Even the good life has an ending: Virtue in the face of finitude

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ABSTRACT

How the good life manifests in one's narrative identity may be shaped by their consideration that their life story will have an ending. This study takes a eudaimonic approach, investigating human virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) as central to the good life. Since reflection on life's finitude may depend on age, three adult life phases were sampled (young, middle-aged, and older adults). Narrative identity was tapped through a *self-defining memory* (SDM) as well as descriptors of the SDM provided in line with one of two conditions: (i) Current-SDM, according to classic SDM instructions, or (ii) Memorialize-SDM, according to instructions prompting them to consider death, and how they want to be remembered. SDMs were content-analyzed for total virtues present, and type of virtue present. Two-way ANOVA showed more virtues, in total, were narrated in Memorialize-SDMs than Current-SDMs, regardless of participant age. Humanity and Courage & Justice occurred more frequently than other virtues in the SDMs. Narrative examples of virtue are presented and discussed. Findings suggest that, compared to those considering only their current life circumstance, individuals considering their death more frequently refer to having a virtuous, good life.

1. Introduction

Bringing thoughts of death to mind can provoke anxiety but also result in positive psychosocial processes (Vail et al., 2012). One aspect of *life review* (Butler, 1963) is to ask: *when I'm gone, will I be remembered as having lived a good life?* The current research examined whether views of the good life (i.e., reference to past virtuous behaviors and characteristics) differ when considering life's ending (Bluck & Mroz, 2018) as compared to when thinking about one's current life. We posit that considering that one will eventually die may prompt individuals to describe their life in more virtuous terms (e.g., see virtues of the dead, https://www.epigraphs.net).

This research operationalized narrative identity through *self-defining memories* (SDM; Singer & Blagov, 2000), a method that resonates with the notion that the good life involves not only feeling good but enacting good (Bauer, 2021). Narrative identity relies on mental time travel (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007) and life review. It is an evolving process of synthesizing one's past, providing one's life story with internal coherence (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

For exploratory purposes, the study involved three age groups.

Actuarially, older people are closer to death, so multiple age groups were included in the design to capture that reality. We speculated that older adults may be more likely to have considered their finitude and adjusted their life priorities, as compared to those in midlife, and particularly to young adults. If so, older adults would be less likely to show differences when considering how they want to be recalled on death, as compared to same-aged peers thinking about who they are today.

1.1. The eudaimonic good life: Focus on virtue

Though conceptualized in many ways (Bauer, 2021) in US society, the good life is defined as "a life of luxury, pleasure and material comfort" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019) and often considered in hedonic terms (Oishi et al., 2020). This includes being rich and famous (i.e., Kanye West's view of the good life as going "on a living spree") or healthy and satisfied (i.e., the Life Is Good® clothing brand). We instead embraced a eudaimonic conceptualization of the good life (Heintzelman & King, 2014), focusing on living a good life to mean embracing universal human virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

There is a long history of considering the good life as a virtuous one. Baltes et al. (2002, p. 329) suggest virtues are what "individuals aspire to as they attempt to regulate their behavior toward a universal canon of a good life". Plato and Aristotle both agreed that the good life involves expressing human goodness through virtuous behavior. Further connection between virtue and the good life is found in spiritual teachings concerning how to live well.

1.2. Narrating the virtuous good life in the face of life's finitude

Contemplating one's death provides opportunities for redefining one's life story (Bluck & Mroz, 2018), one's narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). One can sculpt the past or plan future chapters that bridge how one sees oneself today with how they would like to be remembered on death. Reflecting on life's finitude positively influences motivations and priorities by "mov[ing] people along more positive trajectories and contribut[ing] to the good life" (Vail et al., 2012, p. 321). Similarly, priming thoughts of life's fragility has been related to prosocial helping behaviors (Gailliot et al., 2008) and to lasting increases in virtues such as kindness, gratitude, and leadership (Fung & Carstensen, 2006). In short, the recognition that life is finite may prompt the need to forge a good life narrative (Bauer, 2021) so that one's life story, or parts of it, can be seen as a virtuous legacy by which one is remembered.

1.3. The present study

We content-analyzed virtues in SDMs from two memory-sharing conditions in a between-groups design. Our codebook was based on Peterson and Seligman's (2004) universal virtues: *humanity, transcendence, temperance, wisdom, courage, and justice.* Conditions were sharing memory narratives/descriptors according to classic SDM instructions or following newly-developed instructions to consider one's death and how one wants to be recalled[1]. Three age groups were included. As much lifespan developmental research uses only extreme groups (i.e., younger and older) inclusion of a midlife group is a boon. That said, examination of age group differences, including how midlifers might differ from other groups, was exploratory.

Aim 1. Identify effects of memory-sharing condition (i.e., Memorialize-SDM sharing, Current-SDM sharing) on total number of virtues in SDM narratives/descriptors and explore effects by age group (i.e., young, middle-aged, and older adults). We expected those in the Memorialize-SDM condition to focus more on virtue in their narratives/descriptors.

Aim 2. Explore relative extent of each of five types of virtues in the Memorialize-SDM narratives/descriptors as compared to the Current-SDM sharing condition. There was no a priori expectation that the two conditions would differ on any one of the specific virtues.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This study was approved by the lead institution's review board as part of a larger project. One publication from that work exists but focused only on Likert-type scale reports of virtue, not on content analysis of SDM narratives and descriptors (McDarby et al., 2021). Findings should be interpreted with respect to the sample composition: participants ($N = 232$; 84% identified as White) were recruited in three predetermined age brackets representing adult life phases: young (18–28; $M_{age} = 25.32$, $SD_{age} = 2.06$), middle-aged (40–50; $M_{age} = 45.10$,

$SD_{age} = 2.98$) and older adults (60–72; $M_{age} = 63.67$, $SD_{age} = 3.10$) through Amazon Mechanical Turk ($3 compensation). They had Mturk Master status or approval ratings above 98%, lived in the United States, and English was their first language. Data from MTurk is as valid and reliable as other data collection methods (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016). Thirty participants were excluded (final sample $N = 202$) using predetermined criteria to ensure high-quality data (Grysman, 2015): 9 for responding to more than one of five foil items incorrectly, indicating inattention; eighteen for finishing the entire study in less than 12 or more than 60 min, indicating distractedness or rushing; three for narratives that were too brief or unintelligible.

2.2. Materials and measures

The Self-Defining Memory Interview was modified to elicit two types of memories in a between-groups design: Memorialize-SDMs or Current-SDMs. Assignment to memory types was balanced so condition by age group cell sizes differed only slightly (N = 30–37 per cell). Participants wrote their memory narrative and then provided three SDM-descriptors of what they feel that memory conveys about them. This allowed participants to state how they personally saw themselves in the memory they had shared. While there are five possible universal virtues participants provided only three descriptors. We felt that having them provide five descriptors of their relatively brief memory would strain reliability of the descriptors they generated. The procedure felt justified as it seemed highly unlikely that any individual would produce a single short memory that they would describe as containing all five universal virtues. The Single Self-Defining Memory Interview and our Universal Virtues Codebook are available on request from the first author.

2.2.1. Content-analysis for virtue

SDMs and SDM-descriptors were analyzed using a newly-developed Universal Virtues Codebook based on foundational, empirically-based research on virtues (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Two coders, blind to SDM sharing condition and to study aims, were trained using practice materials obtained from pilot participants (n = 38). Coders first read a participant's SDM narrative and SDM-descriptors. If a virtue was detected in SDM-descriptors, coders then re-read the narrative to determine if the virtue was reified in the narrative before scoring each descriptor (virtue present = 1; virtue absent = 0). This process was repeated for each of the three SDM-descriptors associated with each participant's narrative, thus, descriptors could be coded for a maximum of three virtues; either the same virtue multiple times, or multiple types of virtues. Coding using SDM-descriptors allowed the research team to see to what extent participants viewed their own stories as conveying virtue, versus that being decided top-down by the research team's interpretation of the narrative. Coders achieved strong reliability: Humanity, kappa = 0.87, Wisdom, kappa = 0.84, Temperance, kappa = 1.00, Transcendence, kappa = 0.79, Courage & Justice, kappa = 0.69. To prevent coder drift and resolve disagreements, coders met weekly. Final virtue scores thus reflect agreement between two coders.

Total Virtues. Total number of virtues is the sum of all virtues coded from a narrative in reference to the three SDM-descriptors, regardless of virtue type. Scores for each participant could vary from 0 (i.e., none of the three SDM-descriptors reflected a virtue) to 3 (i.e., all SDM-descriptors reflected a virtue). This coding was done for both memory-sharing conditions. For descriptive purposes, note that 61.4% SDM narratives/descriptors contained one or more virtue.

Virtue Types. Type of virtue was also coded, including Humanity,

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples t-Tests for Virtues in SDMs.

	M (SD)	Paired samples t-tests				
		Humanity	Courage	Transcendence	Temperance	Wisdom
Humanity	0.53 (0.85)	–				
Courage-Justice	0.34 (0.75)	2.24*	–			
Transcendence	0.12 (0.35)	6.44***	3.83***	–		
Temperance	0.15 (0.40)	6.08***	3.03**	−0.93	–	
Wisdom	0.05 (0.22)	7.76***	5.29***	2.30*	3.20**	–

Note. Mean scores possible range 0–3. Paired samples t-tests, all $df = 201$, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$.

Wisdom, Courage & Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence[2]. For each type of virtue, scores could vary from 0 (i.e., no SDM-descriptor reflected the given virtue) to 3 (i.e., all SDM-descriptors reflected the given virtue).

2.3. Procedure

To elicit high-quality memories that were on-target with condition instructions, participants first brainstormed possible SDMs. They then selected one memory to type in a response box and provided SDM-descriptors for that memory. Instructions for each between-groups memory-sharing condition were as follows.

2.3.1. Memorialize-SDM instructions

Participants in the Memorialize-SDM condition were prompted to think about their eventual death by recalling the memory they would like to be remembered by after death. Instructions stated, "at a funeral or memorial service, sometimes people will stand up and tell a story about the deceased person. Think of memories from your own life that you would most want to be told about you at your funeral … a story for people to remember you by." They then provided three SDM-descriptors in response to the prompt: "I chose this memory … because after I'm gone I would like to be remembered as a person who was…[fill in the three blanks].".

2.3.2. Current-SDM instructions

Participants assigned to the Current-SDM sharing condition were prompted to share a single memory describing how they see the self in present-day life (Singer & Blagov, 2000). They then provided three SDM-descriptors, responding to the prompt: "I chose this one memory as the one that I would like told about me to describe who I am in the present because I would like to be known as a person who … [fill in the three blanks].".

3. Results

3.1. Aim 1: Total virtues in SDMs by age group and SDM-Sharing condition

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate SDM-sharing condition (Memorialize-SDM, Current-SDM) by age group (young adult, middle-aged adult, older adult) differences in total virtues (range =

0–3). Participants in the Memorialize-SDM condition narrated SDMs with more virtues ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.18$) than did those in the Current-SDM condition ($M = 0.98$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 194) = 7.29$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. This small but significant effect held across age groups. Effects were not hypothesized for individual virtues.[3]

3.2. Aim 2: Extent of each type of virtue

To analyze relative extent of virtues in the narratives-descriptors (and explore differences in frequency of each virtue type across conditions), A MANOVA was conducted with virtue type as a within-participants repeated measure and SDM-sharing condition as a between-participants factor. Humanity occurred one or more times in 34.7% of SDMs, Courage & Justice in 22.3%, Transcendence in 10.9%, Temperance in 13.9%, and Wisdom in 5.00%. The main effect of virtue type (i.e., the extent to which one virtue occurred relatively more than others) was large and significant, $F(2.44, 488.56) = 23.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. As such, paired t-tests were conducted to determine the relative frequency of virtue types regardless of condition. Humanity and Courage & Justice occurred most often, and both occurred to a greater extent than any other virtue (See Table 1 for means and t statistics). The exploratory interaction of virtue type and SDM-sharing condition was not significant, $F(2.44, 488.56) = 1.00$, $p = .38$.

3.3. Narrative examples of the good life: Virtues in SDMs

Table 2 provides excerpts elucidating virtue in self-defining memories. We view expression of virtue in these SDMs as representing individuals' conception of what it means to have led a good life.

The first excerpt elucidates *Humanity*. This man remembers helping his friend with her drug addiction. The virtue humanity appears in his selfless attempts to improve her circumstances and his unconditional love in seeing past her addiction. In descriptors, he reported three instances of Humanity, wanting to be remembered as "caring, loving, and having helped others out".

The next excerpt exemplifies *Courage & Justice*. This woman shares an experience where she felt that children she was teaching were being treated unjustly by having an educational course cancelled. She drew on her sense of fairness to provide an alternative experience for them, through a school club. She described herself as "a dedicated teacher," naming one aspect of leadership and determination inherent in Courage & Justice.

The third excerpt illustrates *Temperance*. This woman recalls facing disrespect from her instructor in a school marching band. Instead of feeling discouraged, she describes gaining insight about her own passion for music. She reported wanting to be remembered as always "doing her

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[2] Peterson & Seligman (2004) originally classify virtues into six categories. The authors noted conceptual overlap between two virtues—courage and justice—which are defined by interconnected character strengths (e.g., integrity and citizenship). These virtues were thus combined into one category during codebook development.

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[3] There was no theoretical basis for expecting differences for any particular, individual virtue across conditions, so analyses were not included in reporting results. For completeness, however, five unplanned, exploratory two-way (i.e., condition-by-age group) ANOVAs were conducted. One virtue was entered as DV in each analysis. No effects were evident for any of the individual virtues analyses (ps greater than 0.1).

Table 2

Narrative Examples of Virtues in SDMs.

Participant Gender, Age	Excerpt	SDM-descriptor	Coded Virtue *Virtue Definition*
Male, 46	I helped a friend of mine get into rehab. It was a stressful and trying few weeks because she was still doing drugs, even went missing for four days…but I felt at the time that I was on a mission to save this girl's life. I was so relieved that she finally was [in rehab] and that now her life could get back on track. I knew in my heart that she was a good person and that she wanted to be helped but needed someone to help her. That is the person that I am, someone who finds the good in people and tries to bring that out. I feel good about that part of me, I feel like I made a difference in her life.	I was caring	Humanity *manifests in caring relationships with others; dispositions to relate, tend, and befriend others; relies on doing more than what is expected.*
Female, 61	I was hired to teach a high school aviation class. The second year, after all these students signed up, the principal decided they weren't going to offer it – [on] the day that school started. So I have all these kids, disappointed, not going to learn about this. So I decided to offer an after school aviation club… I took my kids on field trips, like going to the local small airport and taking them flying in a small plane. I had… pilots who would meet us at the airport and take my kids up for free, they donated their time.……These were long days for me, but very satisfying and rewarding. Several of my kids went on to become pilots in the Navy, and one got his private pilot license…	I was a dedicated teacher	Courage & Justice *The ability to act correctly, even when one has much to lose; combined virtue that entails civil strengths that underlie healthy community life and the will to accomplish goals.*
Female, 24	When I was in marching band everything was very hard for me at the start.……. I had a very specific memory of being on the practice field on an extremely hot day marching with the band. The	I was doing my best	Temperance *Protects us from excess (hatred, arrogance, short-term pleasure with long-term costs, destabilizing emotional extremes); a form of self-denial and self-regulation that is*

Table 2 (*continued*)

Participant Gender, Age	Excerpt	SDM-descriptor	Coded Virtue *Virtue Definition*
	instructor came over to me and asked specifically which direction I was supposed to be going. I guess I was too long winded in my explanation for the instructor, as he started to yell at me about it. He then physically moved my body and pointed me in the correct direction. While I was crying and marching to the correct location, I realized that I still wanted to march even though this happened. Nothing could make me want to march any less. Even though I was being told I wasn't very good at it I still had the want to keep trying. I just kept doing my best.		*ultimately generous to the self or to others.*
Male, 50	I was in the Navy in the 1980 s… We were on a bus headed toward an embassy and along the way I had seen many groups of children that were literally starving to death… I lived in a suburb most my life and had never really traveled extensively. Seeing human suffering on a scale that large really altered the way I looked at the world… I realized that we need to take care of those that are the least among us… I think it was after that particular experience in Somalia that I began to be less of a misanthrope and more open to helping other human beings. In my 50 years I have forgotten many things but that trip through Mogadishu is permanently etched in my mind… So, whenever I'm feeling sorry for myself…I think back to what I saw there and how people were suffering far more than I ever have or ever would.	I changed my worldview when I saw people suffering	Wisdom *Related to the acquisition and use of information in the service of the good life; a form of noble intelligence where one demonstrates "good judgment and about important but uncertain matters of life".*
Male, 20	Working with wildlife and environment conservation became my dream as a teenager. My love for	I made a mark on the world by changing human activity	Transcendence *Allows individuals to forge connections to the larger universe;*

Table 2 (*continued*)

Participant Gender, Age	Excerpt	SDM-descriptor	Coded Virtue *Virtue Definition*
	animals is boundless, and when I was progressing through high school, I knew working to save our planet was my calling. That decision has guided the course of my life ever since. It made me decide where to volunteer, who to approach, where to look for a career, and of course my major in college. I have not had second thoughts about my career choice, as I know in my heart it is what my spirit calls to… That is why I want to devote my life to making as much of a difference as I can. I am only one person, but by educating and spreading my passion for the environment and wildlife I can hopefully promote change in other people's actions.		*characterized by the belief that there is purpose larger than our selves which inspires awe, hope, or gratitude; lifts us out of a sense of insignificance.*

Note. The three SDM-descriptors for a given narrative could be coded for more than one type of virtue. Inclusion of an excerpt as an exemplar of a given virtue in this table does not mean that it does not include other virtues.

best" despite obstacles. She thus chose a descriptor focused on down-regulate negative emotions, an aspect of Temperance.

In the fourth excerpt, regarding *Wisdom*, a man recalls his US Navy service. He describes how seeing children starving and suffering put his own struggles in greater perspective. He displays wisdom through developing a new perspective. In his descriptors, he reports wanting to be remembered as having changed his worldview through witnessing human suffering.

The final excerpt shows *Transcendence*. This man recalls how wildlife ecology became a calling for him: encouraging others to help save the planet. In descriptors, he reported wanting to be remembered as devoting his life to a larger endeavor. This reflects transcendence in terms of showing hope and unwavering optimism about the future.

4. Discussion

This study took a eudaimonic view of the good life, examining individuals' own lived virtue as part of their narrative identity (Bauer, 2021), particularly when considering life's finitude. Findings show that individuals asked to consider how they want to be recalled on death narrated memories with more virtue than those who were simply thinking about their current life, regardless of age. There are many ways to be virtuous (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Humanity and courage & justice were the most common virtues themes found in individuals' narratives/descriptors.

4.1. No time like the present to live a good, virtuous life

Virtue appears to be a relatively salient part of individuals' narrative identity. Many but not all participants (61%) shared SDMs illustrating virtue, representing the good life as one where virtuous actions and

attitudes are valued. Virtue appeared in SDMs more commonly when people considered their own eventual death (and how they want to be remembered) as compared to considering how they wanted to be thought about in the present. While acknowledging this was a between-participants design, one interpretation of this finding is that individuals are even more concerned with manifesting the eudaimonic good life (Heintzelman & King, 2014) as part of narrative identity when reminded that their life story has an ending. Recent research on the good life has called for attention to contexts that promote growth toward a good life (i.e., Bauer, 2021). The current study suggests contemplation of one's own death may be such a context.

The discrepancy between virtue in narrating the present self and in narrating how one will be recalled after death begs the question, "If we want to be recalled as people who lived a good life, (e.g., who were kind and just and courageous), when do we need to start living that way?" We had considered that young, middle-aged and older persons might be differentially affected by our study instructions, given their current life expectancy. It would be understandable for young people to feel they need to achieve developmental milestones (e.g., occupation, partnership; Baltes, 1987) rather than focusing on virtue. Our finding held regardless of age, however: being virtuous was more strongly endorsed when instructed to focus on being remembered after death than in the group who considered themselves in their current life context. Though a between-participants design, this finding suggests divergence between views of virtue when considering life up to the current day as compared to how virtuously one wants to have lived by the time the end of life comes. The gap between virtue in current self-definition, and how virtuous one wants to be at the end of life might pose a particular issue for older persons: if they do not see themselves as virtuous today, they have quite limited time left in life to manifest a life they see as a virtuous good life. This may create discontent or even despair (Erikson, 1959). Our finding thus resonates with philosophy from Marcus Aurelius: *don't behave as if you are destined to live forever… As long as you live, and while you can, become good now.*

4.2. Not all virtues are equal

Of the universal virtues studied (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), showing humanity and demonstrating courage & justice were most common as part of narrative identity. Individuals had crafted unique stories of specific ways of being virtuous. Humanity was represented in narratives (see Table 2) that focused on selfless provision of help to another human being and feelings of unconditional love. Narratives with courage & justice depicted individuals being determined to step in on behalf of others, particularly those facing disadvantage. For both humanity and courage & justice, these were not always grand acts but included small instances in which one person expended their own energy in the service of another, or of their larger community. As such, these individuals narrated times that they saw themselves enacting the good life (Bauer, 2021).

The desire to be seen as living a good, virtuous life may be reconstructed to fit mainstream American cultural values for what constitutes positive narrative identity. Showing humanity (e.g., prominence of kindness as an American value, Pew Research Center, 2018), being just (e.g., US Pledge of Allegiance, which includes, "with…justice for all") and being brave (i.e., US national anthem that refer to the US as the "land of the brave") all fit well with an American view of goodness. Virtues such as temperance, (i.e., moderation, self-denial), for example, are also valued in American culture but possibly not as mainstream principles. They were not commonly seen in our sample.

5. Conclusion

The editors have dedicated this special issue to our colleague Will Dunlop[4]. Will's UC Riverside online memorial was filled with students, colleagues and friends who shared stories of his huge capacity for generosity and caring, characteristic of the virtue humanity. Our findings concerning the virtuous good life in the context of life's finitude hold a directive message. Knowing that even the good life has an ending, there is no time like the present to live virtuously: to be kind, just, and courageous. If we can do that, then life is good, both while we are living it and as we live on in others' memories after death.

Author contributions

SB, EM, MM, and BC contributed to study conceptualization. MM led data collection and data management. SB and EM developed the coding manual. EM led contentanalysis efforts. EM and MM conducted data preparation, and EM led statistical data analysis. SB, EM, KCR, and MM contributed to manuscript development and writing. All authors reviewed and approved the manuscript for submission in its present form.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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[4] Good-bye Will. We were but ships passing in the night.