European Journal of Psychology of Education (2025) 40:76
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-025-00973-3

Beyond narratives of decline versus success: retirement through the lens of a diary

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Received: 5 August 2024 / Revised: 16 April 2025 / Accepted: 3 June 2025

Abstract
Retirement is rarely conceptualised in terms of learning and development. However, as the end of professional activity approaches, many people begin to reflect deeply on the past, present, and future of their lives. This potentially profound reflection involves a complex process of learning and development to which research has paid too little attention. This article places the voice of a retiree at the centre of the study and provides a nuanced understanding of retirement, sensitive to the changes and difficulties of narrative sense-making activity in this transition, with all its ambiguities and complexities. The article analyses the 24-year diary of a man who goes through retirement, exploring the narrative sense-making dynamics by which this diarist interprets his retirement: initially it is mentioned with a combination of desire, idealisation, fear, and insecurity; then it is experienced as a deep personal crisis with depression; and afterward it is reinterpreted in a nuanced, positive, and constructive way. The analysis reveals the intertwining of cultural and personal dimensions in narrative sense-making. Sense-making around retirement is not passive or merely descriptive of the event, but instead is an integral part of what the process of retirement itself can become.

Keywords Retirement · Development · Diaries · Sense-making · Narrative foreclosure · Narrative openness

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Published online: 23 June 2025

Retirement, often marking the beginning of later life, can be a period in which individuals engage in a more frequent and intensive review of their past, while simultaneously contemplating their future trajectory (Butler, 1963, 1974). This narrative reflection on the overall sense and shape of the stories of our lives involves a complex process of learning and development that has received insufficient research attention. Consequently, researchers have highlighted the need for empirical studies exploring sense-making during retirement (Froidevaux & Hirschi, 2015; Gubrium, 2011; Halama et al., 2021; Kenyon et al., 2011; Randall, 2010).

Considering this gap, this work focuses on the study of narrative sense-making dynamics in retirement, especially on the changes and difficulties narrative sense-making activity might encounter during this transition. The article approaches this from a longitudinal first-person perspective, through a person's diary writing. Specifically, the article presents the analysis of the diary of a man in three different phases: when he is anticipating, experiencing, and reflecting upon his professional retirement. The work examines, in real time, the process of narrative sense-making by which the diarist interprets his experience of retirement and ageing, across a 24-year time window. It explores how the diarist nuances, assumes, or rejects the dominant cultural narratives about ageing and how this process feeds into his personal narratives, actual decisions, emotional dynamics, and trajectory. The general goal is to contribute to a nuanced understanding of retirement and later life, capturing the ambiguities and complexities that this life transition entails. Adult development is not just something that happens to us; it is something made sense of, navigated, and thus done.

First, the article presents the two dominant cultural narratives of ageing in Western societies, the narratives of decline versus successful ageing. Then, using sociocultural theory, it argues that the interplay of these narratives needs to be examined temporally (i.e. over decades). To this end, the work presents the analysis of how one diarist writes about retirement before, during, and after the date of his retirement. The main contribution of the article is to "temporalise" retirement, situating it in time, and showing how sense-making oscillates between the two dominant narratives at different points in time and appears as open-ended process.

Cultural narratives on retirement and human development

Humans live in complex social and cultural worlds, which both enable them to become active members of their societies, and also guide and constrain their possibilities. Many approaches in psychology consider that people's experiences are best understood as being situated in time and place. Approaches sensitive to the sociocultural or the dialogical nature of human experience more specifically consider that one cannot understand people's experience without considering the social and material specificities of the environments in which they live, and especially, the symbolic environment that constitutes the cultural nature of societies (Marková, 2003; Kirschner & Martin, 2010; Rosa & Valsiner, 2018; Stenner, 2014). This symbolic nature of the environment has traditionally been understood in terms of social knowledge (Moscovici, 2000), discourses (Billig, 1996; Brinkmann, 2017), or, more generally, semiotic dynamics based on elements (narratives, images, objects, actions, etc.) that people use to interact and make sense of the world around them (Neuman, 2014; Salvatore, 2016; Valsiner, 2021).

In this article, the symbolic nature of the environment is considered as characterised by specific narratives. Narratives are cultural mediators that help us make sense of our lives. They allow us to translate our life experiences into a story, giving sense to our personal journeys and social relationships within our ever-changing cultural environments. Narratives have two aspects: they can be apprehended as collective, and as such become cultural templates providing shared meanings, or as the products of individual sense-making (Bruner, 1999, 2003; Daiute, 2014; McAdams, 2013). This article therefore precisely examines the tension between collective narratives, and individual sense-making.

Retirement as social construct and narrative

Retirement age is usually institutionally fixed: it designates the chronological age at which a person cannot fully participate in the job market anymore and becomes liable to pension money, usually between 63 and 68. On the more subjective side, retirement can also be part of a transition to a new phase of life. Although recognised as a major life transition requiring multiple changes and adjustments (Moffat & Heaven, 2017; Wang, 2007), retirement is rarely conceptualised in terms of learning and development (Zittoun & Baucal, 2021). With few exceptions (Engestrom & Sannino, 2016; Engestrom et al., 2015; Stenner et al., 2011; Valsiner, 2017), the tendency has been the same in psychological science: it is often taken for granted that children and young adults learn and develop, adults work, and older adults retire (Grossen et al., 2020).

Narratives of decline versus success

Over the decades, the aforementioned trend has produced two dominant narratives of ageing after retirement. First, the narrative of decline, which obscures learning and development and offers a decremental story of human ageing generally based on a biomedical model of deficit (Gullette, 2004, 2015). Margaret Gullette uses the following visual example to illustrate the pervasiveness of this perspective:

> A baby learning to walk toddles on tippy-toe across the floor and falls; anyone present applauds. An 'old man' falls to the floor and onlookers hold their breath. Both participate in central cultural narratives of age and expectation. The next step for the baby is known: speaking, growing, learning. Progress. The baby stands up; her laughter when falling may become part of her legend. The old man collapses into another narrative. The next step, even if he rises making a rueful joke, appears to be a walker or a hospital. Decline. (Gullette, 2015, p. 22)

The association of retirement and later life with vulnerability, frailty, and physical or cognitive decline (Bugental & Hehman, 2007; Kesby, 2017) forecloses other imaginative possibilities: further growth and new knowledge, relationships, and the possibility of a redefinition of the self (Klugman & Lamb, 2019). These stereotypical representations can become "self-fulfilling prophecies", as they can affect how older people view themselves, their own capabilities and therefore the kinds of tasks and activities they engage with (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Swift et al., 2017).

Second, the narrative of successful ageing (Balard, 2015; Bülow & Soderqvist, 2014; Havighurst, 1961; Rowe & Cosco, 2016), grounded both in an attempt to restore dignity to the aged, and in the socioeconomical need to keep older persons in good health to minimise the social and financial burden of ageing (Baltes & Lang, 1997; Freund, 2008; Rowe

& Kahn, 1997). Some authors have seen in the successful ageing narrative a recognition of the need to rethink traditional notions of retirement as sedentary and dependent (Baltes & Lang, 1997; Freund, 2008; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). The retirement phase is no longer so often interpreted as a period of disengagement but as a time of leisure and freedom from family life and work responsibilities, a sort of "prolonged midlife style" (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995). Other authors talk about the new possibilities that can open for older people in retirement: pursuing new interests and commitments, spending quality time with their partner, fulfilling life-long dreams, etc. (Coole, 2012; Kesby, 2017).

However, although embraced as an optimistic approach to challenge ageist narratives based on decline, the concept "may appeal more than it illuminates" (Ryff, 1982, p. 209) and has received considerable criticism (Milner et al., 2012; Rozanova, 2010; Stephens, 2017). The emphasis on "successful", "active", or "positive" ageing, both in psychology and in institutional and public discourses (Balard, 2015; Havighurst, 1961; Rowe & Cosco, 2016), has often individualised such "success", ignoring the sociocultural, economic, racial, gender, etc. conditions that facilitate or hinder it (Bülow & Soderqvist, 2014). These "age-defying" representations (Laceulle & Baars, 2014) are based on an extremely positive, productive, and vigorous ideal, presented as an individualised challenge to the so-called mask of ageing (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995) that divides older people into successful and unsuccessful agers (Milner et al., 2012; Rozanova, 2010).

Both narratives of decline and success, each in their own way, have been criticised for being unable to address retirement and later life in all its diverse and complex forms or circumstances, fostering a stereotypical view of older people and their experiences as a homogenous group, and producing deleterious effects in the life of older persons themselves (Stenner et al., 2011). What is important to highlight for the argument of this article is that both constitute cultural "narrative templates" (Bruner, 1999, 2003) that people may assume, reject, or nuance to develop their personal narratives.

Foregrounding the voices of older people in retirement: a sociocultural psychological perspective

This work proposes a sociocultural conceptualisation of retirement and development in later life that emphasises the temporal dynamics of sense-making, here with a focus on narratives.

First, we consider development not as an outcome but as an open-ended process (Zittoun, 2006; Zittoun et al., 2024) addressed by examining the developing person all life long and by studying the transitions, ruptures, and processes of adjustment and readjustment between the person and the environment. In this sense, transitions are processes of elaboration following a rupture in the "taken for granted". They are significant occasions for change and development in the life course (Zittoun, 2006). Ruptures and transitions involve learning, identity changes, and sense-making, affect one or many spheres of experience, question sense of continuity and integrity, and are facilitated by uses of a wide series of cultural elements as resources to support such dynamics (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010a, b; Zittoun, 2006). Retirement, as we understand it, constitutes such a transition, a key moment in an individual's life course that brings new challenges and particularities for each person (Sato et al., 2009; Zittoun et al., 2021), as well as a period rich in transitions involving identity transformations, sense-making, and learning.

Second, based on a theoretical framework that draws on ideas from sociocultural psychology (Bruner, 2003; Valsiner, 2000; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2022), narrative psychology (Freeman, 2011; Manuti et al., 2016; Murakami, 2021), and critical gerontology (Kenyon et al., 2011), an appreciation of the biographical and narrative dimensions of human experience is essential to study the uniqueness, complexity, and diversity of the experience of retirement. Moreover, it is important to consider the "first person perspective" of older persons themselves (Hviid, 2012, 2020). According to Baars (2017), "their voices have become very thin while much is said *about* them and too little *by* them" (p. 975).

Therefore, this article proposes to foreground the voice of older persons to approach the activity of sense-making through which they interpret their experiences of retirement and ageing, an activity that may involve the making of narratives, life stories, whether oral or written in the form of autobiographies, diaries, etc. This article is thus based on the following theoretical assumptions.

Personal narrative sense-making and cultural narrative templates

Narrative sense-making is based on the available cultural canonical forms or "narrative templates" (Bruner, 1999, 2003) that people draw on more or less deliberately. The narratives of decline or successful ageing discussed above can therefore become narrative templates for personal sense-making in retirement. Each individual, according to her own process of interpretation and understanding of the dominant cultural narratives, will internalise, reject, or nuance these narratives to develop her own.

Narrative sense-making and temporal elaboration of experience

Sense-making through narratives involves a temporal organisation and elaboration of experience (Ricoeur, 1991; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2022). This occurs through periodic thinking and rethinking of the past in relation to the present and future, and the imagination of alternatives to generalise the experience and prepare the person for a particular rupture or transition, in this case, retirement (Zittoun, 2006; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).

Narrative sense-making and its influence on our life trajectories

As Carmen Martín Gaite (1988) would say, through narrative we not only tell the things that happen to us. By telling them we can also potentially make them happen. Therefore, narrative is a serious business (Bruner, 2003). Our stories impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience and even a philosophical stance. As Bruner puts it, "in the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives" (Bruner, 2004, p. 694). Narrative sense-making as a process feeds into our social life and can change a life trajectory. How we make sense narratively of our key transitions is part of what transitions become.

Oscillations in narrative sense-making: between narrative foreclosure and narrative openness

According to Mark Freeman (2000, 2011), narrative sense-making can face certain challenges over the life course and these are even more frequent in later life. One of these

challenges is the narrative foreclosure, described by Freeman (2011) as the conviction that no new experiences, interpretations, and commitments could substantially change one's life story and sense of life anymore. This is particularly common in those cultural environments in which retirement and later life might be seen as little more than an opportunity to "pass the time" until it runs out, in line with the narrative of decline (Freeman, 2011; McAdams, 2013; Randall & McKim, 2008). Narrative foreclosure is also usual in settings where the narrative of successful ageing becomes an important source of frustration for older persons, given the impossibility of reaching the normative successful model (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011).

But Freeman (2011) also suggests that, in some cases, narrative can open new horizons of interpretation. Our lives are then "restoried" (Kenyon & Randall, 1997). By redefining and rewriting oneself and one's relationship to others and to the world, people imagine possible worlds and futures, and develop and maintain an open-ended narrative. According to William Randall, there's no necessary endpoint to our narrative development. The narrative openness is then characterised by "the sense that, despite the setbacks and struggles in one's life and the prospect of its coming to an end, one's story isn't over" (Randall, 2013, p.167).

In any case, narrative openness is not a rewriting of the self linked to the unreachable, individualistic ideal of successful ageing. Rather, this narrative often involves an openness to the complexity of life. Such narratives are full of nuances with which people can reflect on and deal with issues such as uncertainty, contradiction or ambivalence; they engage acceptance and sense-making; and they can involve spiritual insight and wisdom, and even open the possibility to keep wondering and marvelling at what other people and life still have to offer. The openness of these narratives is therefore based on a delicate and difficult balance in which the extremes of decline or success do not apply.

Guiding research questions

This article analyses narrative sense-making before, during, and after retirement as it is narrated in a 24-year diary. The work examines how the narrative sense-making changes from the time he imagines retirement to the time he experiences and later remembers it. And the article also explores how this narrative sense-making is an integral part of the transition process itself.

The work starts with a general guiding question: how is retirement made sense of before, during, and after retirement? This initial question leads us to an even more precise inquiry: how do the dominant cultural narratives of decline/successful ageing act as symbolic resources used for personal narrative sense-making about retirement before, during, and after retirement? Finally, this leads us to ask: how do the dominant cultural narratives feed into the greater or lesser openness or closure of the diarist's personal narratives?

Methodology

Data source: public accessible online diaries as *naturally occurring data*

This work focuses on how the narrative sense-making around imagined, experienced, and remembered retirement develops over time. The methodology has therefore turned to

longitudinal qualitative data (Hollstein, 2021). Recent psychological research has used diaries (Zittoun, 2014; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2012, 2015, 2022), as well as other qualitative longitudinal documents (Gillespie, 2005; Zittoun, 2016, 2017; Zittoun & de Saint Laurent, 2015). This article has used a new accessible data source: online public diaries. They are written by individuals who spontaneously decide to write a diary, but they do so in the space offered by an online platform and not as a private document. Such space is offered by dedicated sites such as Opendiary.com or My-diary.org, among others (Martinviita, 2016), where people write under a pseudonym and can choose the degree of privacy of their diary (either accessible to all, members only, selected users only). These diaries can be treated as naturally occurring data (Bernal Marcos et al., 2024; Zittoun et al., 2024). Not only do they give unique access to people's daily thoughts, feelings, worries, fears, desires, hopes, etc., they also give access to how people make sense of what they experience.

Analysing Ernest's diary

We chose to focus on a single diary because our research question concerns the process of narrative sense-making about retirement as an event looming in the future, lived through in the present, and remembered in the past. Understanding qualitative processes (e.g. how sense-making with narratives is done) is often best achieved with an in-depth case study (Harré, 1993). Multiple cases would be useful to address the question of how frequently the observed patterns occur (Gillespie et al., 2024a, b), but this is not our current research question. To understand processes, it is necessary to find a good case, and then examine in-depth how it occurs in a single case—before asking questions of frequency. By focusing on a single case, we were able to grapple with the heterogeneity within the case, the oscillations between the ageing narratives, and how the narratives feed-forward into life-altering decisions (e.g. to retire or not; early or late retirement). Thus, we reasoned, a single case would give us most scope for an in-depth understanding of how the narratives of aging could interact with the imagination, experience, and recollection of retirement.

This article focuses on the diary of Ernest, a pseudonym chosen by us to preserve his anonymity. His diary covers 24 years (from 1999 to 2023) and has 1206 posts. Ernest is a North American single man, with no children, who retired in June 2017, at the age of 66, while he was the main caregiver for his 90-year-old mother, suffering from diabetes and dementia.

We used a mixed method qualitative-quantitative recursive design (Gillespie et al., 2024a, b) to analyse Ernest's diary. Both analyses fed back into each other. The qualitative analysis consisted of an in-depth reading of the diaries using ATLAS.ti (Friese, 2019). This reading included the elaboration of a chronology of events and a coding scheme to *zoom in* on identifying personal ruptures or transitions and resources used by the diarist. The quantitative analysis *zoomed out* to provide measures, associations, and statistical models.

Using natural language processing programs and tools like Python, spaCy and VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner) (Honnibal et al., 2022; Hutto & Gilbert, 2014), the quantitative analysis has automatically identified people, places, events, basic themes, and also the prevalent sentiment in the diary entries. One of the main themes identified in this diary was retirement, as shown by the dark oval in Fig. 1. This figure shows the sentiment of Ernest's posts throughout the diary (high is positive, and low is negative, with the line showing the rolling mean).

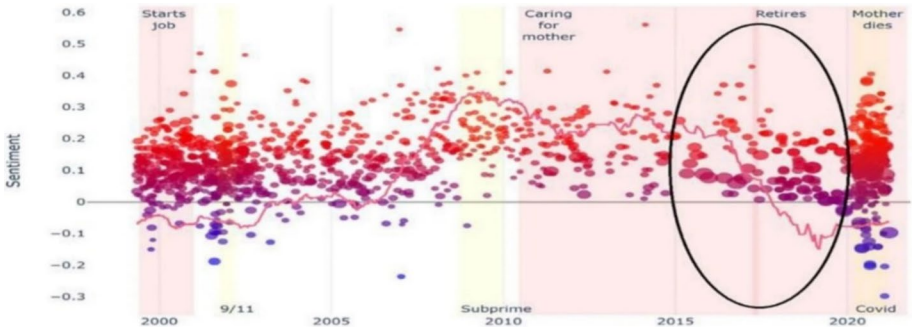

Fig. 1 Longitudinal plot of Ernest's diary. Each dot is a diary entry, the y-axis is the sentiment (high is positive, low is negative), and the line is the rolling mean for the sentiment. To contextualise the trajectory, shaded areas indicate societal events (9/11 terrorist attack, the subprime crisis and recession, and the COVID-19 pandemic) and personal events (starting work, caring for his mother with diabetes and dementia, retiring, and his mother dying)

This work has examined longitudinally the variation of narrative sense-making around retirement (before, during, and after), specifically the oscillation between narrative foreclosure and narrative openness. Utilising a back-and-forth between qualitative and quantitative approaches to the data, the analysis of Ernest's diary involved the following systematic process:

Step 1: Using the abovementioned quantitative automatised analysis, all the diary entries in which Ernest writes about retirement were obtained. All these entries were also scored with sentiment (prevalence of positive/negative) using the VADER algorithm. In a very specific way, these retirement entries were grouped according to three phases: (1) *anticipating his professional retirement* (entries written from 2006 until the year 2014); (2) *experiencing the actual official retirement*, which took effect in June 2017 (entries written on that specific year); and (3) *reflecting upon his retirement* (entries written in 2020, two and a half years later, and also in 2023).

Step 2: In the above entries, the uses of cultural narrative templates of decline or successful ageing were identified. Both templates were understood as symbolic resources used by the diarist to make sense of his experience. This analysis was carried out through an in-depth qualitative analysis of the diary entries, including the identification of different textual markers and linguistic cues (verb tenses, changing vocabulary, etc.), for example, negative or depressive reflections, comments or feelings corresponding to a decremental conception of the retirement phase as well as the ageing process as a period of cognitive or physical decline, loneliness, vulnerability, dependence (decline narrative), or to an idealisation of retirement, almost exclusively as a period of leisure and individual unconcern (successful ageing narrative).

This second step also involved identifying in the text the diarist's personal narratives, understood as the outcome of the rejection, internalisation, or nuance of the cultural narrative templates mentioned above. That is, the oscillation of Ernest's writing towards narrative foreclosure (inability to see new horizons of experience, feeling that life can no longer move forward) or narrative openness (hope, nuanced and not over-idealised, open to new horizons of experience, through the use of a new narrative of the self, mentions to the use of new symbolic resources, etc.).

Step 3: Finally, the article analysis how the narrative sense-making fed into Ernest's trajectory: decisions he makes about retirement, what he thinks or how he writes about his feelings on retirement at different times (emotional elaboration through writing).

Analysis

First phase: anticipating retirement

Imagining retirement 11 years before

Ernest writes about retirement 11 years before his actual retirement in 2017. This fact gave us an initial idea of the importance of retirement for him and his concern about this transition. In this diary entry, he elaborates on the role that work has been occupying in his life:

> As I get older and I realize my life has definitely crossed the threshold of middle age and, unbelievably, is entering the final stage of life, I tend to re-assess the good and bad of those jobs, the towns I lived in, and the employers I had […] I don't have a family of my own, and, for better or worse, the people I have worked with became, in a sense, surrogate families […] Not having had many close friends outside of work, my jobs have always taken on a very important role in my life. (Ernest, 2006)

Ernest's concern about his distant future retirement leads him to reflect on the importance of work in his life and the social role it has been playing. This even leads him to describe his colleagues as "surrogate families". In most Western societies, the two main areas of life that define our social status as individuals are usually considered to be work and family (Twigg & Martin, 2015). In Ernest's case, given his consideration of work as the source of a substitute family, the perspective of retirement opens the possibility of becoming socially isolated.

Looking old: Ernest's confrontation with the mirror

The use of narrative of decline terminology continued in 2014, three years before retirement. Take, for example, the following reflection following a visit to an eyewear shop. Ernest focuses on a very specific detail, his confrontation with a mirror:

> I was sitting in the eyeglass store this afternoon looking at myself in one of those small, round mirrors, and I looked old. I mean, no denying it, no rationalizing. Old. Sagging folds under my chin and on my neck, dark bags under my eyes. Full head of gray hair, just cut this afternoon. (Ernest, 2014)

Ernest sees and describes himself as an "old" person. The mirror reflects back to him the face of an Ernest in whom, following his own discourse, the signs of physical decline are already clearly inscribed. Ernest is reproducing here the prevailing narratives of ageing as declining health and increasing physical weakness that are taken for granted in much of Western society (Humberstone & Cuttler-Riddick, 2015). We recognise, therefore, traces of ageism with its archetypal valorisation of the younger body (and its appearance in terms of beauty, strength, and performance) over the old. We also recognise here the reference to the "mask of age" which, according to the narrative of successful ageing, people must, in one way or another, fear and defy (Casas, 2014; Nelson, 2005).

Later, in the same diary entry, he links the above reflections with a comment from someone he assisted at work:

> I helped someone at work the other day, nice as can be, but who was older than me for sure and then she made some reference to "our generation." I am surrounded by college students where I live. They're going to live forever, just look at them. (Ernest, 2014)

Ernest not only says he looks old, he also feels that he is perceived by others as older than he is. The phrase "they're going to live forever" synthesises both the hope and future he sees in his young neighbours and, conversely, the little time he feels he has left. In short, Ernest here confronts the vivid "sense of finitude" identified by authors such as Baars (2017), through which many older people begin to tell themselves that they no longer have a whole life ahead of them.

No horizons: Ernest's narrative foreclosure

The utilisation of terminology characteristic of the cultural narrative of decline initiates a process of narrative foreclosure (Freeman, 2011) within Ernest's diary entries, a sense of life's possibilities diminishing, with no new chapters, adventures, or themes appearing likely. As his birthday approaches, he writes the following:

> I am not getting any younger. I'll be 63 in a month. I find myself thinking more and more about how much or little time I have left. There's no longer an endless series of days and nights and new career possibilities or places to move to or new friends to make. I am here, now, 20 years here and I'm not going anywhere. Retirement? Perish the thought. I'm too afraid and insecure to do that. Not yet anyway. I'll know when I have to. (Ernest, 2014)

The idea of retirement, although still a long way off, brings Ernest great insecurity and disorientation. This leads him to fear retirement both because of the loss of his only source of social contact and because of what it represents: getting old.

But narrative foreclosure is not only a reflection on his life trajectory in terms of horizons and life experiences that are closing. The reflection can be considered an integral part of the development of his trajectory and feeds the planning of his future decision on retirement. His words denote not only a fear of retirement itself but also his fear and anxiety of the very approach to the decision he feels he will have to make when the time comes. In this sense, our analysis detected how Ernest's anxiety progressively increased as the time of his retirement approached, combined significantly with his increasing use of future tense verbs (see Fig. 2).

Sitting on the porch all morning: Ernest's desire for retirement

Only three months later, however, Ernest's narrative swings to the opposite pole. He recalls how only seven days earlier he had even thought about late retirement:

> Last week I was saying I could work, and, might have to work indefinitely until 70 or more. This week I want so badly the leisure time and peace that comes with being able to sit on the porch all morning with my coffee and not have to scramble to get to work […] And now, life goes on, and I see retirement looming ahead. What will

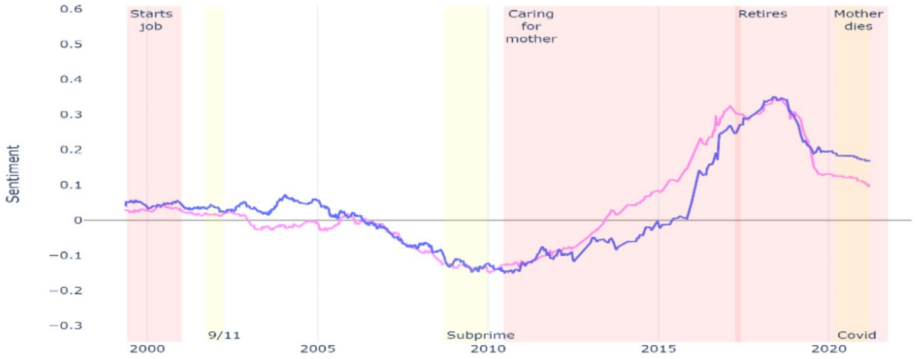

Fig. 2 Anxiety (pink line) and use of future tense (blue line) in Ernest's diary. Both lines concurrently peak upon Ernest's retirement, following an upward trend

> I do? That's what's exciting about it. All those big questions to answer and a time in which I will start over near the end of life. Endings into beginnings. (Ernest, 2014)

Ernest seems to refuse to internalise the narrative of decline. His words can be interpreted both as a challenge to that narrative and as a desire for self-convincement: retirement, he tells himself, will be a new start. His writing here is full of hope and potentiality: he is aware that he is becoming a new person, and that anything is possible.

Ernest writes these thoughts and feelings by imagining himself in an idealised, idyllic situation in line with the discourse of successful ageing: that of rest and carefree relaxation as he sits drinking coffee on his porch. Narrative sense-making, as Bruner suggested (Bruner, 2003), feeds back into Ernest's life trajectory: "sitting on the porch all morning with my coffee" is a powerful image that functions as a semiotic mediator or resource, guiding him, for the moment, into early retirement.

Recapitulation

Ernest's initial contradictory narratives about retirement continually oscillate between fear, insecurity, and idealisation. Initially, the analysis reveals the fear about the changes that he imagines retirement might bring to his social life. But the analysis has also identified a narrative that leads him to reject the idea of a late retirement. Retirement is then desired as the beginning of a period of carefree leisure. Be that as it may, the diary entries show us how these oscillating narratives are feeding Ernest's own trajectory. In short, how the narrative sense-making around retirement is feeding into the imagined retirement itself.

Second phase: experiencing retirement

Disruptive and traumatic: depression and sense of loss

In this phase, Ernest has just started his retirement at the age of 66, the earliest he could retire with full Social Security benefits. This coincides with the progressive decline in his mother's health. As the sole available caregiver, with his sister and brother residing considerable distances away, Ernest's diary entries detail the substantial physical and psychological strain inherent in his caregiving responsibilities.

The first interesting aspect identified in his narrative is the reference to the psychological difficulty retirement has begun to pose for him, as he acknowledges in the following excerpt: "The past two weeks have been an incredible transition period, really difficult psychologically as I've struggled with second thoughts and bouts of depression and anxiety" (Ernest, 2017). In this sense, one of the interesting features of Ernest's retirement, in contrast to many others, is that it was *his* choice. As in the previous phase, Ernest oscillates between the desire for an early retirement and the fear of the new situation, which even leads him to think about a late retirement at age 70 or more. His writing denotes the weight and anxiety triggered by the responsibility of his own decision, as well as his fear of social isolation, illustrated in this excerpt:

> I'm feeling a bit lonely – and fighting off occasional, rather intense but brief bouts of depression where I ask myself if I've made a horrible mistake in retiring […] Back and forth feelings of great freedom and release combined with a deep sense of loss, like my whole former way of life is gone, in an instant […] How terribly difficult it is to avoid revisiting the past too much or pondering possible futures. (Ernest, 2017)

Aspects of both narratives of decline and successful ageing are combined in the above excerpt. The reference to depression, loneliness, and the sense of loss make him wonder if he has made a "horrible mistake in retiring". But there are also traces of reflection on the future ("pondering possible futures") in which a sense of liberation ("great freedom and release") enters. If he takes a decline narrative, then he made a mistake. But if he takes a successful ageing narrative, then it was the right choice. Ernest seems to be caught here between these two narratives, showing the ambivalence that many people experience in times of transition (Zittoun et al., 2012).

On the other hand, it is also significant how Ernest describes his situation in terms of a difficult narrative balance. This description coincides with Freeman's (2011) studies on the oscillations of narrative sense-making in later life. How to combine our need to revisit the past with the inevitable task of moving forward? How to not get caught up in recreating our past failures, to keep developing, to keep opening new horizons and new "melodies of living" (Zittoun et al., 2013)? In Ernest's case, although it may seem that the negative narrative of decline becomes dominant, the reference to a liberating future is not completely gone in his diary entries.

From idealisation to unexpected adjustment

So far, Ernest's agency in this new phase has been present: he has written about the responsibility of having decided the official date for his retirement. However, this begins to change. In his writing, he begins to feel overwhelmed by a situation over which he feels he has no control and to which he thought he could adapt in a better way. In the previous section, he was idealising retirement with the powerful image of resting on the porch having a coffee. Now, he writes as if he is a victim of the process that has a momentum of its own and consequences he cannot control; he also has to admit that his anticipated fear—that of losing his social network—is becoming true. This is what we can see in his sad and depressing description of Thanksgiving Day, with only the company of his mother:

> A gray and wet Thanksgiving passed in a depressing haze. Just me and Mom. Holidays can be very difficult […] Continued anxiety about caregiving and what is best for my mother have upset any sense of equilibrium I had hoped to establish in my early foray into the world of retirement. I never really expected this to happen. I thought things would be much different, that I'd be coping better, and yet, of course,

> we can never know what's coming after major life changes […] I seemed to be managing things ok before I retired, but then everything gradually seemed to change and slide downhill. (Ernest, 2017)

The analysis shows here a common feature associated in the literature with the excessively idealising narratives of successful ageing: the problem of achieving or not the active and successful ideal, and the blaming of the person in the face of a process understood as exclusively individual (Laceulle & Baars, 2014; Milner et al., 2012; Rozanova, 2010). When Ernest writes about depression and losing his sense of equilibrium, saying to himself "I never expected this to happen", it is as if the narrative of a successful retirement has collided with the experience of decline, with the feeling that everything is a rushing "slide downhill".

Narrative sense-making and agency

Experiencing a sense of lost agency, Ernest attempts to understand his depression through writing. Within this diary entry, he explores his current depressive state by comparing it with past episodes:

> One has to look at depression as not only a medical or biological condition (and I've always struggled with this idea), but also as a spiritual and religious experience. In periods of depression throughout my life I have had to confront the most urgent questions about life's purpose, good and evil, and the nature of suffering and why some of us must go through such terrible suffering. In years past, after long months of struggle and then slow healing and awakening as from a deep sleep, I have come out transformed — hopeful, optimistic, and happy. I hope and pray a new path in life awaits, this time during my final years when my life's work is done and I realize there will come a time when I see everything clearly. (Ernest, 2017)

Traces of the narrative of decline continue to be present in Ernest's writing, describing his entrance into retirement as "my final years". But, at the same time, Ernest uses contradictory narratives that denote insecurity and ambivalence. In this sense, more than a description of his past relationship with depression, the narrative sense-making functions in the above excerpt as a kind of resource to face the difficult times and convince himself: if at other times a "slow healing and awakening" has been possible for him, the current depression can also lead him to personal transformation, to a new version of Ernest, "hopeful, optimistic, and happy". Here, Ernest engages in a higher level of sense-making. Rather than focusing on activities (what I want to do), he adopts a more distanced perspective, addressing these issues in terms of general values and drawing upon a philosophical or religious vocabulary as a resource.

Despite Ernest's attempts to construct a positive narrative around this period, his later reflections suggest a lack of conviction. The narrative subsequently reverts to a negative valence. As the following diary entry illustrates, this return to a negative framing is indicative of narrative foreclosure:

> Sometimes, however, I feel so trapped and cut off from others and the world around me that things seem to be closing in and I can't see a way out […] Whenever I succumb to peering into several imagined scenarios involving the future and start to ruminate and dwell on what might ultimately happen to Mom as well as to me, anxiety starts moving back in. I begin to feel an existential sense of dread. Those feelings

were most acute late last year almost every morning, and I truly didn't want to get out of bed. (Ernest, 2018)

Recapitulation

The official date of retirement marks Ernest's entry into a phase of depression and guilt. The dreaded but also desired retirement of the previous phase is now described as a horrible nightmare to which he is finding it very difficult to adapt; his fear of losing his social network has turned into painful social isolation. Ernest's narrative seems to lean towards the negative narrative pole, internalising the cultural discourse of decline, resulting in a sense of oppression and abrupt closure of life's horizons, in a narrative foreclosure. However, he experiences the ambivalence characteristic of vital transitions: narrative openness is not completely absent from his writings, pushing him, although still with difficulty, to ponder more hopeful and liberating futures.

Third phase: after retirement

Reinterpretation of retirement in positive terms

In 2020, two and a half years after his retirement, Ernest is very happy with his new identity as a retiree. His oscillating narratives now lean towards the positive narrative of successful ageing. But as we shall see, Ernest continues to use both the cultural narratives of decline and successful ageing to compose his own narrative.

Consider the following excerpt from a diary entry entitled "Retirement, loss of friends and the true meaning of life". The phase of depression and sense of loss he wrote about earlier is now reinterpreted in a quite different way:

> It's been 2 ½ years since I retired, and that momentous milestone was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I, of course, am far from free to do what I want since I am the 24/7 primary caregiver for my mother who has advanced dementia and diabetes. The freedom I do have is release from the responsibility of doing a job right and working for others […] But it's over, the last 21 years of my working life, and I don't miss it. I've never looked back with the slightest regret about whether it was the right decision to retire. I was 66. It was time. (Ernest, 2020)

Retirement now appears in his narrative as "one of the best things that ever happened". He omits times when he looked back with regret wondering whether or not he had made the right decision. He also seems not to suffer from loneliness anymore. But, be that as it may, in this diary entry he says he does not miss his work and considers that his decision-making process has finally proved a success: "I was 66. It was time".

On the other hand, the sense of freedom and release that he dreamed of in the anticipation phase, synthesised in the image of the porch retreat, seems to have finally come true for him. However, Ernest is not using here the overly idyllic narrative characteristic of successful ageing (Rozanova, 2010). His references to his mother's intense daily care suggest that he is not passively internalising such a narrative. Rather, he is making a much more nuanced and complex narrative of his own.

Retirement as a new beginning: searching for the essential

Ernest writes about retirement in quotation marks, perhaps revealing his own reconceptualisation of retirement. Before retiring he saw retirement as undifferentiated not only from work but also from social life. Now, with his more nuanced experience, he realises that work was only a part of his life and that he has not "retired" from life more broadly. He goes on to write:

> So for me I've only "retired" from a job. In its place I embraced a new beginning, the final chapter of life, and a time to sort things out, try to make sense of the past, and develop a much deeper understanding of God and the life of the spirit. In those moments of being I can confront the unknown in ways I never could when I was younger, working or looking for work. That life energy is now directed at more important things — the essential questions of life. (Ernest, 2020)

Now, his intention of transforming the "endings into beginnings", which we saw in the first phase of our analysis, seems to take on a new, much deeper sense for him ("I embraced a new beginning"). For example, he writes about trying to focus on what is essential to him, something that in some older people leads them to focus on politics, beauty, religion, etc. (Hviid, 2022). In his case, the fear of isolation and the loss of his social network have been turned into a relationship to a more general, spiritual, Other. In this regard, he mentions his desire to deepen his religious faith, as a new sphere of his experience (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016) and the will to live a meaningful life.

This reference to religion as a cultural resource at this point in the diary aligns with recent studies carried out from a sociocultural perspective (see, for example, Baucal & Zittoun, 2013; Manuti et al., 2016) which suggest, based on William James' proposal (James, 1902/2002), that religion can become a powerful symbolic force in people's beliefs and attitudes during later life. In Ernest's case, religion, as a cultural interpretative repertoire, becomes a source for answering essential questions about life, an anchor for dealing with the present and the future, and a sociocultural resource for wellbeing (Manuti et al., 2016).

"It begins to make sense": Ernest's nuanced reflections on retirement and ageing

The narrative openness Ernest uses in this phase is also the outcome of a more nuanced view of ageism and the narrative of decline. We had seen at the beginning of our analysis how Ernest reproduced the prevailing narratives of ageing as declining health and increasing physical weakness. For example, in the description of his confrontation with the mirror, we recognised traces of ageism and its archetypal valorisation of the young body over the old (Humberstone & Cuttler-Riddick, 2015). Now, in this new diary entry, his narrative is much more complex and critical of that vision. Ernest sums it up this way:

> Do we age gracefully? No. Emphatically not. It's a creeping existential nightmare, but eventually we get over it and realize our own Septuagenarian Age is going the best years of our lives because retirement at 66 was freedom at last […] We live in a society that values youth and looks, but seems to have forgotten that beauty is only skin deep. The key is to remember that when you are old, you've gotten very far along the road of life and are living proof that hardships and vicissitudes can be surmounted. With aging comes a certain degree of wisdom, and the young are often the last to realize that. (Ernest, 2020)

Ernest continues writing about ageing using terms from the narrative of decline ("it's a creeping existential nightmare"). However, he uses this diary entry to criticise and nuance the decline perspective reflecting on the positive possibilities and wisdom that can come with retirement ("because retirement at 66 was freedom at last"). We see here an important integration: he is trying to come to terms with the reality of the ageing body, without denying the possibility of psychological learning and development. Ageing as a whole emerges for him as a process of not just passively *getting old* but of actively *growing old* (Randall & McKim, 2008).

Recapitulation

In Ernest's narrative at this phase, the analysis has identified elements of the narrative of decline or success. However, on this occasion, the use and nuance of these narratives have moved towards the creation of a complex personal narrative of openness. This openness is not only a new way of reinterpreting his past and present experience; it also implies the development of a new way of facing the future, opening new spheres of experience and new personal "melodies of living". This is characterised, for Ernest, by a focus on what appears as "more essential" (Zittoun & Cabra, 2024), and by a transformation of social relationships in a more abstract and general tension toward the spiritual. This leads him finally to state that "life is a great adventure, and the older I get, the more mysterious and beautiful it seems. And this is also because so much of it begins to make sense" (Ernest, 2023).

Conclusion

This article has examined the heterogeneity, ambiguities, and complexities that the experience of retirement entails through the longitudinal analysis of Ernest's diary over a 24-year window. The case study has shown that what retirement is imagined to be, is, and how it is narrated does not follow a homogeneous pattern but varies in multiple ways and has continuous ups and downs. The work illustrates how the cultural and personal dimensions of narrative sense-making intertwine over time in Ernest's diary writing. Ernest has used the cultural narratives of decline or success, internalising, rejecting, or nuancing them, in one way or another. The article has shown how these cultural narratives have coexisted, in tension, with one sometimes being dominant. At various points in the diary, this process has resulted in the creation of a personal narrative with a greater or lesser degree of closure or openness, i.e. an oscillation between the narrative foreclosure and the narrative openness. In this respect, the narrative sense-making around retirement has gone through different phases. First, retirement was imagined and anticipated with a combination of insecurity, fear, idealisation, and desire. Second, it was experienced as a phase of depression. Third, it was remembered and reconsidered a positive and constructive experience.

However, the analysis has not only shown us how narrative sense-making varies over time. Narrative, as Bruner (2004) or Martín Gaite (1988) noted, is not passive or merely descriptive. Ernest's diary is not a mere description of facts, anecdotes, or observations devoid of life. Ernest's narrative has become part of his own becoming, of what his retirement has become. Potentially, the sense-making narrative, with all its nuances and highs and lows, has been guiding his decisions, as semiotic mediators of action (Valsiner, 2021). For example, the positive narrative has led him to think about choosing early retirement. The decline narrative, on the other hand, has sometimes led him to

lean towards later retirement. In addition, the choice, guided by the narratives, has carried personal responsibility. He has wondered at certain times whether he had retired too early or too late, or whether he had made a horrible mistake. In this sense, while many life events happen to people, this is a life event that Ernest made happen to himself, and this has changed the narrative sense-making.

Narrative sense-making has also acted as a semiotic mediator in terms of Ernest's way of feeling and emotional development. In some diary entries, narrative foreclosure has mediated his slide into depression and hopelessness. In others, the narrative openness has mediated his inclination towards a more positive and constructive predisposition, elaborating a more nuanced, ambiguous, and complex view. In this process of sense-making, he has used, for example, new symbolic resources, such as religion, to support his transition. In addition, he also transformed his fear and regret of losing social relationships into the discovery of new and more abstract spiritual dialogues. Thus, a new narrative emerges from this process, one where ageing becomes a period of losses, yet also of learning and development—of growing old.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Neuchâtel. This article is the result of a project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation through the Swiss National Center of Competence in Research LIVES (nccr-LIVES) "Overcoming Vulnerability: Perspectives Across the Lifecourse". The work has also been framed within the project entitled "Societal Crises and Personal Sense-Making: Transitions, Mobility, and Imagination Across the Lifecourse" funded by the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies, nccr – on the move.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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-Current themes of research.

Diaries as technologies of the self; promises and perils of diary writing; sensemaking in crises; development and experiences of vulnerability across the life course; the "development of autobiography", that is, how our way of telling about ourselves changes, and how these accounts come to take control of our ways of life, especially in later life.

-Most relevant publications.

Bernal Marcos, M.J., Zittoun, T. & Gillespie, A. (2023). Diaries as technologies for sense-making and self-transformation in times of vulnerability. Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-023-09765-0
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-Current themes of research.

Learning and development in the life course. Her theoretical work draws on semiotic cultural psychology, psychoanalysis, and the social sciences, and addresses imagination and arts in human development. Her current empirical work addresses societal crises and personal sense-making (transitions, mobility, and imagination across the lifecourse), the development of adults via online diaries, and of older persons at a regional scale.

-Most relevant publications.

Her last monographs include La fabrique de l'integration (co-authored, Anthropos, 2020) and The pleasure of thinking (CUP; 2024).

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Current Themes of Research.

His research focuses on divergences of perspective, misunderstandings, distrust, failures of listening, and how people try (and fail) to imagine shared futures. He uses a range of quantitative and qualitative methods from laboratory studies to fieldwork. Most recent research deals with writing (specifically diary writing) as a psychological tool in times of crises.

Most relevant publications.

Recent publications include "A Sociocultural Approach to Identity Through Diary Studies" in Cambridge Handbook of Identity (with Tania Zittoun, Cambridge University Press, 2021), "Imagining the Collective Future: A Sociocultural Perspective", in Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology (Palgrave, 2018) and the book Pragmatism and Methodology with Vlad Glaveanu and Constance de Saint Laurent (Cambridge University Press, 2024), a pragmatist approach on analyzing large qualitative datasets that integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches.