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Heart-followers, hero, maiden: Life story positioning within a romantic couple

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Abstract

In this case study, we conducted a qualitative narrative analysis of four written life stories coming from a multi-ethnic, married Danish couple in their 20's: two personal life stories and two life stories written about each other, *vicarious life stories*. We suggest, first, that in these narrations each person positioned their partner's important life experiences in ways that served that narrator's identity, while maintaining some degree of fidelity to the partner's personal accounts. Second, our idiographic analysis showed that these life stories were constructed through *engagement* – i.e., adoption, repudiation, and creative interweaving - with redemption and traditional romance and gender master narratives from both dominant Danish culture and the couple's minority ethnic groups, suggesting that life stories and cultural master narratives are mutually constituted and navigated intersectionally. We argue that to understand a person's narrative identity, we must understand not only their storied self-understanding, but also their storied understanding of close others' lives, as well as the master narrative contexts in which the stories unfold.

Key words: narrative analysis, vicarious life stories, romantic partners, master narrative engagement, mutual constitution

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“We construct stories about the other, making sense of their behavior along the lines that we need to see them.” Josselson, *Playing Pygmalion: How People Create One Another* (2007, p. 13).

Researchers studying identity development have long recognized its symbiotic and constitutive relationship with the social context in which it unfolds (Adler, 2012; Erikson, 1968; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Vygotsky, 1962). However, although some narrative and discursive scholarship has examined how stories about one's social groups, communities, and public spaces are intertwined with identity (e.g., Brockmeier, 2002, on historical monuments; Hammack, 2011, on Israeli and Palestinian communities; Rappaport, 2000, on mental health communities; Schiff, Noy & Cohler, 2001, on collected stories from Holocaust survivors; Dixon & Durheim, 2002, 2004, and Toolis & Hammack, 2015, on use of public spaces), most narrative identity research has tended to focus narrowly on a person's construction of autobiographical stories, leaving many important questions regarding stories of the social still unanswered (McLean & Syed, 2015). As Josselson observed above, the way we construct stories about others in our social orbit tells us something meaningful about how we see ourselves. It also tell us about the narrative world around us – what stories we hear from close others and from our culture at large.

This study investigated how a person tells the life story of their romantic partner in relation to their personal life story. How do they engage with their partner's narratives to construct life stories that both support their self-understanding and are deemed acceptable to the partner? How do they further engage with the dominant narratives underpinning their social and cultural contexts, *master narratives*, to construct life stories that are culturally acceptable (Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Toolis, 2016; McLean & Syed, 2015)?

To investigate these questions, we conducted an in-depth qualitative narrative analysis of four life stories written by Nadeem and Anna¹, a Danish married couple in their 20s. Nadeem and Anna each wrote a personal life story and a life story about each other. These storied representations of others' lives have been coined *vicarious life stories* (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2016). Nadeem and Anna's personal and vicarious life stories were drawn from a quantitative study of 51 Danish couples' narratively coded life stories, in which participants' personal and vicarious life stories were correlated on redemption sequences (i.e., negative stories that end positively) and motivational themes of agency and communion (Panattoni & Thomsen, 2018). These findings coupled with findings that personal life stories contained higher levels of agency and redemption than vicarious life stories suggested that interpretive and self-enhancement processes might be involved in the construction of stories about romantic partners, but we had no window into the idiographic, interwoven nature of these stories.

The present interpretive case study begins to open that window. Its novel design provides the unusual opportunity to juxtapose the couple's four stories directly against each other. This brings into sharper relief where interpretive "choices" seem to have been made and what these conscious or unconscious choices might have accomplished for the narrators. Further, in the course of analysis, we noticed that many of these "choices" seemed to reference cultural norms and discourses around gender, romance, and agency and redemption, leading to an additional layer of contextual interpretation focusing on how this couple adopted, repudiated, or otherwise engaged with master narratives (see Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Our bottom-up analysis of this multi-ethnic couple's life stories makes visible the give-and-take of individual agency and cultural norms, showing how life stories and master

¹ Names, professions, ethnicity, and other details have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

narratives are mutually constituted and navigated intersectionally (Hammack, 2011). In the paper, we will review relevant literature on personal and vicarious life stories and cultural master narratives and then describe our methodology. This will be followed by a presentation of findings, including analyses of the four life stories individually, as a quartet, and in relation to master narratives, before offering a concluding discussion.

Personal and vicarious stories

Narrative identity theories tell us that the cacophony of personal experience and worldly interactions are molded, temporally and causally organized, and made sense of through storying, making our lives coherent and purposeful (Bruner, 1990; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1993). This motivation to render a life - and the person whose life it is - continuous, coherent, and meaningful also helps to explain for why people construct vicarious life stories for important others. Autobiographical memory, developmental, and personality researchers have begun exploring the importance of these vicarious stories for identity development, well-being (Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, 2011; Merrill & Fivush, 2016), decision making (Pillemer, Steiner, Kuwabara, Thomsen, & Svob, 2015), and bonding with others (McLean, 2015). Apart from the aforementioned Panattoni and Thomsen (2018) study, the very limited research on how individuals position vicarious life stories in relation to their personal life stories has found them related, but lower, on positivity, based on a study of participant ratings of their own and close friends' life stories (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2016). This aligns with the body of findings that individuals project their own goals and motivations when ideographically interpreting others, regardless if those others are personally known (Dunlop, McCoy, Harake, & Gray, 2018) or fictional characters, e.g., via Thematic Apperception Test (Emmons & McAdams, 1991; McAdams, 1982).

Although understanding of self and others is always shaped by one's unique social and relational position, in couples, like Nadeem and Anna, constructing an intimate partner's

life in an idealized way seems likely. Partners are especially motivated to maintain closeness, and, unlike parent or sibling relationships, they usually *choose* their partners and consequently are called on to rationalize that choice to themselves and others by way of anecdotal stories (see Weidmann, Ledermann, & Grob, 2016, for a review of couples' positive illusions). At the same time, how one views a partner cannot simply be an idealized fabrication untethered to how that partner views himself or herself. If my husband, for example, hears me "misrepresent" his rebellious teenage years, he would almost certainly feel misunderstood. He might let me know, while modifying his own interpretation of the event in an "effort to find common ground" (McLean, Shucard, & Syed, 2016, p. 9). To maintain closeness and keep the peace conversationally, our stories and self-understandings would likely be nudged to accommodate each other.

To our knowledge these interwoven interpersonal and intrapsychic processes have received little direct empirical attention in relation to couples' personal and vicarious life stories, apart from the Panattoni and Thomsen (2018) study and a qualitative narrative analysis by Josselson (2007) of four pairs of close individuals, including spouses. Josselson illustrated how the pairs constructed quite different and wholly plausible stories of each other to support their self-understandings. Like the present study, her findings acknowledge the complex, often unconscious, psychological processes underlying stories of self and other.

Cultural master narratives

Although our analytical scope was originally limited to the quartet of life stories, through inductive readings we noticed that these narratives leaned heavily into self-help and romance tropes recognizable from both our Danish and American upbringings. To understand these life stories, we concluded that we needed to examine not only their romantic relational context, but also the cultural discourses surrounding them. We took as our analytical departure point McLean and Syed's (2015) conceptualization of cultural *master narratives*,

i.e., powerful normative scripts encountered in the media and conversation that prescribe a culture's "good" life stories, and Hammack's (2011) idea of *master narrative engagement*, which highlights culture and individual identity as mutually constituted via narrative (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Hammack & Toolis, 2016; see also, Bamberg, 2004; Breen, McLean, Cairney, & McAdams, 2016; McAdams, 2006; Thorne & McLean, 2003).

McLean and Syed (2015) identify master narratives by their ubiquity, utility to society's current power structure, invisibility, rigidity, and compulsory nature. Individuals must *negotiate* with "good" cultural scripts when trying to construct a coherent account of their own lives. Although these negotiations can occur explicitly (e.g., "I don't believe in the traditional view of marriage"), master narratives' ubiquity in the culture typically leads to their internalization, implicit adherence (e.g., "I always dreamed of finding 'the one.'"), and perceived naturalness, at least until life no longer can be fitted to the master narrative (e.g., "after my marriage failed, I didn't know what to make of myself.")

At that point, to create an acceptable story, the individual must engage in difficult "identity work" (McLean et al., 2018, p. 5) either by aligning with what McLean and Syed (2015) deem an *alternative narrative*, a culturally familiar narrative that is definitional for another, usually smaller and marginalized, social group (e.g., "but at graduate school, I found a tight band of other divorced women who wanted to focus on their career - not catching a husband") or by managing the deviation by borrowing from other more generally applicable master narratives like a redemption story (e.g., "but I realized that I had to be true to myself and follow my heart"). Even if the master narrative is explicitly rejected it is referenced, and McLean and Syed argue that this constant referencing inadvertently contributes to its societal staying power. An individual's agency to freely author a life story is therefore limited both by their "actual" life circumstances (e.g., structural marginalization) and cultural master narratives. Hammack (2011; Hammack & Cohler, 2009) refers to processes of internalization,

reproduction, or rejection of master narratives as *master narrative engagement*, but emphasizes that engagement is also a reciprocal, co-constructive process in which individuals' personal narrative construction may also impact master narratives, albeit more slowly. Mutuality in the constitution of cultural and individual narratives is key; that is "Culture and psyche 'afford' each other, which is another way of saying they make each other up" (Shweder & Sullivan, 1993, p. 511; see also, Salter & Adams, 2016).

Hammack's approach emphasizes *social-categorical* master narratives: that is, "scripts that contain collective storylines that range from a group's history to notions of what it means to inhabit a social category" (Hammack, 2010, p. 178). In other words, a social group, e.g., ethnic, racial, professional, class, religious, gender, or other cultural subgroup, carries with it a set of specific scripts about, for example, the life course, historical and political events, social roles, and outgroups, which an individual must engage with and generally adopt to be part of that group (e.g., Hammack, 2011).

Master narratives have not been systematically studied in relation to life stories in Denmark, with the notable exception of a Danish *cultural life script*, i.e., the culturally shared expectations of timing and order of major life events of a typical Dane (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). However, Denmark has broadly been considered "Western" and "individualistic" in many areas of cross-cultural research (Hofstede, 1980; Nelson & Shavitt, 2002; Thomsen, Sidanius, & Fiske, 2007) and has been heavily influenced by American media, business, and popular culture (Sørensen & Petersen, 2006). Moreover, historical forces of globalism, colonialism, and migration have spread "Western" values and associated master narratives throughout much of the world; for example, themes of individualism and becoming modern have been observed in identity narratives of individuals from so-called "collectivist" cultures, such as India (Bhatia, 2018) and Morocco (Gregg, 2007; 2012). It should consequently not be surprising if some master narratives associated with the United States have seeped into

Danish life stories, even if we are not in a position to say, without a systematic study, whether they would qualify as *master* or *alternative* under McLean and Syed's approach.

Although our discussions of master narratives in relation to Nadeem and Anna's life stories should, therefore, be considered suggestive, we found them to be crucial to answering this study's central question: how does an individual selectively interpret a partner's life story to support their own life story – their own identity?

Method

Overview

We chose to investigate these questions qualitatively for several reasons. First, since the study of how people construct vicarious life stories is in its infancy among both quantitative and qualitative researchers, rich description of the phenomenon would be valuable for narrative researchers of all stripes (see Syed & Nelson, 2015). Second, qualitative analysis provides open-ended flexibility allowing research questions and methods to evolve dynamically and “self-correct” over the course of a study in response to the data and the iterative process (Burman, 1997; Levitt et al., 2018, p. 27). Indeed, the addition of cultural master narrative analyses arose from such self-correction. Third, a person-centered approach, in contrast to variable centered, aligns with a fundamental assumption within the narrative psychology field that to understand a person requires knowing their unique story about who they think they are (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1995). In addition, we thought a qualitative analysis might shed light on how agency and communion themes and redemption sequences, i.e., the variables in the quantitative study from which Nadeem and Anna's quartet was drawn (Panattoni & Thomsen, 2018), would unfold within the idiographic context of a single couple's four life stories, though this was not driving our analysis or research question.

Narrative approach to inquiry. A *narrative* qualitative approach, in particular, befits our research question. First, a narrative approach and our research question are both

influenced by a social constructivist epistemology and view personal stories as texts whose meanings are intersubjectively constructed, interpreted, and reinterpreted, also by the researcher and the reader (Josselson, 2011; Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Second, a narrative approach and our research question both assume that subjective self-understanding - one's identity - is organized through story (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1993; Sarbin, 1986).

Methodologically, a narrative data-analytic strategy is holistic and therefore especially well suited to analyzing "big" reflective stories like the full life stories we have collected; that is, a researcher iteratively interprets relationships between narrative parts and wholes (Josselson, 2011; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Our couple's quartet has many such parts and wholes, e.g., individual episodes, chapters in which those episodes sit, entire life stories, duets of personal and vicarious life stories, and the quartet as a whole.

Data adequacy. We decided on a single case study in order to have sufficient space to thoroughly analyze both thematically and structurally each of the four life stories separately, then in relation to each other, and then in relation to master narratives. To support the *groundedness* of these analyses and in line with narrative data analytic strategies, extensive passages from the couple's own narratives needed to be included (Levitt et al, 2018), further contributing to the manuscript's length. As a case study, our contention is not that the exact life story dynamics in this couple represent other couples in our study (or even to the next time this couple tells these stories), but rather that a general phenomenon of self-other life story positioning through engagement with master narratives and in the service of the narrator's identity is likely to be generalizable.

Participants

The couple analyzed in this paper consisted of Nadeem, age 28, Danish man of Pakistani descent, and his wife, Anna, age 25, of Danish and German descent. They had known each other six years and lived together for four, with no children. Anna was working

full-time and had a university education, while Nadeem was currently receiving his bachelors in social work.

While almost all couples from the larger quantitative study exhibited some type of self-partner life story intertwining, Nadeem and Anna wrote more extensively and more about the same events than most couples did, facilitating more direct comparisons between life stories. In addition, differences in their cultural backgrounds seemed to highlight contrasts between their stories and the master narratives implicated. Besides these qualities, Nadeem and Anna told a genuinely moving relationship story between two people who seemed to care deeply for each other.

Procedure

Nadeem emailed me (the first author) to arrange a study time in response to the quantitative study's recruitment flyer posted at his college. The flyer detailed only the requirements of Danish fluency, couple co-habitation for at least one year, willingness to attend together and write about themselves for two hours, and a thank you gift of two movie tickets. On arrival at my university office one evening, I introduced myself (a 44 year old American woman, speaking proficient but accented Danish), and Nadeem introduced them both. Anna spoke little but smiled frequently and seemed happy enough to be participating.

I ushered each of them into an individual office, explaining to each individually that in Part 1 of the study, I was interested in how people make sense of who they are through telling important stories from their personal past. I requested their consent to study participation and to my withholding information about Part 2 until after completion of Part 1. Confidentiality was emphasized, noting specifically that their responses would not be shared with their partner. I tried to make these discussions comfortable, both to facilitate their openness and because I was grateful they would be sharing their intimate stories. They were also invited to ask questions to me at any time during or after the study, but did not do so.

After they individually completed Part 1 on computer, I introduced Part 2: precisely the same introduction and questions as in Part 1, except that now they should recount their understanding of their partner's life story. They both used over the full time recommended for the two parts together (over two hours). These tasks were followed by a relationship satisfaction survey (Spanier, 1976) and a demographic questionnaire that included an explicit request for permission to share anonymized passages from their narrations in later articles.

The Life Story Interview. The life story prompts were based on the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008). Participants were asked first to think of their (or their partner's) life as a book, and then spend up to 15 minutes briefly describing on computer the chapters that would be included in a table of contents. Next, they were asked to describe an important childhood episode, an important teenage episode, a life high point episode, a life low point episode, and an important life turning point for themselves (or their partner). For each event a variation on the following prompt was given:

...what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you (your partner) thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good/negative/important and what the scene may say about who you are (your partner is) as a person.

The Life Story Interview was translated to Danish by the first author (proficient Danish, native English skills) and subsequently edited by the third author (native Danish, fluent English skills).

Contextualization of data. A narrative analytical approach assumes that stories are told with a particular conscious or unconscious goal and in response to a particular audience (Josselson, 2011), i.e., how do Nadeem and Anna narrate their stories *in this study setting*? It seems likely that participating in a "couples" study with their partner in an adjoining room might have activated a romantic identity and greater recall of romantic stories in accordance

with a *love life script* (Dunlop, Hanley, McCoy, & Harake, 2017). It might have motivated them to try to impress me with their romantic success (see Korobov & Thorne, 2009) or entertain me by writing a sweeping romance story. At times, Nadeem and Anna also seemed to be educating me about Pakistani and German cultures, though not about Danish culture, despite my American accent.

Analytic process

The 51 couples of the quantitative study were winnowed down to 10 couples, then to three, and finally, one. With the three couples, I coded sentence-by-sentence each couple member's personal and vicarious life stories, noting the presence of interpretive repertoires and anything else that stood out as distinguishable, surprising, curious, or emotionally evocative. In narrative memos, these notes were roughly organized by theme and plot structure, including any first impressions of how a couple's stories related to each other. The wealth of potential interpretations and memo length persuaded us to focus solely on Nadeem and Anna's quartet. We set Nadeem's life stories about himself and about Anna side-by-side and coded for positioning in relation to each other - did they, for example, seem to complement, mirror, challenge or ignore each other, or function together to elevate the relationship or one of the protagonists? The same setup and analyses were also done for the two stories narrated by Anna (personal and vicarious), the two stories about Nadeem (i.e., by Nadeem and by Anna), and the two stories about Anna, producing eight mini-memos.

Memo versions with the original life story texts in Danish were read by the co-authors, more frequently and with more feedback by the second author. As we began to notice the influence of cultural tropes, I began reviewing relevant master narrative literature. Once gender and romance and, later, redemption and self-help related master narratives were identified as particularly salient, each story and side-by-side pairing was reexamined for engagement with these master narratives. As we moved iteratively between interpreting each

narrative on its own terms, to interpreting the personal and vicarious narratives together as reflecting, in part, unconscious interpersonal processes, to finally interpreting them as constituted by master narratives, we shifted from what Josselson (2004) calls a hermeneutic stance of *faith*, i.e., intending to re-articulate the narrator's point of view and lived experience, more towards a hermeneutic stance of *suspicion*, i.e., looking for meanings hidden from the narrator (or at least not explicitly expressed) by viewing a narrative through a particular interpretive lens (e.g., feminist, psychoanalytic, or structural).

Positioning and interpretive repertoire. Although we primarily employed a narrative approach to inquiry and analysis, we also borrowed discourse analysis ideas of *positioning* and *interpretive repertoires*.

Positioning. Originally used by discourse analysts to analyze how speakers discursively “position” themselves and listeners interactively in conversation, Bamberg (2004) suggested that people also “position” on two other levels: first, in relation to other characters in their stories (e.g., McMullen, 2011; Thorne & McLean, 2003) and, second, in relation to master narratives, as discussed earlier. We employed these latter two levels, since Nadeem and Anna's stories were elicited in isolation in a lab as written reflections and not through naturalistic conversation.

Interpretive repertoire. Interpretive repertoires are a “recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes” (Seymour-Smith, Wetherell, & Phoenix, 2002, p. 255). We contend that they function as building blocks of master narratives that can be used in life stories in concert to conform to master narratives or selectively to navigate between and manage deviations from them.

Researcher perspective management. Narrative interpretation is inevitably informed by the interpreter's background and perspective (Josselson, 2011). My experiences as a psychodynamically trained couples counselor and divorce attorney likely predisposed me toward noticing some type of projective processes in how Nadeem and Anna narrated each other's lives, though not necessarily the particular idiographic expressions we eventually found. To check that my interpretations were grounded as well as ecologically valid for Danish culture (given my American upbringing), I took the following measures: regular feedback and solicitation of alternative interpretations from co-authors and comments from American and Danish study groups, with generous inclusion of data.

Results

To reiterate, we aimed to illustrate how Nadeem and Anna constructed each other's life stories to support their own narrative identity. This section begins with an interpretation of each life story independently, followed by interpretations of how they fit together, and finally interpretations based master narratives. The majority of Anna's and Nadeem's writings are included.

Maiden: Nadeem's story of Anna

Nadeem tells a story of Anna's life as one long redemptive plot, beginning with a lonely and painful childhood, leading to low self-esteem, but who eventually gains self-confidence through the care of her husband and by following her professional passion. He begins by describing her lonely early years living in a Danish enclave in Germany with few friends, a Danish father, and an alcoholic German mother. She "distance(s) herself from her German identity" and lacks a feeling of "belongingness to Germany," as illustrated below.

Her drunk mother walks into the kitchen and sits down with a beer from the fridge.

Anna is lying under the table in the living room, terrified that her mother should

discover that she is hiding. Anna is afraid of her mother when she is drunk. Her mother always yells and berates. She makes Anna really sad. Anna's mother talks aloud to herself. Wondering why Anna cannot figure out how to speak German. Is she stupid? Or is she just spoiled rotten? After a while Anna's mother falls asleep in the chair with her half beer in hand. Anna sneaks out from her hiding place and up to her room and she sits down and cries. (important childhood event)

According to Nadeem, this feeling of being an outsider and of little worth haunted Anna into adulthood. Fortunately, according to Nadeem, Anna has had a series of other people looking out for her emotional well-being over her life. He credits Anna's father for giving his permission for Anna's study exchange year in Paris and credits her French host family for providing the warmth and acceptance Anna needed emotionally.

After Anna starts high school in Germany, she can feel in her bones that she does not fit in in her class and not at all in Germany. Thanks to her father's understanding she is allowed to go on an exchange in France for one year. Anna could not speak a word of French but soon learns it. She lives with a host family that has a big impact on her and makes her feel at home immediately. Anna learns French and discovers a passion for art. Her self-image changes a lot during the exchange year and she returns to Germany with an ambition and a maturity to pursue it. (chapters)

While Nadeem seems impressed by her learning French and her discovered passion for art (the discovery of which he also selects as her important teenage episode), he also emphasizes the importance of the father's and host family's caretaking actions. Soon after returning to Germany, Anna moves to Aarhus with her brother to attend a high school that offers art history and French, while her brother attends college there. She meets Nadeem while working at a local coffee shop, and they quickly become "an inseparable pair." From this point on, Nadeem's construction of Anna's life history almost always involves him

playing a key role, for example, in his description of her life high point – his wedding proposal to her.

When she came into the entry way she saw pink rose petals scattered as a trail to our front door. She opens the door, where the trail led on into the living room where the door was ajar so she could not see inside. Without taking clothes or shoes off, she pushes open the door and sees a landscape of pink flowers and candles all over the place. And me in the middle dressed in nice clothes and on my knee. She is so overwhelmed that she starts crying immediately. I barely get a chance to ask, when she cries a tearful 'YES!' (high point)

Anna appears swept away by Nadeem's romantic scene setting and filled with joy and gratitude that Nadeem has made the decision to spend his life with her. Prior to this romantic proposal, however, Nadeem notes that "the problems with her mother intrude again."

Before her bachelors thesis Anna is close to going down with stress and suffers from depression. It is her very low self-esteem and lack of confidence that she can handle her studies that causes her breakdown. She gets help from a psychologist and I go with her a few times for support. It's a very hard time for her, but I help her to manage it. She is very grateful to me and is sure that it would have ended very badly if I were not there for her. (low point)

Nadeem attributes the cause of this low period to Anna's mother's alcoholism and verbal abuse. Fortunately, Nadeem is an indispensable support for Anna, for which she is very grateful. Indeed, he credits Anna's psychologist and himself for helping her get through this dark period caused by her mother. As with her father, French host family, and childhood friends, Nadeem is looking out for Anna and seeing value in her that she cannot see, hindered as she is by her low self-esteem. One can see an echo of this "helpers" script again in

Nadeem description of Anna's life turning point – being offered to curate an art exhibition at the museum where she volunteered.

It comes out of the blue for her and she is positively surprised by the confidence it (the offer) shows in her and her skills. It is an important turning point for her default position of doubting her own abilities. She still suffers some from low self-esteem, but this is something she thinks back on for personal affirmation and to strengthen her motivation. 'If they trust in me so much to give me such a big responsibility, it means that I am doing something good!' (turning point)

Nadeem's narrative of Anna reveals his adoration, viewing her as emotionally wounded but talented; she did, after all, learn French, finish her bachelors and excel at the exhibition. He constructs her as a woman with deep emotional scars, but through their marriage and Nadeem's love, and aided by other helpers along the way, she is finding confidence and happiness.

Romantic hero: Nadeem's personal life story

For Nadeem, his coming together with Anna is the transformative event of his life story. Similar to his description of Anna's life, he constructs his life prior to Anna as an almost unrelentingly tragic first act, a lonely, subservient childhood and adolescence to an authoritarian family, redeemed only by the new life that results from his relationship with Anna. He summarizes his childhood this way (he wrote in third person about himself for the chapters),

Nadeem grew up in a large Pakistani family, but he was a very lonely. With an older sister who controlled him with an iron hand through most of his childhood he got used to having decisions made for him. He was bullied at school for being overweight and did not really have any friends. The few friends he had, he lost due to his

overprotective mother and the few interests he had, he lost due to his ethnic background as a 'paki.' But it did not matter. For family always comes first.

He returned to the theme of familial oppression in his important childhood event, "My sister commanded me around as she wanted. I was so subservient. Was used to having choices made for me. Was used to doing as was expected."

His narration expresses loneliness, powerlessness, and resentment toward his strict "overprotective" family, his bullying classmates and sister, and his prejudiced community, in addition to some compassion for his suffering childhood self. The only exception to his story of loneliness and victimhood comes in high school, when he is "desperate" for and "finds his first real friend: a Danish nerdy boy he could identify with. It quickly became them against the world." (chapters)

Bowing to parental expectations, Nadeem chooses to study law setting him on a prestigious and lucrative career path; however, "It was a disaster. Nadeem could not handle an education that he had no desire to study. He dropped out." He then tried with the study of biology, but again dropped out. He felt a failure.

All my life I had just done what had been told to me. And lived up to expectations.

But I suddenly could not anymore. I had no desire to anymore. But now what? I had no idea what I should do with myself. Or how I should handle my situation. (low point)

In Nadeem's rendering, from childhood he learned only to subsume his own desires to his family's expectations, leading directly to the crisis of identity he was currently experiencing. Now he was lost.

A path toward resolving this existential crisis reveals itself in the form of Anna. Nadeem positions Anna as his inspiration – giving him the courage to discover and pursue

what he wanted. Nadeem identifies his high point episode as his meeting Anna at the coffee shop where they both worked.

I fell in love at first sight. Literally. When I saw her the first time I tipped over a big stack of napkins and she helped me pick them up. When I found out that she also liked me, I was so happy. She is the most important thing in my life. (high point)

Despite this charming account of their first meeting, Nadeem's romance with Anna resulted in dramatic consequences for the life he had known. When his family discovered that he was dating a non-Muslim and non-Pakistani woman, he was forced to choose between them.

She gave me the courage to actually make a break with my family. Courage to stand on my own and want to make my own decision. The only time I was not in doubt about what I wanted, was when I fell in love with her and wanted to be with her. No matter the cost! My family threatened me with the worst imaginable. It's her or us! Without doubt, I told them that it was not a decision they want me to make. For they would regret it. (turning point)

By painting his pre-Anna self as a victim, he also put himself in the uncomfortable and often shameful position of appearing weak. But by subsequently transforming through the relationship into a heroic protagonist finally standing up for himself and true love, he tells a tale of triumph over weakness. Nadeem now is free to live as he desires.

Nadeem felt for the first time that he was living his life. That there actually was a life to live for. She meant everything to him. But she had her problems - just like him.

Together they overcame them and they became closely attached. (chapters)

Self-acceptance seeker: Anna's personal life story

Like in Nadeem's story of her, Anna begins her narration with childhood references to her bicultural identity, but does not mention her mother's alcoholism problems until

adolescence. She instead emphasizes the solidarity she found in a small band of close friends and her *decision* not to speak German, implying she felt some control over her life (she also writes her chapters in third person).

Anna grew up in a little German town with a Danish dad and German mom. Even as a 6-year-old, she decided not to speak German, but only Danish. Already in the 1st grade, she had 3 close girlfriends who also were half Danish/German and all spoke Danish. They stuck together through thick and thin throughout grade and middle school years, and made Anna feel that she was never alone - she always had someone she could lean on. (chapters)

Despite these accepting friendships, Anna also feels misunderstood and different in her German-Danish community – again not mentioning any family problems. She strikingly selects as her “important childhood episode” the following example in 4th grade of being wrongly accused of truancy with some classmates due to an innocent misunderstanding.

...our teacher did not believe us, and so we were forced to sit up in front of the whole class while our teacher scolded us for having been truant. I remember this episode as it showed me, how unfair life can be and how little it takes for someone to be labeled as something one is not at all - in this case, one that could come up with the idea to play hooky for an hour. (important childhood event)

The moral Anna takes from this episode is that others cannot be trusted to see one's true self. Anna rejects the teacher's negative definition of her, asserting to herself (and her reader) that she is an innocent, hardworking student.

Over the next few years, Anna increasingly feels an outsider in Germany, motivating her decision to go on a French study exchange “adventure.”

She began to yearn to get away, try something new - and decided at age 14 to go on a one-year exchange to another country, and her parents went along with it, and at age

15 she therefore went to France to go to a French school and live with a French family. (chapters)

Anna seems to take pride in the fact that she herself “realized” her needs, and bravely “decided” to move by herself to a foreign land as a young teen, referring only generally to parents’ acquiescence in a rather unspecified and passive way (“went along with it”). She identifies this year in France as “without a doubt” her life “turning point episode.” It is here that she,

...learn(s) that there were other ways to live than what I had previously experienced.

In France I was seen as very special because I was from another country... It made me for the first time feel different in a positive way. (Turning point)

Here, she finds “acceptance” from others, but mainly from herself. Interestingly, only passing reference is made to her host family and no mention anywhere in her life story of a passion for art. Rather, she presents her take home insight to be “that it was ok to be different as long as you’re comfortable with it.”

This insight is challenged, however, on returning to Germany. Now she feels even “more different” and “increasingly unhappy” about “being neither German nor Danish,” her parents’ divorce, and her mother’s alcohol problems, as exemplified below.

My mother came home at night, very drunk and wanted to talk to me. I did not want to talk to her because she was so drunk, and I went up to my room, but she followed me and shouted at me. She yelled about how I could not hide behind my father now, and how he could not protect me now. She told of how disappointed she was that I could not speak German. Eventually she left me in the room crying. Subsequently, I wrote her a letter, in which I wrote how much I hated her and laid it on her bed. The next morning the letter was gone, but she did not comment on it until many years later. The incident made me feel alone, different, not good enough and that my voice

was not important - it did not matter what I had to say and what I wanted. (important teenage event)

This story resembles Anna's childhood story recounted by Nadeem, apart from the crucial agentic difference that Anna did something, namely, writing a letter. The problems at home lead her to move to Denmark to attend high school, beginning a self-described "Danish fairytale," in which, "she felt more at home, met friends and did well in school. Here she met, at age 18, the love of her life who gives her the love and care that she needed."

Despite this fairytale, she felt "very alone," and her "confidence problems" came back "full throttle" while working on her bachelor's thesis.

I just laid under my desk and contemplated, crying, whether it would not be better, if I was just dead – whether it would not be better off for everyone else without me, including my boyfriend, who definitely deserved better than me. At that moment it became clear that something was terribly wrong and that I had to work on my self-confidence problems. (low point)

In Anna's account, she finds within herself the wherewithal to recognize her dangerous mental state and begin to pull herself out of it. No reference is made to a psychologist and only a single mention in her chapters that "she had Nadeem to lean on, and that helped her through." By focusing on herself, she constructs herself as the primary driver of her recovery.

Anna completes her bachelor's thesis and lands a job in her field, giving her "incredible confidence." Most importantly, she finds her "life affirmation" when Nadeem "says yes, to spending the rest of his life together with her as man and wife," filling her with "confidence, joy and gratitude."

The happiest time in my life was when my husband and I got married. It made me happy that someone that I found as amazing as him, also found me great enough that

he wanted to be with me the rest of his life. It gave me a different, positive image of myself, and confirmed that I am good enough as I am and that I am worth loving.

(high point)

Although her wedding day is her high point, her story departs from Nadeem's story of her in that her happiness is configured around her inner growth and increasing self-worth and confidence, and less around being swept away by romance (e.g., the rose-petalled proposal episode is not mentioned in her life story).

Heart-follower: Anna's story of Nadeem

In contrast to Nadeem's wholly negative depiction of his bullied childhood and his family, Anna draws a more modulated and repeatedly redemptive picture in both his family and bullying stories. Echoing Nadeem's personal story, Anna titles his first chapter "The lonely childhood," but positions his family as - at least sometimes - a source of support.

Nadeem did not have many friends as a child, but he had, on the other hand, a lot of family who were there for him. He was nice and kind, but was bullied because he was a little heavier than the others. But one day he had enough. (chapters)

According to Anna, Nadeem puts a stop to the bullying by finally punching one of the boys back.

His father was proud of him, and they agreed that he should start karate. The episode had meaning, as his father for the first time showed that he was proud of him, but also because Nadeem now knew that it was important to fight for himself. Moreover, he found out that he had a thing that many others did not - namely physical strength.

(important childhood event)

Anna describes Nadeem's family as "there for him" and his father as "proud," albeit for the first time. Further, Anna narrates his story of bullying with an agentic and redemptive

ending: learning to stand up for himself. Fighting back, in this case, led to other positive developments.

... Nadeem began to go to karate, and began here to get a sense of being good at something and be part of a group that accepted him and looked up to him. He was different from the others, but in a good way - for he was strong and knew how to quickly use his strength in karate. It gave him confidence – unfortunately, his sterling career ended abruptly when he got a knee injury. But the confidence held on, for karate was not the only thing he was good at - the good grades came rushing in.

(chapters)

Here, there is an echo of the self-acceptance language Anna uses in her personal life story: “sense of being good at something,” “different...in a good way,” and gaining “confidence.” She highlights other positive outcomes: being part of a group and admired. Interestingly, Nadeem's personal story mentions none of this except for being bullied. Anna does not deny the bullying and feeling misunderstood by his parents, but these are presented more as vicissitudes of growing up with an overall trajectory toward increased confidence and personal growth.

Anna selects as Nadeem's important teenage episode another lesson on the importance of standing up for himself, this time when confronted with the hypocritical expectations of Nadeem's father. Coming home drunk one night, Nadeem's father asks him, What he was doing at home on a Friday night – why wasn't he out partying and finding himself a girlfriend? This made no sense to Nadeem, because he had never been allowed by his parents to do that – they had always kept him home, and did not let him go to parties. So he was all that a Muslim/Pakistani family in Denmark could wish for in a son, but it was not good enough for his father. The episode made Nadeem realize how hypocritical his father was, but it also made him quietly realize

that if you want to be happy, one must not just please others, but follow one's heart.

(important teenage event)

One could imagine Nadeem feeling more than confusion in this episode, maybe also anger, disappointment, shame at not being good enough, but Anna's account quickly highlights a redemptive insight: "follow(ing) one's heart" leads to happiness, even if that means not pleasing one's parents.

The "follow one's heart" rhetoric reappears after Nadeem finds "his one and only" and is confronted with his parents' demand that he leave Anna.

She was not Muslim and not Pakistani – she was, on the contrary, half German/Danish. There was nevertheless no doubt that it was her, he should have. They found each other, and despite the outside world's protests, they came together. Nadeem found the courage to follow his heart and let go of the things in his life he was unhappy about. He left home, started a new education...and lived as he desired. (high point)

But Anna also notes challenges resulting from Nadeem's decision, (i)t put into question the whole life he had imagined when he was growing up, and he now had to build a new image of himself and his life... Nadeem found the courage to follow his heart. (low point)

(it) demanded a fair bit of courage, because it was not normal in his family to move away from home, before one was married...He saw that life could be lived in many ways, and one need not do what others expected of him or her. (turning point)

Interestingly, Anna twice suggests that Nadeem and his family may have reconciled: in the low point (i.e., "In the end, the family chose to accept it) and in the chapters (i.e., "parents eventually accepted the relationship"), something never alluded to by Nadeem.

Breaking from his parents' expectations, Nadeem realizes he can be true to his authentic self, according to Anna, eventually leading him to go back to college "where he entirely followed his heart" to become a social worker. In short, Anna frames his break with his family as important less because he chooses her, and more because he simply chooses – he stands up for himself.

Putting it together: the life story quartet

We now shift our interpretive perspective and examine Nadeem and Anna's personal and vicarious life stories juxtaposed against each other: Do they describe each others' lives in ways that service their own narrative identities? How might the relational context facilitate and constrain how they see themselves, each other, and the relationship?

Nadeem's two stories. Taking a holistic approach to the two life stories told by Nadeem, we were initially impressed by their overarching structural similarity. In both, Nadeem describes childhood and adolescence beset by loneliness, powerlessness, and vulnerability within their families. Nadeem's and Anna's scars from this time – subservience and low self-worth, respectively – remain until Nadeem and Anna find each other - the pivotal plot turn. Providing each other with the support and strength long sought, both of their lives and self-understanding transform radically, according to Nadeem.

What does Nadeem accomplish consciously or unconsciously with these parallel story structures? Possibly, by interpreting Anna's life as radically transformed like his, he positions himself as no more vulnerable and dependent on her than she is on him. He thereby avoids the emasculating prospect of feeling – and appearing through his narrative - weak in relation to her. In addition, believing that Anna has gone through similar life experiences might make him feel that they "get" each other. Possibly, believing they have fought the same fight increases feelings of closeness and commitment to the relationship.

Despite their structural similarities, Nadeem's two life story constructions differ notably on *how* their relationship transforms each of their lives: Nadeem positions himself more as the one who rescues Anna and goes on to an agentic life, and positions her more as the passive rescuee and beneficiary of his love who goes on to a happy-ever-after ending.

Comparison to Anna's stories. The choices Nadeem makes in constructing their life stories become particularly clear when juxtaposed against Anna's constructions of her own life and Nadeem's life, both of which differ from Nadeem's versions in curious ways. Not only does Anna present her own life (and Nadeem's) as a series of smaller redemptive ups and downs (instead of Nadeem's largely two act structure), she highlights a more resilient and agentic interpretation of herself than Nadeem does, usually through gradual self-acceptance. In almost every episode of Anna's life described by both of them, Anna constructs herself less passively, less someone in need of watchful care, than Nadeem does.

To illustrate, in her important childhood event, Anna emphasizes the group solidarity and resilience of her friends without a specific mention of problems at home, whereas Nadeem presents her childhood friends as just a small support against the overarching loneliness and emotional abuse of that dark period. As a teenager, Anna, in her telling, "realizes" that she needed a change of perspective, "decided" to go on a yearlong exchange program in France at age 14, and gets her father to go "along with it," whereas Nadeem's version credits Anna's father alone without mentioning Anna's initiatives. Anna identifies her year in France as her life's turning point because she learns to "accept" herself, whereas Nadeem's depiction emphasizes the French host family's loving care and Anna learning French and discovering her passion for art, but not her self-acceptance realization. Both Anna and Nadeem narrate a heartbreaking story between Anna and her drunken mother, but in Anna's rendering she writes a letter to her mother to express her feelings (an action that backfires for her self-worth, but an action nonetheless), whereas in Nadeem's version she

responds only with fear and tears. Finally, in describing her depressed period, it is Anna who “realizes” the seriousness of her condition and resolves to work on her problems, whereas Nadeem’s version does not reference her efforts, but credits his own and the psychologist’s support for her recovery from these “confidence problems.”

It is not that there are no agentic interpretations in Nadeem's stories of Anna, e.g., learning French, realizing she loves and wants to pursue art, and excelling at the museum, but they are fewer. When he periodically echoes her own story by writing of confidence and “self-worth,” it is more often in regards to their deficit and to others’ help in gaining them. Taken together, Nadeem’s depiction of Anna is notable for its missed opportunities to construct her as having a strong will of her own and make her the protagonist of her life story.

Nadeem’s almost unrelentingly negative portrayal of his childhood contrasts starkly to Anna’s more nuanced portrayal of Nadeem’s childhood, including both multiple negative events and positive silver linings e.g., standing up to bullies, realizing his strength, gaining admiration and friends, and succeeding at karate. What might Nadeem’s two act redemptive structure for his life story accomplish for his identity development? It may be that this negative portrayal allows Anna to be positioned as Nadeem’s redemption - the idealized muse for his radically transformed and happier life, making it an easier choice between an (idealized) good, Anna, and bad, his pre-Anna life. The downside of this black/white narrative strategy is that he narrates himself in his early years into the powerless and uncomfortable position of a victim, which he then must narratively overcome. This he accomplishes by presenting himself as heroically rescuing Anna from her painful past, courageously breaking with his family, and living life on his terms.

Anna’s two stories. As noted, Anna portrays the overarching structure of her early life and Nadeem’s as a series of ups and downs that cumulatively lead to greater inner

growth: for her through self-acceptance and for him by following his heart. How might these similarities serve Anna's identity? First, seeing inner growth in Nadeem's life may confirm her own individualistic worldview that seems to prioritize self-actualization over ties to family or others: Better to find acceptance and fulfillment from within and not from others, as those others, e.g., 4th grade teacher, alcoholic mother, Nadeem's hypocritical father, might fail to see the real you. Second, the structural and thematic similarities may strengthen her perception of mutual understanding and feelings of closeness with Nadeem.

Third, making Nadeem's story about his inner growth and standing up for himself might allow her to deflect blame – and possible feelings of guilt – for Nadeem's family's estrangement. In her construction, it is an existential obligation to realize his authentic self and “to follow his own heart,” not Anna herself, that forces him to cut ties with his family. Avoiding blame and guilt might also have motivated Anna's markedly more nuanced recounting of his early years – particularly about his family (e.g., that they were “there for him,” father's pride he beat the bully, and, most strikingly, his parents' eventual acceptance of Anna). If Nadeem's life with his family is structured as a series of ups and downs, and, in any case, the estrangement was just temporary, then the estrangement becomes less serious, as does her role in it.

Master Narrative Analysis

What left an impression on us from the foregoing section was the cinematic, very familiar quality of much of Nadeem and Anna's love and life stories. This quality spurred us to shift further toward a *suspicious* hermeneutic stance (Hammack & Toolis, 2016; Josselson, 2004) and view their life stories as constituted and constrained by cultural master narratives. We will discuss each of the relevant master narratives in turn, i.e., romance and gender, redemption and individualistic personal growth, first examining extant theoretical literature, followed by examples of master narrative engagement from Nadeem and Anna's life stories.

Finally, we will briefly speculate on additional interpretations focusing on intersections with minority ethnic group and family master narratives

Romance and gender master narratives. In Western cultures, a “compulsory heterosexual romance” master narrative has traditionally assumed that women desire heterosexual monogamous marriage above most else and are more passive in courtship (e.g., being asked out, being kissed, being proposed to), while men are the active courtship drivers (Rich, 1980; Tolman, 2009). Individuals growing up in cultures rooted in a Western literary cannon and Hollywood also become familiar with an idealized romantic script, a *fairytale romance* master narrative, in which a prince rescues a maiden, and they fall in love, marry and live happily ever after (Jackson, 2001; Roach, 2016; see also Dunlop et al., 2017). McLean and Syed's (2015) master narrative taxonomy would likely consider these romance master narratives *biographical*, as they prescribe an idealized life course, but in their crucially different roles for men and women, it also seems important to highlight them as social-categorical master narratives associated with one's identified gender (Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Toolis, 2016).

Within Denmark, a country with a cultural life script that includes children *before* marriage (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004) and since the 1970's an increasingly more egalitarian distribution of breadwinning, child-rearing, and homemaking responsibilities than seen in the U.S. (Baagøe Nielsen & Riis Hansen, 2016; Hofstede, 1980), it is unlikely that these gender driven romance narratives hold the same normative sway over life stories as in the U.S. They generally lack the same degree of *ubiquity*, *rigidity*, and *compulsory nature*, to use McLean and Syed's (2015) language. At the same time, traditional gender disparities in Danish domestic life and within political and economic spheres continue to exist as do gender stereotypes attributing strength to men and emotionality to women (Baagøe Nielsen & Riis Hansen, 2016; Jacobsen, 1998). We might therefore expect that traditional gender and

romance narratives still provide structural *utility* and function as master narratives, albeit relatively weak ones, within Danish society (McLean & Syed, 2015). Furthermore, it is worth remembering that Nadeem was raised in a Pakistani immigrant community in Denmark, a minority culture that tends to endorse more traditional gender norms than the dominant Danish culture (Liversage, 2012). To the extent he has identified with this social sub-group, traditional romance and gender master narratives may feel even more compulsory.

These romance narratives are visible throughout Nadeem's stories, for example: his Hollywood rom-com "meet-cute" story of being so smitten the first time he sees Anna that he charmingly knocks down a pile of napkins; and the fairytale romance proposal story, in which Nadeem (the man) proposes on one knee, after decorating their home with popular romance symbols (candles and pink rose petals). Meanwhile, by carefully describing her dawning realization, surprise, and joy and by selecting this day as Anna's life high point, he positions her as firmly conforming to a "compulsory heterosexual romance" master narrative that women prioritize marriage and the romantic marriage proposal above most all else.

But Nadeem goes further than the simple tropes of a romantic proposal by a man to a lucky woman; by naming Anna's mother's abuse as the source of her life long self-worth deficit and naming himself as a crucial source of her triumph over it, this story aligns with a long fairytale tradition of wicked mothers and stepmothers from whom, like Prince Charming and Cinderella, a white knight needs to rescue a beautiful, but helpless maiden. Nadeem gets to play the heroic knight, and Anna the helpless maiden, a view he implicitly backs up by emphasizing her other "helpers" – her father, the French family, her psychologist, her employer. Scripting himself as a white knight may serve the purpose of supporting his gender identity as a "man." In constructing his pre-Anna years as rife with "bullying," "being terrified," and "subservient," he positions himself uncomfortably as being and appearing weak, and thus, potentially, in non-conformity with a gendered master narrative that boys and

men should be strong, dominant and independent (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002; Thorne & McLean, 2003), at least relative to women. But leaning into this fairytale romance master narrative affords him an acceptable story of triumph over his early masculinity deviating years, to show that Anna is equally or more dependent on him. He thereby masculinizes the central role their romance plays in his life story, making it a story of heroism and less about “feminine” things like intimacy, and vulnerability (Thorne & McLean, 2003).

Anna's story about herself also conforms to the broad outline of traditional romance master narratives, in that she describes her wedding as the “happiest time in her life” and “life's affirmation” and naming her life with Nadeem in Denmark as her “Danish fairytale.” However, her story departs from Nadeem's story of her and the traditional master narrative for women in romance narratives in that the meaning she makes from her wedding day happiness centers on inner growth and increasing self-worth and confidence, and less around popular symbols of romance (no mention of the rose-petalled proposal). Indeed, throughout her story she emphasizes her inner growth and agency rather than the protective role of Nadeem and other “helpers.”

Interestingly, when telling Nadeem's story, she seems more constrained by traditional master narratives for men. She highlights Nadeem being “stronger” than his classmates and dominating over his bully, in addition to using the masculinity trope of father-son bonding through learning to physically “fight back.” In his story she also uses more traditional romance interpretive repertoires than in hers, such as “he found the one” and “there was no doubt, it was her he should have.” Perhaps this is done to support Nadeem's heroic version of himself or to strengthen the relationship through a more similar origin story (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992), or maybe the sunny optimism of fairytale romance endings is simply appealing. Or perhaps her conformity to traditional gender master narratives for Nadeem more than for herself exemplifies greater gender master narrative rigidity for men –

i.e., discouraging deviations in a “feminine” direction. This has been observed in the U.S. but may even apply in relatively egalitarian Denmark (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015; Jacobsen, 1998).

Personal development redemption master narrative. Anna's inner growth language closely resembles a *redemption* master narrative dominant in U.S. biographies (McAdams, 2006). McAdams (2006) identified a personal *development* version of the redemption story that centers on the realization of one's “good inner self” (p. 119), using ideas such self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-worth. Anna's life stories of herself and Nadeem turn on these themes (i.e., gradual self-acceptance and learning to follow one's heart) and are peppered with their interpretive repertoire (e.g., “self-acceptance,” “ok to be different,” “self-worth,” “ self-confidence,” “stand up for himself,” and “follow his heart.”) Though we cannot claim- nor would we expect- that a classic “tragedy to triumph” redemption narrative is as powerful and compulsory in Denmark as in the U.S. (particularly not a “rags to riches” version), there are grounds to expect some types of redemption narratives would be influential here. First, in the quantitative study from which Anna and Nadeem's stories were drawn, redemption sequences (i.e., stories that go from bad to good) were found at levels comparable to American samples (see Panattoni & Thomsen, 2018; e.g., McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Second, particular to the personal development version of redemption, bookstores in Denmark are so rife with self-help and self-improvement books that resisting its claimed creeping hegemony has become a hot topic in academic and popular literature, e.g. “Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze” (title translated from Danish; Brinkmann, 2014). The edited volume “Self-realization: Critiques on a Boundless Development Culture” (author's translation; Brinkmann & Eriksen, 2005) argues that the self-help and self-realization thinking has become too widespread in Danish culture from elementary school teaching, to psychotherapy rooms, to workplace

human resource departments. Given Anna's recent period in therapy, a personal development master narrative may have been especially influential as an acceptable way to construct her personal life story. Besides the positive self-development language, Anna's stories also incorporate a downside of this master narrative that was identified by McAdams (2006), namely that others cannot be trusted to see one's authentic self. This distrust - coupled with reaffirmed faith in oneself - is evident in her stories of her elementary school teacher, her mother, Nadeem's father, and Nadeem's parents generally.

An inductive reading further reveals that Anna creatively interweaves interpretive repertoire of a self-development master narrative, i.e., language of psychological growth and increased agency, in ways that justify or de-emphasize her deviations from the gender roles of the traditional romance master narratives. McLean et al. (2018) might describe this as "managing" deviations from a master narrative by reference to another master narrative. This self-development master narrative also enables her to fashion a story that deflects some responsibility – and potential blame – for Nadeem's break with his family.

"Emancipation" redemption master narrative. As discussed in earlier sections, the overarching structure Nadeem uses for both his life story and Anna's is broadly two-act. Particularly for him, it takes the form of Act 1: oppression, Act 2: freedom, through his relationship with Anna. This structure resembles what McAdams (2006) identified an *emancipation* from bondage narrative, another version of the redemption master narrative influential in the U.S. According to McAdams this particular version is rooted in African-American slave narratives, a history that is mostly not shared by Denmark. Therefore, we would not expect the exact same emancipation narrative to qualify as a *master* narrative in Danish culture, according to McLean and Syed's (2015) definitions. However, a Danish variation on an emancipation narrative may function as an available and acceptable *alternative* narrative. The emancipation master narrative –like the story of redemption itself - is an archetypal biblical narrative (e.g., Moses frees the Israelites from the Egyptians, and mankind is redeemed through Jesus's death) and one that, in its prizing of individual freedom, dovetails with Denmark's

individualistic values and Christian history (Jenkins, 2012). As an example, discourses of emancipation have been used in reference to the presumed empowerment and liberation Muslims, particularly Muslim women, would experience when they migrated from “less developed” countries to Europe, including Denmark (Liversage & Mizrahi Mirdal, 2015). It therefore seems credible that an emancipation narrative would be available as an *alternative* story structure for Nadeem, especially as he endeavors to construct an acceptable story for his rejection of his family and culture of origin in favor of marrying his non-Pakistani, non-Muslim girlfriend.

Master narratives for other identities

To illustrate life stories' intersectionality and layered nature, we now briefly present interpretations focusing on possible family and minority ethnic group master narratives that may have influenced Nadeem's and Anna's stories. Recall that for confidentiality reasons the non-Danish ethnicities of the Anna and Nadeem have been changed throughout the paper from another European influenced culture and another Muslim, non-European immigrant community in Denmark, respectively. Therefore, the following interpretations regarding specific non-Danish ethnicities and their cultural master narratives should be considered merely as examples of how master narratives could be engaged with.

Ethnic identities. Both Nadeem and Anna construct their own and each other's life stories in ways that distance them from their social sub-group ethnic identities (i.e., Pakistani and German, respectively) and move them toward their Danish ethnic identities. This may be similar to the *distancing to culture or ethnicity* narrative strategy found in some personal ethnicity related narratives of young people with immigrant backgrounds in Sweden (Gyberg, Frisé, Syed, Wängqvist, & Svensson, 2017). By emphasizing the alienation Anna has always felt about being German, Nadeem positions their relationship as not merely a sanctuary from the problems of her family and low self-worth but also from her ethnic identity confusion. This serves Nadeem, because he, too, is rejecting his minority ethnic

group identity in favor of the master narratives of the dominant ethnic Danish culture (e.g., non-Muslim girlfriend, co-habiting before marriage, choosing own career), which Anna also supports through her “heart-following” interpretive repertoire. Thus, Nadeem and Anna, through the use of redemption master narratives, may be complicit in reinforcing each other's Danishness and in distancing each other from their non-Danish ethnic identities. Under McLean et al. (2018), the Pakistani ethnic group's narratives, from which Nadeem is deviating, would by definition be considered *alternative*, due to the group's structural marginalization in Danish society, and Nadeem's deviations from these alternative narratives would be considered *intersectional deviations*, as they represent deviations from deviations. For Hammack and Toolis (2016), in contrast, the Pakistani ethnic group's narratives and the dominant Danish cultural narratives would both be considered socio-categorical master narratives, and Nadeem's movement between them, examples of his *narrative engagement* (see Bhatia, 2007, as an example of navigating between discourses of majority and minority identities as Indian immigrants to the U.S.).

Family identities. Why might Nadeem have constructed his family in such an exclusively negative light, especially in contrast to Anna's more nuanced rendering of them? One possible interpretation is that such a negative rendering helps him rationalize his decision to break with his family, thereby shielding him from feelings of self-doubt and guilt for causing them pain, as well as potential criticism from others. Put another way, since they, in his construction, did not conform to a potential master narrative of being loving and supportive parents, he may have felt less pressure to conform to a master narrative of being a dutiful son.

It is also possible that master narratives around being a dutiful son may be stronger in the Pakistani immigrant community than in majority Danish culture, in line with the views that Asian cultures tend to have a more interdependent, collectivist understanding of the self

(Markus & Kitayama, 1991; McAdams, 2006) and stronger family obligations (Fulgini, 2007). If so, this would have made Nadeem's decision to choose Anna over his family even more difficult and required even greater demonization of his family to justify the choice. In comparison, Anna's reflexive prioritizing of individualistic and inner growth master narratives for Nadeem over stories of family obligation likely reflects her internalization of her Western, individualistically oriented cultural upbringing.

Discussion

Through Nadeem and Anna's personal and partner life stories, we have tried, first and foremost, to offer various illustrations of how narrative identity construction might not stop at the individual life story but extend to the construction of the lives around that individual. Nadeem and Anna employed many narrative strategies to structure their partner's story to support their personal stories, but two storylines were the most prominent: for Nadeem, that of a transformative and triumphant romance over their dark family legacies, and for Anna, that of gradual inner growth and self-development. Secondly, we observed that the strategies that Nadeem and Anna employed to accomplish this were drawn from and limited by available cultural master narratives and their attendant interpretive repertoire, in this case, around traditional romance and gender, individual agency and redemption.

Our bottom-up analysis also reveals how Anna and Nadeem *engaged* with the master narratives, creatively weaving in select alternative narratives and interpretive repertoires salient to their identities to manage master narrative deviations and put their idiosyncratic spin on their stories. For example, by referencing an emancipation narrative and the hero/maiden roles in fairytale romance narratives, Nadeem was able to manage his deviations from a master narrative dictating "strong" men and construct a coherent story. Similarly, such selective interweaving enabled them to reproduce important aspects of each other's' stories without needing to endorse the entirety of their partner's preferred master narrative. Anna

used some of the traditional romance interpretive repertoires that Nadeem leans so heavily on, and Nadeem storied Anna's life with some of the inner psychological growth language that define Anna's stories. These reproductions may reflect the practical and emotional motivation of wanting to feel close to and recognized by their partner via each others' stories, perhaps illustrating a conversational effort to find common ground (McLean et al., 2017). Thus, Anna and Nadeem seem to be able to position each other's life stories to support their personal identity, as long as 1) the stories can be tailored to a single or a coherent blend of master and alternative narratives of dominant Danish culture and their social groups, e.g. Pakistani immigrant family and community, and 2), for the sake of relationship harmony, the partner can still sufficiently recognize the stories as his or her own.

Nadeem and Anna's creative navigating of master and alternative narratives and interpretive repertoire demonstrate that master narratives are not purely top-down cultural dictates to personal stories; rather, narrators have some power to manage deviations and re-fashion new culturally acceptable stories. These new stories may in time contribute to master narratives' gradual evolution, illustrating the mutual constitution of person and culture argued by cultural psychologists (Hammack, 2011; Salter & Adams, 2016; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993). Finally, our results highlight that identities are multiple and intersectional and that a person-centered, inductive analysis, like ours, may be needed to make visible the power of socio-categorical master narratives not associated with the societally dominant group, e.g., of Nadeem's Pakistani immigrant social group and family. This power would risk being obscured with an a priori analytical focus only on master narratives of the culture writ large, (see Hammack & Toolis, 2016; see also, Bhatia, 2007, 2017; Gregg, 2012).

Limitations and conclusion

This paper extends recent narrative identity and autobiographical memory literature on the role of vicarious memories and stories of close others to personal identity (Fivush et

al., 2011; McLean, 2016; Pillemer et al., 2015; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2016) as well as the burgeoning literature on master narratives (e.g., Hammack & Toolis, 2016; McLean & Syed, 2015). However, as this is a case study, further quantitative and qualitative research is needed in order to make arguments about the types and prevalence of particular narrative strategies used by various groups (e.g., based on age, relationship stage, ethnicity), how strategies relate to relationship or individual adjustment, and the power of these master narratives in Denmark. Additionally, as these were “big” reflective stories and not produced in natural conversation, we can only speculate as to earlier conversational processes might have led to the stories we collected.

Our analysis of Nadeem and Anna's stories argues that to understand how identity is constructed and reconstructed, life stories need to be analyzed within their narrative contexts – both the context of vicarious stories of the close others and the context of master narratives.

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