experienced, but also in how they interpret those experiences and position them within their life stories. Research has linked features of personal narratives—including agency, communion, coherence, and meaning-making - with psychological adjustment and well-being. Booker et al. [6] found that coherence and growth themes in low-point narratives were associated with higher levels of psychological adjustment across repeated assessments. In a nine-year longitudinal study of late-midlife adults, Lind et al. [7] found that agency and communion themes in narrative identity were associated with well-being and depression over time, beyond the effects of dispositional traits. Similarly, Adler et al. [8], in a review of the field, concluded that the association between narrative identity and well-being is especially evident in motivational and affective themes and in integrative meaning-making. Longitudinal research extending from adolescence into emerging adulthood further highlights the developmental relevance of these narrative processes. Marshall et al. [9], for instance, found that characteristics of adolescents' turning-point narratives—particularly negative event resolution - were associated with higher depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem in emerging adulthood.

At the same time, associations between narrative characteristics and psychological well-being are not uniform across studies. Vanderveren et al. [10] found that narrative coherence in single turning-point memories was not significantly related to psychological well-being; however, higher narrative coherence was negatively associated with disturbed identity functioning. Gehrt et al. [11] likewise showed that the apparent association between narrative identity and well-being was substantially attenuated after accounting for the emotional valence of life stories and individuals' general experience of autobiographical memory: agency predicted only one well-being variable, whereas communion predicted none. Taken together, these findings suggest that links between narrative identity and psychological well-being cannot be reduced to a single narrative feature or to the positive or negative content of a narrative. The psychological significance of personal narratives may therefore be better understood by considering the meaning attributed to experiences alongside the developmental and sociocultural contexts in which those meanings are constructed.

Identity development is not solely an individual process. Close relationships, and the stories shared within them, contribute to how individuals understand themselves. The family is a central relational context for this process, and family stories can shape the narratives individuals construct about their own lives [12]. The influence of experiences with parents may also extend beyond childhood and adolescence. Camia et al. [13] found longitudinal associations between parenting experiences perceived in adolescence and parents' traces in life stories constructed in young adulthood, supporting a long-term connection between family experiences and narrative identity. Marshall and Reese [14] provided further longitudinal evidence: emerging adults whose mothers had received an elaborative reminiscing intervention during early childhood showed greater causal coherence - that is, stronger connections between past events and the present self - in their turning-point narratives at age 21. They also reported higher self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms than participants in the control condition. These findings suggest that early parent–child meaning-making processes can have enduring implications for narrative identity and psychological well-being in emerging adulthood.

Recent research also demonstrates the value of life stories for examining identity and psychological adjustment within social and cultural contexts. Using McAdams's life story interview, Binder et al. [15] showed how young refugees in Norway reconstructed narratives of identity and belonging while negotiating differing cultural expectations. Their accounts reflected not only psychological tension and internal conflict, but also processes of meaning-making, self-redefinition, and resilience. Similarly, Zheng et al. [16], combining life story interviews with quantitative measures, found that relational themes were prominent in the narratives of Chinese adults with physical disabilities and highlighted the importance of family and social relationships for meaning-making and subjective well-being. In a 36-month longitudinal qualitative narrative study, Zięba et al. [17] further showed that positive and negative changes following adverse life events could coexist within the same person's narrative over time. Collectively, these studies underscore that life stories do more than recount past events; they provide a means of examining how individuals interpret themselves, their relationships, and personal change within shifting life circumstances.

Emerging adulthood provides a particularly relevant developmental context for examining how experiences with parents are interpreted because it is a period in which identity-related possibilities are actively explored and transitions into adult roles become increasingly salient. Arnett [18] proposed that emerging adulthood is especially evident in cultural contexts that allow an extended period for relatively independent exploration of life roles and alternatives, with identity exploration as one of its defining features. Greater independence, however, does not eliminate the importance of relationships with parents. In a longitudinal study, Lindell et al. [19] found that emerging adults who reported less negativity in relationships with their mothers and fathers during the first year of college felt more like adults three years later. Higher levels of psychological control and helicopter parenting, by contrast, had detrimental implications for vocational identity development and perceived competence in the transition to adulthood.

Existing research therefore provides several complementary lines of evidence. Studies with Turkish samples have linked the satisfaction of basic psychological needs in relationships with parents to identity statuses and have associated parental control, autonomy support, and psychological control with indicators of psychological adjustment and well-being [20–22]. Narrative identity research has examined how parents are represented in individuals' life stories and how earlier parenting experiences are associated with later narrative identity. Köber and Habermas [23], for example, examined how and to what extent parents were represented in spontaneous life narratives across age groups and found that parents occupied a persistent place in those accounts. Camia et al. [13] investigated longitudinal associations between perceived parenting in adolescence, parents' traces in later life stories, and narrative identity characteristics in young adulthood. Marshall and Reese [14] demonstrated that early mother–child reminiscing processes were related to the connections emerging adults later constructed between past experiences and their present selves. Liu and Zhu [24], from a different angle, examined how Chinese emerging adults made meaning of adverse experiences from their parents' pasts and showed how this process was linked to personal identity exploration and the renegotiation of family ties.

Against this background, the present study extends these lines of research by focusing directly on emerging adults' own experiences with their parents as narrated within their life stories. Rather than treating parent–child relationships only as retrospective relationship qualities or as predictors of predefined psychological outcomes, the study examines which experiences involving parents participants select as significant, how they interpret those experiences, and what self-related meanings they derive from them. It also considers how those meanings are reflected in participants' current identities, relationships, and subjective experiences of psychological well-being. This focus allows parent–child relationships to be examined not only in terms of what occurred in the past, but also in terms of how past experiences are recalled, reinterpreted, and integrated into the current self-narrative during emerging adulthood.

Study aim and research questions

The present study aimed to examine the events and emotional patterns that are salient in emerging adults' life stories, the self-related meanings they construct from significant experiences involving their relationships with their parents, and how these meanings are reflected in their current identities, relationships, and subjective experiences of psychological well-being. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. 1. Which events and emotional patterns are most salient in participants' life stories?
2. 2. How do participants narrate significant experiences involving their relationships with their parents, and what self-related meanings do they derive from these experiences?
3. 3. How are the self-related meanings derived from these experiences reflected in participants' subjective accounts of their current identities, relationships, and psychological well-being?

Methods

Study design

This study employed a narrative inquiry design to examine how individuals make sense of significant life experiences, position these experiences within their life stories, and connect past events with their current sense of self. Narrative inquiry provides a framework for examining how individuals recount experiences from their own perspectives and within their own systems of meaning, while attending to the personal, relational, and contextual dimensions through which those experiences are interpreted [25].

Accordingly, the study examined the events and emotions that were salient in participants' life stories, the meanings they constructed from significant experiences involving their relationships with their parents, and the self-related meanings they derived from these experiences. It further explored how these meanings were reflected in participants' subjective accounts of their current identities, relationships, and psychological well-being. Rather than evaluating parent–child relationships solely in terms of the positive or negative quality of past interactions, the study focused on how participants selected, positioned, and interpreted these experiences within their life stories and connected them to their present sense of self.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns of meaning across the narratives while preserving the integrity of individual life stories, the contextual positioning of events, and the connections participants constructed between past experiences and their present selves. Thus, cross-narrative patterns were interpreted in relation to, rather than independently of, participants' individual narratives.

Participants and setting

The study included 15 undergraduate students who voluntarily participated and were enrolled in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Program within the Department of Educational Sciences,

Faculty of Education, Eastern Mediterranean University. Thirteen participants were women and two were men, and their ages ranged from 20 to 23 years. All participants were in the third or fourth year of the undergraduate program.

The study examined life-story accounts from 15 participants, focusing on shared and divergent patterns of meaning while retaining the distinctiveness of individual experiences. Participants included students who had moved to Northern Cyprus for university education from different geographical regions of Türkiye, including eastern and western regions, as well as Cypriot students residing in Northern Cyprus. This variation provided access to accounts situated within different geographical, family, and life contexts without treating geographical origin as a direct measure of cultural orientation.

Participation was voluntary. Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the data-collection process, the intended scientific use of the data, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw from the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data sources and collection procedure

The primary narrative data consisted of self-authored written life stories, supplemented by semi-structured interviews designed to elaborate on the experiences and meanings described in these narratives. The data-collection process was informed by McAdams's [1] life-story approach, which conceptualizes identity in terms of an evolving life narrative through which individuals organize experiences and construct a sense of continuity and meaning.

The interview guide was developed by the researchers specifically for this study, drawing on selected prompts from McAdams's Life Story Interview [26], and refined following expert review. An English-language version is provided in Additional file 1.

The interview guide was reviewed for content coverage, clarity, and alignment with the research aims by five experts: four in Guidance and Psychological Counseling and one in Measurement and Evaluation. The guide was revised in accordance with their feedback. Examples of questions included, "Why is this scene important and meaningful to you, and what does it say about you?" and "How did this experience change the way you define yourself, or what did it help you realize about yourself?"

Participants were invited to write about four types of significant life-story scenes: a low point, a high point, a turning point, and a significant life challenge. For each scene, they were asked to describe what occurred, the people involved, their thoughts and emotions at the time, the meaning they attributed to the event, and what the experience revealed to them about themselves.

After the written life stories had been collected, they were digitized by transcribing them verbatim into electronic text files for analysis. During this transfer, the participants' wording and substantive content were preserved; no interpretive changes were introduced. These verbatim electronic texts provided the textual basis for the subsequent semi-structured interviews, which were conducted to elaborate on the

experiences and meanings expressed in the written narratives. Probing questions were used when necessary to deepen participants' accounts.

During the interviews, the researcher took detailed notes on participants' additional explanations, emotional emphases, and interpretations of the experiences described in their written life stories. Following each interview, these notes were organized and linked to the corresponding verbatim electronic version of the written narrative. The written life stories remained the primary narrative data source, whereas the interview notes were used to clarify and enrich contextual understanding. Direct quotations presented in the findings were drawn from the participants' written narratives and retained the participants' original wording.

Across the four life-story prompts, 60 responses were possible (15 participants × four scenes). Three prompts did not yield an event narrative for one participant; therefore, 57 event narratives were available for thematic classification and analysis. Non-responses were retained descriptively but were not treated as analytic categories.

Data analysis

The verbatim electronic versions of participants' self-authored written life stories constituted the primary dataset for analysis. Researcher notes from the semi-structured interviews were considered alongside the corresponding narratives to clarify the context of events, emotions, and self-related meanings.

Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning in relation to the research questions. The analysis drew on methodological discussions by Terry and Hayfield [27] and Byrne [28], particularly their emphasis on iterative engagement with qualitative data and the researcher's interpretative role. Analysis proceeded iteratively through familiarization with the data, coding, pattern development, review, refinement, and interpretation. Rather than fragmenting the narratives into decontextualized codes, the analysis sought to preserve the location of each event within the participant's broader life story and the meaning-making connections established between past experiences and the present self.

In the initial analytic stage, each written life story was read holistically, with attention to the context and narrative position of the event, its emotional quality, and the meaning attributed to it by the participant. Relevant interview notes were considered alongside the corresponding written narrative. The accounts were then organized according to the four life-story scenes used during data collection: low points, high points, turning points, and life challenges.

Within each scene, the primary event content was coded, and similar descriptive codes were grouped into event-content categories such as family relationships, academic achievement, education, romantic relationships, friendships, health-related experiences, and other forms of adversity or personal change. For descriptive presentation, these event-content codes were subsequently consolidated into five overarching event categories: academic and educational experiences, family-related experiences,

relational and social experiences, adversity and risk experiences, and personal growth/transformation. “No response” was retained separately and was not treated as an analytic category. This first-level descriptive classification was used to characterize the types of experiences around which participants’ narratives were organized and to provide a contextual foundation for the subsequent interpretive analysis. It was conceptually distinguished from the higher-order thematic patterns used to address the research questions.

For the first research question, salient life events and the emotional patterns associated with them were examined. For the second research question, analysis focused on the connections participants constructed between significant life events and their current selves, including the autobiographical and self-related meanings they derived from these experiences. For the third research question, the analysis examined how these meanings were reflected in participants’ subjective accounts of their current identities, relationships, and psychological well-being. Because psychological well-being was not assessed using an independent psychometric measure, interpretations were restricted to participants’ subjective narrative accounts and meanings concerning psychological well-being; no claims were made regarding levels of psychological well-being or causal relationships.

Codes with related content and meaning were brought together to develop broader interpretive patterns while maintaining their connection to the narrative context in which they occurred. Descriptive frequencies were used only to indicate the distribution of event categories across the four life-story scenes, whereas direct quotations from the written narratives were used to illustrate and substantiate the interpretive findings.

QDA Miner Lite 2.0.6 was used to organize the data, systematically record codes, and track the developing analytic structure. The software supported data management; interpretation of the codes and development of thematic patterns remained the responsibility of the researcher. The verbatim electronic versions of the written life stories and the corresponding organized interview notes were imported into the software for coding and data management. A hierarchical coding structure was used to organize the data across four analytic levels: Life-Story Scene (Low Point, High Point, Turning Point, Life Challenge), Event-Content Code (e.g., Family Relationships, Academic Achievement, Education), Event Descriptor (e.g., University Admission, Death of a Relative), and Emotion Type (e.g., Positive, Negative, Uncertain, Complex). The descriptive coding structure supported systematic comparison across scenes and participants; it did not constitute a separate inferential analysis.

Trustworthiness and methodological rigor

The methodological rigor of the study was considered in relation to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, established criteria for evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research [29]. These criteria guided efforts to make the research process transparent, ground interpretations in the data, and render analytic decisions traceable.

Credibility was supported through the use of participants' self-authored written life stories as the primary data source, follow-up probing during semi-structured interviews, and the presentation of direct quotations from the written narratives. Attention was also given throughout the analysis to the contextual positioning of events and to the meanings participants themselves attributed to their experiences. Expert review of the interview guide further supported the clarity and relevance of the questions used to elicit the narratives.

Transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of the participants, research context, data sources, data-collection procedure, and analytic process. Dependability was addressed by distinguishing the analytic roles of written life stories and interview notes, applying the same analytic procedure across the dataset, and maintaining systematic coding records in QDA Miner Lite. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in participants' written narratives and by distinguishing analytic interpretations from participants' direct accounts.

Ethical considerations

The principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, privacy, and participant autonomy were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the study purpose, data-collection procedures, and the scientific use of the data before providing written informed consent. Information that could directly or indirectly identify participants was separated from the analytic dataset, and participants were identified using pseudonymous codes (e.g., P1, P2) when reporting the findings. Particular care was taken to omit unnecessary identifying details when reporting sensitive family, relational, or personal experiences. To further protect participant confidentiality, Supplementary Table S1 uses a separate set of pseudonymous codes (S01–S15), assigned independently of the participant codes used in the main manuscript; no crosswalk between the two coding systems is provided.

Ethical approval

was granted by the Eastern Mediterranean University Board of Scientific Research and Publication Ethics (BAYEK) on 7 December 2022 (Ref. No. ETK00-2022-0281).

Use of AI-assisted tools in manuscript preparation

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to support English-language translation, language editing, and the stylistic and structural refinement of author-prepared text. The tool was not used to collect, code, analyze, or interpret the study data, make analytic decisions, or generate the study findings or conclusions. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

Results

The findings were generated primarily from participants' self-authored written life stories, with researcher notes from the semi-structured interviews used to clarify and contextualize the written narratives. Direct quotations presented in this section are drawn from the written life stories. Across the four life-story prompts, 60 responses were possible (15 participants × four scenes); three prompts did not elicit an event narrative, leaving 57 event narratives for thematic classification and analysis.

Table 1
Distribution of overarching event categories across life-story scenes

Overarching event category	**Low Point (n = 15)**	**High Point (n = 15)**	**Turning Point (n = 15)**	**Life Challenge (n = 15)**
Academic and educational experiences	4	11	9	4
Family-related experiences	9	2	0	1
Relational and social experiences	1	1	1	5
Adversity and risk experiences	1	0	2	4
Personal growth/transformation	0	0	2	0
No response	0	1	1	1

Note. Categories represent the primary event content highlighted in each narrative. They do not represent the total visibility of the parental or family context across the narratives; parental support, expectations, loss, and other relational elements also appeared within academic, health-related, and other life experiences. Across the four life-story scenes, 57 event narratives were thematically classified; three of the 60 possible response slots contained no event narrative. "No response" is not an analytic category but indicates that no narrative was provided for that life-story scene.

As shown in Table 1, family-related experiences were most common in Low Point narratives (9/15), whereas academic and educational experiences predominated in High Point narratives (11/15) and Turning Point narratives (9/15). Life Challenge narratives showed the broadest distribution across content domains, including relational and social experiences (5/15), adversity and risk experiences (4/15), and academic and educational experiences (4/15). Emotional patterns also differed across scene types: Low Point narratives were predominantly associated with negative emotions, High Point narratives with positive emotions, Turning Point narratives more often included mixed or complex emotions, and Life Challenge narratives displayed the greatest emotional diversity. Figure 1 provides a descriptive synthesis of these event and emotional patterns. A pseudonymized participant-level matrix of life-story event categories and concise event descriptors is provided in Additional file 2 (Supplementary Table S1). The supplementary table uses an independent set of participant codes (S01–S15) to prevent direct cross-referencing with the participant codes used in the main text.

Note

The figure provides a descriptive synthesis of the observed patterns and does not represent inferential associations.

Salient events and emotional patterns in personal life stories

The first research question examined which events and emotional patterns were most salient in participants' life stories. Within the broader family-related category, family relationships constituted the most frequent descriptive event category in Low Point narratives (7/15). These accounts included communication breakdown, being ignored, changes in family arrangements, verbal conflict or abuse, deprivation, bereavement, and family disagreement surrounding marriage. Recurrent emotions included sadness, guilt, hopelessness, disappointment, and regret. In narratives involving academic difficulty, failure to meet family expectations was also linked to reduced self-confidence and disappointment.

"I experienced this low point while attending the preparatory program at [another university]; I was in the prep year and felt great uncertainty about whether I would pass, and I felt this situation was straining my family relationships. It was a time when I lacked self-confidence because my family's expectations of me were quite high, yet I had failed to meet them, and this left me deeply disappointed." (P15)

In some accounts, the significance of a Low Point extended beyond the event itself to the meaning subsequently attributed to it. One participant, reflecting on an early change in family life, connected the experience with a continuing tendency toward self-sacrifice in relationships.

"When I think about that little girl of five or six, there was this situation where she suddenly had to grow up and learn to make sacrifices. When I look at my current self—at my personality—I see a woman who still puts aside her own desires... I realized that I generally adopt a role akin to a self-sacrificing mother figure toward both my parents and my siblings... It is just a matter of balance; sometimes I struggle to strike the right balance." (P9)

Academic achievement was the most frequent descriptive event category in High Point narratives (10/15). These accounts included university admission, strong school performance, graduation, ranking first in class, and passing an English preparatory examination. Happiness was common across these narratives, often accompanied by excitement and pride. Importantly, achievement was frequently narrated not only as an individual accomplishment but also as a relational experience that gained meaning through family support and shared pride.

"The moment I got into university—when I heard I had been accepted into the department—I was so excited, and everyone in my family was happy along with me... Later that evening, we had a big family dinner with my grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles; it was incredible—everyone was so proud of me." (P1)

"One of the moments when I felt—and believe I made my family feel—the happiest, most excited, and proudest was my graduation day... Seeing the pride in my family's eyes when I received my diploma made

me very happy. Having reached this point and achieved something through their effort and support—and being able to repay their efforts—marked one of the happiest, most exciting, and most positive times for me." (P8)

Turning Point narratives were more emotionally mixed. Education was the most frequent descriptive event category (8/15), and education-related turning points included both positive and complex emotional experiences. Health problems, bereavement, friendship changes, and personal transformation also appeared as turning points. These accounts suggest that turning points were not experienced as uniformly positive or negative; loss, uncertainty, decision-making, hope, and reorientation could coexist within the same narrative.

"Starting university—studying alongside my two children—gives me a unique kind of strength. Although it is very challenging, I am happy because I am going to realize my dreams." (P13)

Self-related meanings derived from significant life experiences

The second research question examined how participants narrated significant experiences involving their relationships with their parents and what self-related meanings they derived from these experiences. Participants did not recount significant events solely as past occurrences; they connected them with their present selves. These connections were especially evident in meanings related to responsibility, independence, family attachment, self-worth, and principles for managing close relationships.

Academic setbacks were sometimes reinterpreted as experiences through which responsibility was learned. P14, for example, described the extension of university study not simply as a period of failure but as an experience that prompted reflection on effort and responsibility toward family.

"Later, during the period when I had to extend my studies, I felt such deep regret... I realized with great regret that I could have succeeded if I had simply put in the work—that even a little effort would have spared me from facing all those hardships. I didn't go through this struggle alone; my family shared the burden with me, both financially and emotionally... I think that was the hardest part for me: involving my family in this struggle. And all because of my own mistake." (P14)

Meanings of independence and responsibility were particularly visible in narratives about educational and work-related transitions. P1 associated an early work experience with becoming more self-reliant, while P10 linked living away from home at boarding school with learning to manage responsibilities independently. Tension between parental expectations and personal preference also functioned as a context for self-definition. P11, for instance, interpreted disagreement with her father about school choice as an early experience of taking responsibility for her own decisions.

"I would say it was when I did an internship during high school. It was the moment I gained work experience on my own and stood on my own two feet without my parents around... When I look back on it, I felt that I

was capable of standing on my own two feet and handling my own affairs independently." (P1)

Self-related meanings were not limited to family and educational experiences. Relational losses and friendship experiences also provided a basis for reconsidering personal boundaries and one's position within relationships. After the end of a long-term friendship, P5 connected the experience to her current understanding of relational boundaries.

"I wouldn't be the person I am today if I hadn't lived through those moments... After that person left my life, I spent more time alone with myself and reflected more on who I am... It turned out that I was the one keeping that friendship going. One shouldn't place anyone at the center of their life to that extent." (P5)

Profound loss could also be narrated as a context for reorientation. Following an extended period of grief after the death of a loved one, P7 described a message left by that person as a turning point that helped her reconnect with education and with a sense of continuing life.

"My life changed that day; it was as if my weeping came to an end... From that day on, I began to improve step by step and to think that he, too, was happy seeing me. I had fallen far behind, but I returned to my studies and quickly prepared for the university entrance exam... I was going to live this life I had been given —for both myself and him." (P7)

Across these narratives, significant life events were used to explain the present self. The resulting meanings were multidirectional: independence and responsibility coexisted with family attachment and self-sacrifice, while experiences of loss and relational difficulty could be linked to boundary setting, self-protection, or the reorientation of life goals.

Reflections of self-related meanings in identity, relationships, and psychological well-being

The third research question examined how self-related meanings derived from life experiences were reflected in participants' accounts of their current identities, relationships, and psychological well-being. These reflections were most evident in self-confidence and perceived competence, responsibility, relational trust, attitudes toward family, interpersonal boundaries, and personal awareness. Psychological well-being was not assessed using an independent psychometric measure; accordingly, the findings reported here concern participants' subjective accounts and meanings related to psychological well-being rather than measured levels of well-being.

One clear example involved P15, who described transferring to a different university after a period of academic difficulty. The participant narrated subsequent academic success as a turning point through which self-confidence and a sense of personal competence were restored.

"Transferring to [my current university] was a turning point for me because I regained the self-confidence and academic success I had lost at [another university]; I felt incredibly happy and at peace, the sense of

embarrassment toward my family vanished, and I realized my own potential. Standing strong on my own and becoming a responsible, disciplined student made this a turning point in my life." (P15)

Parental responses also shaped the relational meanings participants attached to difficult experiences. P6 described cyber-harassment and blackmail with feelings of guilt, regret, and shame, but interpreted her mother's response as a pivotal experience that strengthened trust within the relationship.

"I gathered all my courage and told my mother everything... We already had a strong bond, but after that day, it became incredibly strong. While I expected her to beat or punish me, she did the exact opposite; she approached me with compassion and understanding... Since that day, I haven't kept any secrets from my mother, and she is my best friend." (P6)

Family support was also described as important in re-evaluating difficult educational choices. P12 linked her family's response to an unwanted field of study with a shift toward a personally more suitable educational path.

"One day, my mother came to me and said, 'If it really isn't working out, don't force it; choose a different major—there's no need to cry over this'... With my family's support, I was able to leave that major and pursue one where I felt good and happy. This situation helped me study a major I truly love and, in turn, realize my dreams." (P12)

Life challenges were also linked to changes in how participants approached relationships with others. P4 connected a dangerous incident involving peers with greater caution in selecting friendships and with a stronger awareness of relational risk.

"When I look back at that incident now, I realize that—due to the wrong kind of friendships—I could have been injured or even killed in an event I had no connection to... I became aware that, regardless of the kind of person I am, forming the wrong friendships could drag me into a quagmire; consequently, I began to be more careful about the friendships I form. Despite all the negativity involved, this experience added these positive traits to my personality." (P4)

P3's account of her father's severe illness during the COVID-19 period similarly illustrated a re-evaluation of family relationships. She described the event as one of the most difficult and helpless moments she had experienced and connected it with a greater appreciation of family and a more conciliatory stance in later relationships.

"My father fainted right before my eyes. Even though I am normally a level-headed person, I truly didn't know what to do... This was the most difficult situation I had ever faced and the moment I felt most helpless... I felt utterly helpless at home during the four days he was in the hospital." (P3)

Across the narratives, parent–child relationships did not emerge as one-dimensional. Parents were represented as sources of support, trust, and motivation in some accounts, while in others they were associated with expectations, conflict, embarrassment, responsibility, or sacrifice. Participants'

interpretations of these experiences showed how earlier events were being revisited in relation to current identity and relational patterns.

Taken together, the findings across the three research questions show that academic achievement, education, and family relationships were prominent in participants' life stories and were narrated through diverse emotional patterns. Participants derived self-related meanings involving independence, responsibility, family attachment, self-sacrifice, self-worth, and relational boundaries. These meanings were reflected in their accounts of self-confidence, relational trust, attitudes toward family, responsibility, interpersonal boundaries, and subjective experiences related to psychological well-being.

Discussion

This study examined the events and emotional patterns that were salient in emerging adults' life stories, the self-related meanings they constructed from significant experiences involving their parents, and how these meanings were reflected in their current identities, relationships, and subjective experiences of psychological well-being. Three broad patterns emerged. First, family-related experiences and negative emotions were prominent in low-point narratives, whereas academic achievement and positive emotions were more visible in high-point narratives; education-related experiences and complex emotions were especially salient in turning points. Second, participants did not simply recount significant events, but used them to construct self-related meanings involving individuation, responsibility, family attachment, self-worth, and relational boundaries. Third, these meanings were reflected in narratives concerning self-confidence and competence, relational trust, attitudes toward family, responsibility, boundary setting, and personal awareness.

The findings related to the first research question can be understood in light of the developmental context of emerging adulthood. Academic and educational experiences were prominent in high points and turning points among participants who were navigating university education and transitions toward adult roles. Arnett [18] characterized emerging adulthood as a period in which identity exploration and decisions regarding education, work, and future direction become especially salient. Within this developmental context, participants' educational experiences were narrated not merely as academic events, but also as personally meaningful transitions connected to individuation, future orientation, and the movement toward adulthood. Moreover, high points involving academic achievement were frequently narrated alongside family support, pride, and the desire to meet or reciprocate family expectations. This pattern suggests that achievement carried both individual and relational meanings. Such coexistence is broadly compatible with the autonomy-relatedness perspective developed by Kağıtçıbaşı [30, 31], in which increasing autonomy need not imply diminished relational connectedness.

Family-related experiences were particularly visible in low-point narratives, but the parent–child relationship was not represented only through support and closeness. Participants also described expectations, guilt, deprivation, communication difficulties, responsibility, and sacrifice as meaningful aspects of family experience. Research with emerging adults in Türkiye has likewise linked forms of

parental control, autonomy support, and psychological control with indicators of psychological adjustment [21, 22]. These associations were not quantitatively tested in the present study. Rather, the narratives illustrate how support, expectations, and strain can coexist within the same relational context and how participants interpret these experiences in relation to identity and close relationships.

The presence of complex emotions in turning-point narratives further suggests that major life transitions are not necessarily experienced as uniformly positive or negative. Leaving home for education, changing schools or majors, bereavement, and personal transformation were often narrated through combinations of anxiety and hope, loss and reorientation, or hardship and responsibility. A 36-month longitudinal qualitative narrative study by Zięba et al. [17] similarly showed that growth and depreciation following adverse experiences can coexist within the same person's narrative over time. The present findings therefore support a view of turning points as sites of meaning-making in which contradictory emotions and changing interpretations may coexist, rather than as inherently positive stories of transformation.

Findings related to the second research question showed that participants repeatedly connected significant life events with their current sense of self. Accounts of learning to stand on one's own feet, assuming responsibility, re-evaluating family relationships, and establishing interpersonal boundaries are consistent with the self-event connections that characterize autobiographical reasoning. McLean et al. [32] found that autobiographical reasoning can show both continuity and change across emerging adulthood and that self-event connections may vary across life domains. In the present study, participants' efforts to derive self-relevant meanings from experiences involving parents suggest an autobiographical reasoning process through which past relational experiences are linked to the present self. However, Turner et al. [33] found no evidence that exploratory narrative processing predicted changes in identity exploration and commitment over four years. Their findings indicate that narrative meaning-making should not automatically be interpreted as a mechanism of change in identity processes.

These self-related meanings were especially visible around autonomy, responsibility, self-awareness, and relational boundaries. Importantly, they did not point exclusively toward greater individual independence. Individuation coexisted with family attachment, personal responsibility with self-sacrifice, and self-protection with relational trust. This pattern suggests that the meanings constructed from significant experiences may develop within an ongoing negotiation between the individual and close relationships rather than along a single, unidirectional developmental pathway. Zięba et al. [17] similarly identified a pattern in which personal empowerment following adverse life events coexisted with an enduring loss of interpersonal trust. The present findings extend this relational complexity to narratives involving parents and other close relationships.

A further contribution of the study concerns the role of parents as relational reference points within participants' life stories. Parents appeared not only as actors in past events, but also as figures through whom participants interpreted success, failure, educational choices, individuation, and adversity. Longitudinal findings by Camia et al. [13] indicate that perceived parenting experiences can leave traces

in narrative identity during young adulthood. Marshall and Reese [14] further showed that early mother–child elaborative reminiscing processes were associated years later with the causal coherence of turning-point narratives and with selected indicators of well-being. Merrill et al. [34] found that intergenerational narratives about parents can also provide adolescents and emerging adults with information about themselves and broader life lessons. The present study complements this literature by focusing directly on how emerging adults reinterpret their own experiences with parents in relation to their current sense of self.

The social and cultural context of this meaning-making process also warrants consideration. Binder et al. [15] showed that young refugees reconstructed narratives of identity and belonging while navigating differing cultural expectations, underscoring the contextual sensitivity of life stories. In the present study, many participants had moved from Türkiye to Northern Cyprus for university education. Narratives involving physical separation from family, educational transitions, parental expectations, and increasing independence were therefore constructed within a particular relational and educational context. However, cultural orientations were not directly assessed. Accordingly, parallels with literature on autonomy, relatedness, and cultural context should be treated as interpretive resources rather than as evidence of a specific cultural effect.

With respect to the third research question, self-related meanings were reflected in narratives concerning self-confidence and competence, relational trust, attitudes toward family, interpersonal boundaries, and personal awareness. These domains show conceptual overlap with aspects of psychological functioning addressed in Ryff's [35] model of psychological well-being, including autonomy, positive relations, self-acceptance, and personal growth. However, the present study did not directly measure these dimensions, and the observed narrative patterns should not be treated as psychometric indicators of psychological well-being. Research on narrative identity also suggests that associations between narrative characteristics and psychological functioning vary according to the feature being examined and the context of the narrative. Song et al. [36] reported that narrative coherence in positive parental memories was positively associated with well-being, whereas patterns differed for negative parental memories depending on how meaning-making was integrated into the narrative. In late-midlife adults, Lind et al. [7] found that agency and communion themes were associated with well-being and depression over time, beyond dispositional traits. In a psychotherapy context, Adler [37] found that increases in agency were associated with improvements in mental health. Booker et al. [6] reported that coherence and growth themes in low-point narratives were associated with higher levels of psychological adjustment.

At the same time, the relationship between narrative identity and psychological well-being should not be assumed to be linear or uniform. Vanderveren et al. [10] found that narrative coherence in turning-point memories was not significantly associated with psychological well-being, although higher coherence was associated with lower levels of disturbed identity functioning. Gehrt et al. [11] likewise showed that associations of narrative identity indicators such as agency and communion with well-being were substantially attenuated after accounting for emotional valence and broader autobiographical memory

characteristics. Taken together, these findings caution against equating the presence of particular narrative features with higher psychological well-being. In the present study, psychological well-being was not assessed using an independent psychometric measure; therefore, self-confidence, competence, relational trust, and self-awareness are interpreted as components of participants' subjective meaning-making rather than as direct indicators of well-being level or as causal consequences of parental experiences.

Implications for research and practice

Future research could examine similar narrative processes in more diverse samples, including emerging adults from different universities and those who are not enrolled in higher education. Comparative studies involving young adults living in Türkiye and students of Turkish origin studying in Northern Cyprus may help clarify how physical separation from family, educational transitions, and continuity in family relationships are reflected in parent-related life narratives. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable for examining how the same event is retold over time and how self-event connections change across developmental transitions. Combining life-story data with validated measures of psychological well-being could also make it possible to examine more directly how subjective narrative meanings relate to psychometric indicators of well-being.

The findings may also have relevance for psychological counseling, provided that they are interpreted as practice implications rather than evidence of therapeutic efficacy. In counseling contexts, attention may be given not only to the content of experiences involving parents, but also to how clients narrate those experiences in the present, what self-related meanings they derive from them, and how those meanings function within current identity and relationships. Narrative and dialogical psychotherapy literature has emphasized processes such as re-examining meanings, developing alternative accounts of experience, and restructuring life narratives [38, 39]. The present findings suggest that self-related meanings derived from parent-related experiences may constitute a clinically relevant area for exploration, while not establishing the effectiveness of any specific therapeutic intervention.

Limitations

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations related to the sample, narrative data, and scope of the study. First, the study was conducted with 15 volunteers enrolled in a single Guidance and Psychological Counseling program, and most participants were women. Participants also shared similar educational and developmental characteristics. The transferability of the findings should therefore be considered in relation to this specific demographic and educational context.

Second, the primary data consisted of life stories constructed by the participants themselves. Autobiographical narratives are not fixed or objective records of past events; they are accounts in which individuals select, organize, and reinterpret past experiences from the standpoint of their current perspectives and self-understandings. Accordingly, the patterns identified in this study reflect how participants remembered and interpreted their experiences at the time of the research rather than the

objective characteristics of the original events. At the same time, this feature is consistent with the narrative inquiry approach and is central to examining how past experiences are connected to the present self.

Third, psychological well-being was not assessed using an independent psychometric instrument. Consequently, narrative expressions involving self-confidence, competence, relational trust, and self-awareness should not be interpreted as indicators of a particular level of psychological well-being. The study therefore does not permit conclusions about the magnitude of psychological well-being or causal relationships between parental experiences and well-being; its contribution is limited to the subjective meanings concerning psychological well-being that emerged within participants' narratives.

Finally, most participants had moved from different regions of Türkiye to study in Northern Cyprus, creating a specific social, educational, and relational context for the narratives. Cultural orientations, values, and autonomy-relatedness tendencies were not directly assessed. Patterns involving family loyalty, parental expectations, autonomy, and individuation should therefore not be interpreted as fixed characteristics of Turkish culture. Cultural interpretations are limited to cautious connections between participants' situated narratives and relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

Conclusions

This study suggests that experiences involving parents are not represented as an isolated domain within emerging adults' life stories. Instead, parent–child relationships were embedded in narratives of academic achievement, educational decisions, individuation, loss, adversity, and relational change. Participants used these experiences to construct self-related meanings concerning responsibility, autonomy, family attachment, self-worth, and interpersonal boundaries, and these meanings were reflected in how they described their current identities, relationships, and subjective experiences of psychological well-being.

The findings highlight the value of examining parent–child relationships not only in terms of the positive or negative quality of past interactions, but also in terms of how those experiences are selected, remembered, reinterpreted, and incorporated into the present self-narrative. In this sense, the psychological significance of parent-related experiences during emerging adulthood appears to lie partly in the meanings they continue to acquire within an evolving life story. Because psychological well-being was not independently measured, these conclusions concern participants' subjective narrative meanings rather than levels of well-being. By foregrounding this meaning-making process, the study contributes to narrative identity research on emerging adulthood and provides a contextually situated account of how individuation and continuing family connectedness can be negotiated within life stories.

Abbreviations

AI
artificial intelligence

BAYEK
Board of Scientific Research and Publication Ethics.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was granted by the Eastern Mediterranean University Board of Scientific Research and Publication Ethics (BAYEK) on 7 December 2022 (Ref. No. ETK00-2022-0281). Written informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants.

Consent for publication

All participants provided written informed consent for the publication of anonymized data, including anonymized excerpts from their written life-story narratives, for scientific purposes. No directly identifiable personal information is included in the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Additional files

Additional file 1. DOCX. Life story prompts and interview guide.

The English-language form used to elicit written life-story narratives and guide subsequent individual, face-to-face interviews includes four life-story prompts and two supplementary questions.

Additional file 2. DOCX. Supplementary Table S1: Pseudonymized Participant-Level Life-Story Event Matrix Across Four Narrative Scenes.

The table presents participant-level event categories and concise event descriptors across low points, high points, turning points, and life challenges. Supplementary participant codes (S01–S15) were assigned independently of the participant codes used in the main manuscript, and no crosswalk between the two coding systems is provided.

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Author Contribution

Yeliz Akıntuğ (YA) and Sibel Dinçyürek (SD) jointly contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, methodology, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and preparation, review, and revision of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Not applicable.

Data Availability

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available because the written life-story narratives contain sensitive personal information and may include potentially identifiable contextual details. Relevant anonymized excerpts supporting the findings are included in the manuscript and supplementary material. The full narrative dataset is not publicly shared in order to protect participant confidentiality and to comply with the conditions of informed consent.

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Figures

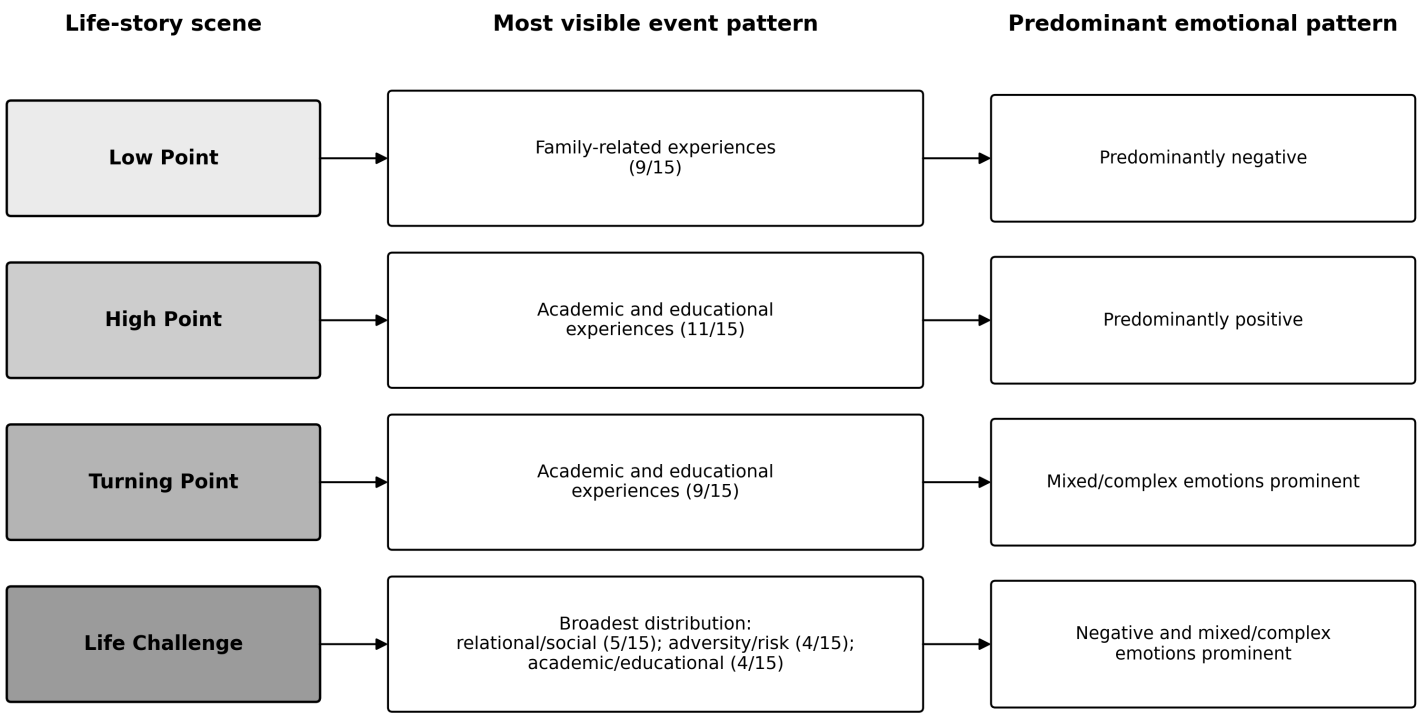


Figure 1

Dominant event and emotional patterns across life-story scenes

Note. The figure provides a descriptive synthesis of the observed patterns and does not represent inferential associations.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Additionalfile1LifeStoryForm.docx
- Additionalfile2SupplementaryTable.docx