

Does Making Sense of a Parent's Life Matter? The Role of Vicarious Life Story Narrative Coherence in Emerging Adults' Well-Being

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The present study examined whether narrative coherence in emerging adults' vicarious life stories of their parents was associated with psychological well-being. A total of 305 emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 30 (171 women, 134 men; $M_{age} = 22.74$, $SD_{age} = 3.27$) completed PERMA-Profil and narrated vicarious high-point (a highly positive life event) and low-point (a highly negative life event) memories from the life of the parent to whom they felt closest. Narratives were coded for coherence using the Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme. Hierarchical regression analyses examined whether coherence predicted well-being beyond memory valence and demographic variables. Findings indicated that coherence of vicarious low-point memories significantly predicted higher psychological well-being even after controlling for memory valence, volume, gender, and perceived income. In contrast, coherence of vicarious high-point memories did not remain a significant predictor after accounting for these variables. These findings suggest that the ability to coherently narrate parents' difficult life experiences may contribute to emerging adults' well-being by facilitating meaning-making and adaptive integration of intergenerational experiences. The study expands narrative identity research by emphasizing the psychological relevance of vicarious memories and highlighting the role of intergenerational storytelling in well-being during emerging adulthood.

Keywords. narrative identity, vicarious memory, life story, narrative coherence, psychological well-being

Emerging adulthood is a developmental period of heightened identity exploration during which individuals actively construct a narrative identity, an internalized, evolving life story that binds past, present, and future into a coherent sense of self (Arnett, 2000; McAdams, 2001; 2018). Emotionally significant autobiographical memories serve as core building blocks of this narrative self (Bluck, 2001; McLean et al., 2020), and a substantial body of research has shown that the structural and interpretive qualities of such memories, particularly narrative coherence, are meaningfully linked to psychological well-being (Adler et al., 2016; Baerger & McAdams, 1999). Higher narrative coherence is associated with adaptive psychological functioning, including greater well-being, purpose in life, and lower levels of distress (Vanden Poel & Hermans, 2019; Vanderveren et al., 2019; Waters & Fivush, 2015).

While narrative identity research predominantly focused on personal autobiographical accounts, growing evidence points to the psychological relevance of vicarious memories, representations individuals develop about the experiences of significant others (Bluck & Lind, 2024; Pillemer et al., 2015; 2024). Vicarious memories are mental representations of specific events that individuals have not directly experienced themselves but have learned about through close others' accounts (e.g., parents' or

partners' narratives). Structurally, they resemble autobiographical memories in that they are episodic, temporally and contextually situated, and integrated into the person's life story, yet they differ by virtue of being encoded second-hand rather than through direct experience (Pillemer et al., 2024). These vicarious accounts can be organized into broader life stories that mirror the structural and emotional features of personal narratives, including narrative coherence (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017; Thomsen & Vedel, 2019). Among vicarious accounts, parental life stories hold particular importance. Empirical work has confirmed that the narrative features of individuals' vicarious stories about their parents closely parallel those of their personal life stories, with both types independently contributing to overall well-being (Thomsen & Vedel, 2019), suggesting that the coherent narration of parental experiences may constitute a meaningful, yet underexplored, pathway to psychological well-being in emerging adulthood. Despite this potential, the role of narrative coherence specifically within vicarious life stories received little direct empirical attention (Thomsen et al., 2025). The present study addresses this gap by examining whether narrative coherence in emerging adults' vicarious high-point and low-point memories of their parents predicts psychological well-being, as assessed by the multidimensional PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011, 2018), a model of flourishing that includes positive emotion (experiencing pleasant affect and satisfaction), engagement (being deeply absorbed in activities), relationships (having supportive and caring social bonds), meaning (feeling that one's life is purposeful and valuable),

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and accomplishments (pursuing and attaining goals). This multidimensional conceptualization is consistent with contemporary perspectives that view well-being as an integrated construct encompassing both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions (Arslan, 2025; Arslan & Coşkun, 2026). The present study examines whether narrative coherence predicts psychological well-being above and beyond the emotional valence of the memories and key demographic covariates.

Narrative Identity and Life Story Narratives

Emerging adulthood is a developmental period marked by identity exploration, increased autonomy, and efforts to establish a coherent understanding of self and one's place in a world (Arnett, 2000; 2015). Arnett (2015) conceptualized this period as one characterized by instability, self-focus, and exploration in areas such as relationships, values, and future goals. As emerging adults navigate these life transitions, they typically engage in constructing a narrative identity, which is defined as an internalized, dynamic life story that combines past experiences, current circumstances, and future goals (McAdams, 2001; 2018). As a core dimension of personality, narrative identity provides individuals with a sense of self-continuity and purpose across different life stages, functioning as a dynamic developmental process (Adler, 2019; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Through actively selecting, interpreting, and narrating significant life events, individuals find meaning in past experiences and maintain a cohesive sense of self over time (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Distinctive autobiographical memories, such as high-point experiences that represent positive moments, and low-point experiences involving challenging experiences, are viewed as central components of the narrative identity (Bluck, 2001). Compared to ordinary daily events, such memories tend to carry greater emotional intensity, personal relevance, and connection to important life aspirations, making them more likely to be incorporated into individuals' evolving life stories (McLean et al., 2020). A growing body of literature suggests that the way individuals narrate and interpret such important experiences is closely linked to psychological functioning (Adler et al., 2016). In this regard, research on narrative identity shows that the structural and interpretive characteristics of autobiographical narratives, particularly narrative coherence, are highly relevant for psychological well-being (Adler et al., 2016).

Although narrative coherence is conceptualized in various ways in the literature, the present study adopts the multidimensional approach proposed by Reese et al. (2011). In this model, narrative coherence is understood as a construct composed of distinct yet related dimensions that emerge and mature at different developmental periods across the life span: context, chronology, and theme/meaning-making. Specifically, coherent narratives are expected to provide clear information about when and where an event occurred, referred to as context. Coherent narratives should also present events in an understandable temporal sequence by indicating temporal markers that allow the audience to infer the progression of actions, referred to as chronology. Finally, coherent narratives should involve a central topic that is meaningfully developed through evaluations, cognitive and emotional reflections and some form of resolution or interpretive integration, known as

theme/meaning-making (Reese et al., 2011). Coherent narratives enable individuals to make sense of past experiences, particularly challenging or emotionally-salient ones, by interpreting and integrating them to a broader life story (Pals, 2006); thus, they are associated with higher psychological adjustment and well-being (Adler et al., 2016; Baerger & McAdams, 1999).

Vicarious Memories and Life Stories

While narrative identity research predominantly centered on individuals' own autobiographical experiences and personal life stories, emerging evidence suggests that people also develop memory representations about the experiences of significant others, which is known as vicarious memories (Bluck and Lind, 2024; Pillemer et al., 2024). These representations may involve both detailed recollections of specific events and broader knowledge about another person's life (Pillemer et al., 2015). Importantly, individuals do not merely remember isolated events from others' lives; they may also organize these experiences into broader and more integrated vicarious life stories (Pillemer et al., 2015; Thomsen & Vedel, 2019). A growing number of studies reveal that vicarious life stories mirror the structure of personal life stories, demonstrating similarity in temporal distributions, overarching thematic chapters (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017), emotional tone (Lind & Thomsen, 2018; Thomsen & Vedel, 2019) and narrative coherence (İlgün, 2024). This alignment suggests that vicarious life stories are not fragmented pieces of second-hand information, but are highly organized, cognitive mental models that individuals construct to make sense of the social world (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017).

In addition, vicarious life stories may fulfill functions similar to those associated with personal life stories (Pond & Peterson, 2020). Engaging with significant others' experiences can help individuals interpret life events, derive meaning, regulate emotions and behaviors, and navigate identity-related challenges in their own lives (Pillemer et al., 2024). Specifically, these narratives act as an adaptational resource; by observing the trajectory of close others, individuals can extract vicarious wisdom, formulate behavioral strategies, and anticipate potential future developmental hurdles without directly experiencing them (Pillemer et al., 2024). Over time, these vicarious accounts may become incorporated into one's broader narrative identity, influencing how individuals understand themselves and construct meaning through the lives of important others (Dunlop et al., 2020; Thomsen et al., 2025).

Among these vicarious accounts, parents' life stories might be especially relevant, as parents play a foundational role in shaping autobiographical memory and narrative identity development through processes such as elaborative reminiscing, emotional scaffolding, and the transmission of culturally meaningful narratives (Fivush, 2011; Fivush & Grysman, 2023). Through these interactions, individuals not only learn how to narrate their own experiences but also develop representations of others' lives that may inform their sense of self and worldview (Merrill & Fivush, 2016). Because family storytelling serves as an important medium for autobiographical narration, children gradually internalize their parents' lived histories as part of an intergenerational family chronicle (Elias & Brown, 2022). Crucially, empirical work indicates that the structural and emotional features of an individual's vicarious stories about their mothers and fathers closely mirror the

characteristics of their own personal life stories, with both narrative types concurrently contributing to their overall well-being (Thomsen & Vedel, 2019). Thus, individuals might use these parental histories as psychological prototypes; narrating a parent's challenges or positive experiences can provide a functional roadmap for the emerging adults.

Narrative Coherence and Well-Being

Relevant literature demonstrated a strong association between narrative identity processes and different aspects of psychological well-being (Adler et al., 2015; Adler et al., 2016; Booker et al., 2022; İlgin, 2026; McLean et al., 2020; Waters & Fivush, 2014). Much of this literature focused on the ways individuals structure and interpret their personal life stories (McLean et al., 2020). Among these studies, narrative coherence received particular attention as an indicator of adaptive autobiographical processing (Baerger & McAdams, 1999).

Constructing coherent narratives about personally significant experiences is considered to reflect individuals' ability to organize and make sense of life events, especially emotionally salient or challenging ones (McLean et al., 2017). In contrast, fragmented or incoherent narratives could be an indicator of psychopathology (Vanden Poel & Hermans, 2019). For example, higher coherence in emerging adults' autobiographical narratives was associated with higher psychological well-being, stronger perceptions of meaning and purpose in life, and more positive interpersonal relationships (Waters & Fivush, 2015). In a different study, narrative coherence of young adults' personal narratives was found to be positively associated with the personal growth aspect of psychological well-being, and negatively associated with anxiety (Vanden Poel & Hermans, 2019). Likewise, lower coherence has been linked to elevated depressive symptoms (Vanderveren et al., 2019).

The Current Study

Despite growing recognition of the social and intergenerational nature of narrative identity (Thomsen et al., 2025), the role of narrative coherence in vicarious life stories remains underexplored. Addressing this gap may advance a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals construct meaning not only from their own lives but also from the lives of those close to them. In this regard, the present study aims to examine whether narrative coherence in emerging adults' vicarious life stories of their parents is associated with psychological well-being, as conceptualized within the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011; 2018).

Focusing on both low-point and high-point memories, we test whether narrative coherence predicts well-being above and beyond the emotional valence of the memories and key demographic variables. To ensure the robustness of these predictions three demographic variables, namely age, gender, and perceived income, were included as covariates in the regression analyses given their established associations with psychological well-being in the existing literature. Regarding age, even within the narrower developmental band of emerging adulthood, there is evidence of meaningful age-related shifts in identity-relevant narrative processes, including thematic coherence and narrative continuity, which may covary with well-being outcomes (Adler, 2019). Regarding gender, research consistently indicates that women and men differ in how they narrate emotionally significant experiences:

women tend to produce more emotionally elaborate, internally detailed accounts than men, a pattern attributed to gender-differentiated socialization in reminiscing practices (Grysmen & Hudson, 2013). These differences in narrative style may translate into differential well-being outcomes, and indeed studies have documented meaningful gender-based variations in well-being among emerging adults (Bohanek & Fivush, 2010; Matud et al., 2022). Regarding perceived income, a robust body of evidence documents a positive association between subjective socioeconomic standing and psychological well-being, with higher perceived income linked to greater life satisfaction, more positive affect, and a stronger sense of purpose (Fors Connolly & Lindh, 2025; Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2020). By statistically accounting for these demographic sources of variance, the present analyses sought to provide a more rigorous test of narrative coherence as an independent predictor of well-being (Adler et al., 2016).

Considering these, we hypothesized that (a) narrative coherence of vicarious low-point memories will be positively related to psychological well-being, after controlling for the valence of the vicarious low-point memory and demographic variables of age, gender, and perceived income (H1); (b) narrative coherence of vicarious high-point memories will be positively related to psychological well-being, after controlling for the valence of the vicarious high-point memory and demographic variables of age, gender, and perceived income (H2).

By integrating narrative identity theory with intergenerational and well-being perspectives, this study extends existing literature in three ways. First, it shifts the focus from autobiographical to vicarious narratives, highlighting the role of others' life stories in identity and well-being. Second, it emphasizes narrative coherence as a key mechanism through which vicarious meaning-making may operate. Third, it situates these processes within a multidimensional model of well-being, offering a more nuanced understanding of how narrative processes contribute to flourishing during emerging adulthood.

Method

Participants

Three hundred and five college students, emerging adults aged 18 to 30 years, participated in the current study (171 women, 134 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.74$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.27$). Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from undergraduate courses at the university. Eligibility criteria required participants to be undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 30 years. Graduate students and individuals outside this age range were not eligible to participate. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study. As compensation for their time, participants received course credit.

Procedure

This study was approved by the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Selcuk University Faculty of Letters (Decision Number: 2026/016). Participants completed the questionnaires online after providing informed consent to take part in the study. They first responded to the demographic information form, assessing variables such as age, gender, perceived income, and subsequently the psychological well-being scale. Next, participants

were instructed to write a vicarious low-point memory and a vicarious high-point memory from the life of the parent whom they felt closest. Following each memory, they rated the emotional valence of the memory for themselves.

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the required sample size for the main regression models, which included narrative coherence as the focal predictor, memory valence, and demographic variables (age, gender, perceived income) as covariates, and psychological well-being as the dependent variable. Assuming a small-to-moderate effect size of $f^2 = 0.0625$, a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, and a desired statistical power of $1 - \beta = .80$, the analysis indicated that a minimum sample of 211 participants would be required. In the present study, data were collected from 305 emerging adults, which exceeds this requirement and thus provides sufficient statistical power to detect effects of the anticipated magnitude.

Measures

Demographic Information Form. Participants reported their age, gender and perceived income level.

PERMA-Profiler. Psychological well-being was assessed with the PERMA-Profiler (15 items; sample item: “*In general, how often do you feel joyful?*”), developed by Butler and Kern (2016) based on Seligman’s five-factor model of well-being. Participants rated the items on an 11-point Likert scale (0 = never, 10 = always). Turkish adaptation of the scale was conducted by Demirci et al. (2017). In the present study, PERMA’s internal reliability was .93.

The Life Story Interview – II. Vicarious life stories for parents were assessed using the Key Scenes part of The Life-Story Interview - II (McAdams, 2008). Participants were instructed to think about their parents’ entire lives and narrate one vicarious high-point memory and one vicarious low-point memory from their parents’ lives. For each memory, an event-specific Turkish adaptation of the following prompt was used: “*Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your parent’s life that stands out as an especially positive/negative experience. This might be the high point/low point scene of your parent’s entire life. Please describe this scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good/bad and what the scene may say about who your parent is as a person.*”

Memory Valence. After each memory, participants rated the valence of the narrated memory for themselves on a 5-point scale (1 = completely negative, 5 = completely positive).

Coding

Vicarious life story narratives for parents were coded for narrative coherence on dimensions of context, chronology, and theme/meaning-making. 35% of the narratives were also coded by a second coder for reliability. To evaluate reliability, an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was computed utilizing a two-way mixed-effects model, focusing on single measures and absolute agreement ($k = 2$). Reliability scores are presented in the text below regarding the coding scheme.

Narrative Coherence

The Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme (NaCCS) was used to assess narrative coherence across three dimensions: context,

chronology, and theme (Reese et al., 2011). In the NaCCS, each dimension is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 to 3, and a total coherence score is calculated by summing the ratings across the three dimensions.

Context refers to the inclusion of temporal and spatial information about the narrated event. Narratives received a score of 0 when neither time nor place was mentioned. A score of 1 was assigned when only one of these elements was provided. Narratives including both time and place, but with one remaining vague or insufficiently specified, were rated 2. A score of 3 indicated that both time and place were clearly described. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) for context were found to be .89 for vicarious low-point memory, and .88 for vicarious high-point memory.

Chronology captures the extent to which events are presented in a logical temporal order. Narratives with no clear sequence of events were scored 0. A score of 1 was assigned when fewer than half of the actions could be organized along a timeline. Narratives in which 50% to 75% of actions followed a clear sequence received a score of 2, whereas those with more than 75% of actions arranged coherently in temporal order were rated 3. ICC values for chronology were found to be .91 for vicarious low-point memory, and .86 for vicarious high-point memory.

Theme/meaning-making evaluates the existence of a central topic and the degree of interpretive processing within the narrative. Narratives lacking a clear topic received a score of 0. A score of 1 reflected the presence of a specific topic without elaboration, evaluation, or causal interpretation. Narratives that presented a clear topic together with some elaboration, evaluative content, or causal connections were rated 2. A score of 3 was assigned when the narrative satisfied the criteria for a 2 and additionally included a resolution. Within the NaCCS, resolution refers to an ending that either provides closure to the event or connects it to broader implications for future experiences, the self, or identity. ICC values for the theme/meaning-making dimension were found to be .82 for vicarious low-point memory, and .90 for vicarious high-point memory.

Volume

Volume of vicarious low-point and high-point memories was calculated using the Microsoft Office word count function.

Results

Preliminary Findings

Initial analyses were conducted before hypothesis testing, including descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation analyses. Skewness and kurtosis values were examined for the assumption of normality. With the exception of vicarious low-point valence and vicarious high-point valence, which showed relatively elevated kurtosis values, the distributions of the study variables generally fell within acceptable ranges, suggesting no severe deviations from normality (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Concerning the valence variables, this pattern was expected given the conceptual nature of the constructs. Specifically, participants were asked to evaluate the perceived positivity of low-point and high-point memories, which are inherently emotionally valenced experiences. Accordingly, low-point memories tended to be rated as less positive, whereas high-point memories were generally evaluated more positively, resulting

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Well-being	--									
2. LP Coherence	.17**	--								
3. LP Valence	.14*	-.09	--							
4. LP Volume	.12*	.64**	.03	--						
5. HP Coherence	.13*	.68**	-.09	.62**	--					
6. HP Valence	.16**	.11*	.04	.11	.17**	--				
7. HP Volume	.11	.58**	-.01	.74**	.75**	.14*	--			
8. Age	.03	.01	.09	-.01	.04	.07	.12*	--		
9. Gender	.12*	.12*	-.22**	.12*	.13*	.02	.10	-.12*	--	
10. Perceived Income	.22**	.14*	.12*	.04	.07	.09	.07	.17**	.08	--
Mean	6.17	4.18	1.56	3.83	66.81	4.32	42.92	22.74	--	5.72
Standard Deviation	1.85	2.24	1.06	2.12	67.20	1.15	43.00	3.27	--	1.45
Skewness	-.57	.18	1.93	.43	2.68	-1.84	2.50	.52	--	.59
Kurtosis	-.20	-.99	3.14	-.82	11.80	2.54	7.72	-.73	--	.53

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. LP = Low-point, HP = High-point.

in somewhat skewed distributions. Regarding the distribution of vicarious narratives, 183 participants (60%) recounted their mothers' memories, whereas 122 participants (40%) recounted their fathers' memories. Among women, 69.6% recounted their mothers' memories and 30.4% their fathers' memories, whereas among men, the distribution was more balanced, with 47.8% recounting their mothers' memories and 52.2% recounting their fathers' memories. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis values, as well as bivariate correlations among the study variables.

Main Findings

A three-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether the narrative coherence of vicarious low-point memories predicted psychological well-being after controlling for memory valence, memory volume, and demographic variables (age, gender, and perceived income). In Model 1, narrative coherence of vicarious low-point memories was a significant positive predictor of psychological well-being ($\beta = .177$, $B = .144$, $SE = .047$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.053, .236]). In Model 2, after adding memory valence and memory volume, narrative coherence remained a significant positive predictor of psychological well-being ($\beta = .200$, $B = .163$, $SE = .061$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [.044, .283]). Memory valence was also a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .174$, $B = .306$, $SE = .101$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.003, .108]), whereas memory volume was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -.012$, $B = .000$, $SE = .002$, $p = .877$, 95% CI [-.004, .004]). In the final model, after controlling for age, gender, and perceived income, narrative coherence remained a significant positive predictor of psychological well-being ($\beta = .157$, $B = .128$, $SE = .060$, $p = .035$, 95% CI [.009, .247]). Memory valence also remained a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .187$, $B = .329$, $SE = .103$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.127, .532]), whereas memory volume was not significant ($\beta = -.009$, $B = .000$, $SE = .001$, $p = .899$, 95% CI [-.004, .004]). Among the demographic variables, perceived income significantly and positively predicted psychological well-being ($\beta = .174$, $B = .218$, $SE = .072$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.077, .360]), and gender

was also a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .151$, $B = .525$, $SE = .219$, $p = .012$, 95% CI [.123, .987]). Age was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .028$, $B = .028$, $SE = .033$, $p = .847$, 95% CI [-.049, .082]). Overall, the hypothesis was supported; narrative coherence of vicarious low-point memories positively predicted psychological well-being even after controlling for memory valence, memory volume, and demographic covariates.

Another three-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether narrative coherence of vicarious high-point memories predicted psychological well-being after controlling for memory valence, memory volume, and demographic variables (age, gender, and perceived income). In Model 1, narrative coherence of vicarious high-point memories significantly and positively predicted psychological well-being ($\beta = .134$, $B = .117$, $SE = .051$, $p = .023$, 95% CI [.016, .219]). In Model 2, after adding memory valence and memory volume, narrative coherence was no longer a significant predictor of psychological well-being ($\beta = .087$, $B = .076$, $SE = .078$, $p = .329$, 95% CI [-.077, .229]). In contrast, memory valence significantly and positively predicted psychological well-being ($\beta = .141$, $B = .229$, $SE = .096$, $p = .017$, 95% CI [.041, .418]), whereas memory volume was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .030$, $B = .001$, $SE = .004$, $p = .737$, 95% CI [-.006, .009]). In the final model, after controlling for age, gender, and perceived income, narrative coherence remained a non-significant predictor of psychological well-being ($\beta = .071$, $B = .067$, $SE = .077$, $p = .385$, 95% CI [-.089, .213]). Memory valence continued to significantly predict psychological well-being ($\beta = .122$, $B = .198$, $SE = .094$, $p = .037$, 95% CI [.013, .383]), whereas memory volume remained non-significant ($\beta = .017$, $B = .001$, $SE = .004$, $p = .879$, 95% CI [-.007, .008]). Among the demographic variables, only perceived income was a significant positive predictor of psychological well-being ($\beta = .193$, $B = .250$, $SE = .076$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [.101, .399]), while age ($\beta = .024$, $B = .092$, $SE = .027$, $p = .471$, 95% CI [-.354, .539]) and gender ($\beta = .100$, $B = .375$, $SE = .219$, $p = .073$, 95% CI [-.055, .806]) were not significant predictors. Overall, the hypothesis was not supported, as narrative

Table 2. Hierarchical regressions for psychological well-being

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ² _{adj}	<i>F</i>
Vicarious Low Point							
Model 1					.002	.028	9.591
LP Narrative Coherence	.144	.047	.177	[.053, .236]	.002		
Model 2					<.001	.051	6.366
LP Narrative Coherence	.163	.061	.200	[.044, .283]	.008		
LP Valence	.306	.101	.174	[.003, .108]	.003		
LP Volume	.000	.002	-.012	[-.004, .004]	.877		
Model 3					<.001	.096	6.241
LP Narrative Coherence	.128	.060	.157	[.009, .247]	.035		
LP Valence	.329	.103	.187	[.127, .532]	.002		
LP Volume	.000	.001	-.009	[-.004, .004]	.899		
Age	.016	.033	.028	[-.049, .082]	.631		
Gender	.555	.219	.151	[.123, .987]	.012		
Perceived Income	.218	.072	.174	[.077, .360]	.003		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ² _{adj}	<i>F</i>
Vicarious High Point							
Model 1					.023	.014	5.224
HP Narrative Coherence	.117	.051	.134	[.016, .219]	.023		
Model 2					.012	.028	3.720
HP Narrative Coherence	.076	.078	.087	[-.077, .229]	.329		
HP Valence	.229	.096	.141	[.041, .418]	.017		
HP Volume	.001	.004	.030	[-.006, .009]	.737		
Model 3					<.001	.071	4.644
HP Narrative Coherence	.067	.077	.071	[-.089, .213]	.385		
HP Valence	.198	.094	.122	[.013, .383]	.037		
HP Volume	.001	.004	.017	[-.007, .008]	.879		
Age	.092	.027	.024	[-.354, .539]	.471		
Gender	.375	.219	.100	[-.055, .806]	.073		
Perceived Income	.250	.076	.193	[.101, .399]	.001		

coherence of vicarious high-point memories did not significantly predict psychological well-being after controlling for memory valence, memory volume, and demographic variables.

Discussion

Psychological well-being is closely tied to the ways individuals organize and interpret life experiences (Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2020), and the present findings extend this insight to the vicarious parental life stories. In line with the first hypothesis, higher narrative coherence in emerging adults' vicarious low-point memories about their parents uniquely predicted greater well-being, even after accounting for the emotional tone of the memories and demographic covariates. In contrast, the coherence of vicarious high-point memories did not remain significant once memory valence and demographics were controlled, whereas the perceived positivity of these high-point stories remained significantly associated with well-being. Together, these results suggest that making a coherent sense of parents' difficult experiences may be particularly important for psychological well-being, whereas narratives of parents' highly positive moments may support well-being more directly through their emotional tone.

The findings regarding vicarious low-point memories are broadly consistent with research emphasizing the importance of narrative coherence. Previous studies showed that individuals who

organize and interpret important experiences in coherent ways tend to report higher well-being, greater meaning in life, and lower levels of psychological distress (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Vanaken et al., 2021; Waters & Fivush, 2015). The current study extends this literature by demonstrating that coherence may also be beneficial when individuals narrate significant experiences from the lives of important others, particularly parents. Thus, the adaptive function of the coherence may not be limited to personal experiences alone but may also operate within vicarious contexts.

One possible explanation for this finding is that coherent narratives facilitate meaning-making processes. According to narrative identity theory, coherent narratives help individuals organize emotionally salient experiences into understandable and manageable forms (McAdams, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013). This process may be especially important when individuals engage with difficult experiences of significant others. Constructing a coherent narrative about a parent's struggle may help emerging adults contextualize these experiences within broader developmental trajectories and lessons learned. In this regard, coherent vicarious low-point narratives may function as mechanisms that support psychological adjustment.

Importantly, low-point memories may require greater cognitive processing than high-point memories (Taylor, 1991). Previous research suggests that difficult experiences often challenge existing

assumptions about the self and the social world; they require interpretive narrative processing and integration (Cox & McAdams, 2019; Pals, 2006; McLean & Pratt, 2006). In contrast, positive experiences may contribute to well-being more directly through their emotional tone and affirming qualities. This distinction may help explain why coherence predicted well-being for vicarious low-point memories but not for high-point memories after valence was controlled. In the case of positive parental experiences, emotional positivity itself may be sufficient to support well-being, reducing the unique contribution of narrative coherence. However, for difficult parental experiences, psychological adjustment may depend more strongly on whether the experience can be organized into a coherent and meaningful account. At the same time, this interpretation should not be taken to suggest that positive experiences are uniformly simple or require little narrative processing. Narrative identity research indicates that some highly positive experiences, particularly those that are unexpected, transformative, or identity-defining, can also stimulate extensive meaning-making and autobiographical reasoning (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Adler et al., 2016). For example, major achievements, exceptional opportunities, or other peak experiences may prompt individuals to reconsider future goals, relationships, or their sense of self, thereby requiring coherent narrative integration similar to that observed following adverse events. It is therefore possible that the high-point memories examined in the present study varied in the extent to which they represented such transformative experiences. Many of the narrated positive parental events may have been emotionally rewarding without substantially challenging existing assumptions or requiring extensive reinterpretation, allowing their emotional valence to account for much of their association with well-being. Future research could distinguish between normative positive events and transformative positive experiences to determine whether narrative coherence becomes more consequential when positive events fundamentally reshape individuals' understanding of themselves or significant others.

The present findings additionally support growing perspectives emphasizing the social and intergenerational nature of narrative identity (Thomsen et al., 2025; Merrill & Fivush, 2016). Although narrative identity was originally conceptualized as deriving primarily from the personal autobiographical experiences (McAdams, 2001), emerging evidence suggests that individuals also construct narrative identity-relevant representations from the experiences of significant others (Pillemer et al., 2015; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). Parents may hold particular importance in this process because family storytelling provides children and emerging adults with models for understanding adversity, coping with challenges, and navigating through life transitions (Elias & Brown, 2022; Merrill & Fivush, 2016). The present study suggests that the degree to which these stories are coherently organized may have implications for well-being.

Another notable implication of the findings concerns emerging adulthood as a critical developmental period. Emerging adulthood is characterized by heightened identity exploration and increasing efforts to establish a coherent understanding of the self (Arnett, 2015; Erikson, 1968; McAdams & McLean, 2013). During this period, individuals often re-evaluate family relationships and reinterpret parental experiences from more mature perspectives

(Merrill et al., 2019). Coherently narrating parents' life experiences may therefore contribute to developmental tasks central to emerging adulthood, including identity consolidation, and the construction of a more integrated understanding of one's personal and family history.

Beyond developmental considerations, the cultural context of the present study warrants explicit theoretical attention in interpreting the observed findings. Türkiye represents a cultural context characterized by relatively high levels of familism, intergenerational interdependence, social harmony, and collectivist values (Hofstede, 1980; İmamoğlu et al., 1993; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; Kağıtçıbaşı et al., 2010). Previous work also suggested that Turkish families tend to exhibit a model of emotional interdependence in which family members maintain strong relational bonds, even as material interdependencies diminish with socioeconomic development. In other words, the self is not construed as a sharply individuated entity separate from the family, but rather as an autonomous-related self (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996), where autonomy and relatedness coexist (İmamoğlu, 1998; 2003), making parent-child memory conversations and family narratives an integral component of the autobiographical memory system, narrative identity, and psychological functioning (Alkis et al., 2024).

Within such a relational cultural context, parental life stories may carry particular psychological salience for emerging adults. A cross-cultural research comparing Turkish and New Zealand women demonstrated that Turkish women's vicarious family stories were more thematically coherent and contained more other-oriented and socially embedded content compared to their New Zealand counterparts, and Turkish women reported didactic purposes and emotional sharing as primary motivations for family storytelling (Bakır-Demir et al., 2023). These findings suggest that in Türkiye, family narratives are not merely informational but serve as deliberate vehicles for transmitting values, modeling coping strategies, and reinforcing intergenerational relational bonds.

These cultural dynamics may help contextualize and potentially amplify the present findings. In collectivist cultural contexts where the boundary between self and significant others is less sharply defined (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), coherently organizing a parent's adversity narrative may be particularly consequential because the parent's life story is not merely a story about one other, it is also, in meaningful ways, a story about the self. The coherent structuring of parental low-point memories may therefore serve not only meaning-making functions for the parent's experience, but may also contribute to the emerging adult's own sense of biographical coherence and identity consolidation. This interpretation aligns with the concept of the intergenerational self (Fivush et al., 2008), which proposes that individuals situate their personal histories within a broader familial narrative, and this process may be especially salient in cultural contexts that prioritize intergenerational continuity and family embeddedness. Furthermore, the literature on life narratives suggests that in more collectivist and family-oriented societies, identity narratives tend to be more other-centered and more deeply embedded in relational and familial contexts compared to those from individualistic Western samples (Hatiboğlu-Altunнар & Habermas, 2018). In line with these cultural dynamics, Dökmeci (2022) showed that an autonomous-related self moderates the association between

narrative coherence and both types of well-being. Specifically, higher levels of autonomous-related self-construal strengthen the link between narrative coherence and psychological as well as social well-being.

The findings should also be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusions regarding causality. Although coherent vicarious low-point narratives were associated with greater well-being, it is also possible that psychologically healthier individuals are more capable of constructing coherent narratives about emotionally salient experiences. Longitudinal studies would help clarify the directionality of these associations. Second, all participants were emerging adults attending university in Türkiye, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other age groups and sociocultural contexts. Family storytelling practices and intergenerational relationships may vary substantially across cultures (Fivush & Kellas, 2025), and future research should examine whether similar patterns emerge in more diverse populations. Third, the study focused exclusively on narratives concerning parents. Future studies could investigate whether coherence in vicarious narratives about romantic partners, siblings, grandparents, or peers similarly relates to psychological functioning.

In addition, future research may benefit from examining specific dimensions of narrative coherence separately. The present study utilized a global coherence score combining context, chronology, and theme. However, some dimensions, particularly thematic coherence and meaning-making, may be more strongly associated with well-being than others (McLean et al., 2020). Exploring these dimensions individually may provide a more nuanced understanding of how vicarious narratives contribute to psychological adaptation. Future studies may also investigate potential mediators, such as emotional regulation, family connectedness, or identity clarity, that could explain why coherent vicarious narratives are associated with well-being.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it expands narrative identity research beyond personal memories by focusing on vicarious life stories. Second, it identifies narrative coherence as a potentially important mechanism linking intergenerational storytelling to well-being. Third, it demonstrates that the psychological relevance of coherence may extend beyond individuals' own experiences to the interpreted experiences of close others. Collectively, these findings support the view that narrative identity is fundamentally social in nature and that making sense of important others' lives may play a meaningful role in psychological flourishing during emerging adulthood.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethics Approval. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments, or comparable ethical standards. This study was approved by the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Selcuk University Faculty of Letters (Decision Number: 2026/016).

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