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Ageing and Society / *FirstView* Article / August 2016, pp 1 - 25

DOI: 10.1017/S0144686X16000581, Published online: 01 August 2016

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0144686X16000581](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0144686X16000581)

### How to cite this article:

EVA DUBOVSKÁ, VLADIMÍR CHRZ, PETER TAVEL, IVA POLÁČKOVÁ  
ŠOLCOVÁ and JIŘÍ RŮŽIČKA Narrative construction of resilience: stories of older  
Czech adults. Ageing and Society, Available on CJO 2016 doi:10.1017/  
S0144686X16000581

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# Narrative construction of resilience: stories of older Czech adults

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## **ABSTRACT**

Some older adults handle the pitfalls of ageing better than others. One explanation emerges from the concept of resilience, the ability to bounce back from the adversities of later life. In this study, we approached resilience from the narrative perspective. This study is a part of a project based on the DIPEX qualitative methodology, focused on different aspects of ageing. A combination of narrative and semi-structured interviews was conducted with 50 older adults (aged 75 and over). From the total number of interviews, a sub-group of 11 resilient participants was selected on the basis of the criteria set for resilience: (a) past exposure to adversity; and (b) positive adaptation to this adversity in terms of quality of life, happiness and activity. The results of the analysis are presented in the framework of five categories: (a) thematic lines, (b) agency and positioning; (c) values and beliefs; (d) reflections and perspectives; and (e) plot and genre. Both agency and reflections point to actively resisting old age as an important characteristic of resilient older adults in the Czech Republic. This resistance is often allied with irony, but we have also found genres of heroic coping and affirmation of lucky moments. Key thematic lines were love of life, emphasis on the importance of movement and positive social relationships; key values expressed by the participants were relational, existential and spiritual.

**KEY WORDS**—resilience, ageing, older adults, narrative, narrative gerontology, agency.

## **Introduction**

Despite the decline in physical and cognitive functioning and the numerous and often irreversible losses of life possibilities in old age, many older adults report satisfying psychological wellbeing. This phenomenon has been

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described in the literature as the wellbeing paradox (Staudinger 2000; Wiesmann and Hannich 2014), which reportedly becomes most salient at age 70 and above (Baird, Lucas and Donnellan 2010). Many adults in old age experience enjoyment, life satisfaction and overall positive emotions (Carstensen and Mikels 2005; Charles and Carstensen 2010).

The question of why some older adults report the same or a better quality of life even after adversities has been explained by various salutogenic concepts, such as a sense of coherence (Antonovsky 1993; Sagy and Antonovsky 1992), hardiness (Kobasa 1979; Kobasa, Maddi and Kahn 1982) and resilience. According to Lundman *et al.* (2010) and Dingley and Roux (2014), resilience, hardiness, a sense of coherence and also purpose in life or self-transcendence have a common denominator, and this is some form of 'inner strength'.

Of the above-mentioned salutogenic concepts, the idea of resilience has received substantial research attention in the last decade. The popularity of resilience in social gerontology is still rising, and according to some authors this concept could be a sensible alternative to the normative ideas of successful ageing (Harris 2008). Unlike the concept of successful ageing (Baltes and Carstensen 1996; Martinson and Berridge 2015; Rowe and Kahn 1997; Ryff 1989), resilience is viewed as inclusive: all older adults have the chance to achieve it (Harris 2008); it is an integral part of human experience (Wild, Wiles and Allen 2013).

Resilience can be characterised as a phenomenon of achieving good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development (Masten 2001), associated with inner strength or resourcefulness and an ability to bounce back following adversity or trauma (Bonanno 2004, 2005). While Wagnild and Young (1993) see resilience as a personality characteristic, Richardson (2002: 313) differentiates between the resilient qualities of individuals, *i.e.* resilience as a process of reaction to an adverse situation, coping with stressors, and innate resilience, which is a motivational force within an individual or group: 'the motivation and drive to grow through adversity'. To call someone resilient we thus need to make two assumptions: (a) past exposure to adversity and (b) positive adaptation to this adversity (Masten 2001; Richardson, Grime and Ong 2014).

Several qualitative studies have been aimed at gaining a better understanding of the lives, attitudes and beliefs of resilient older adults: in their qualitative study of older adults with chronic joint pain, Richardson, Grime and Ong (2014) found that a resilient person does not simply 'bounce back' following the adversity but rather finds a way to 'keep going'. In a study of 16 older palliative patients, Nakashima and Canda (2005) found that resilience and the support of internal and external resources enabled the participants to reach personal growth even while

dying. In a study of older women in Australia, Gattuso (2003) found that resilient older women used memories of loss and coping in the construction or reaffirmation of a resilient self. Considering oneself as being resilient may sustain older women through the process of becoming older. In a focus group qualitative study, Wiles *et al.* (2012) found that from the viewpoint of older adults resilience is based on internal resources, such as having the 'right' attitude, a developed ability to acknowledge happy moments in life, and having a purpose and keeping busy in life. Zimmermann and Grebe (2014) described the phenomenon of senior coolness as a resilient attitude to ageing.

### *Narrative gerontology*

In this study, we look at resilience from the viewpoint of narrative gerontology. Following the so-called narrative turn in the social sciences (Atkinson 1997; Georgakopoulou 2006), the field of gerontology has also experienced a significant increase in interest in the life-story metaphor (Kenyon 2004). This narrative perspective is based on the supposition that humans are hermeneutical beings, that they need to understand their lives (Gadamer 2004; Heidegger 1996). This understanding and interpreting, both for themselves and for others, is realised through creating stories (Bruner 1999, 2004; McAdams 1996, 1997, 2010).

Narrative gerontology is a young discipline which sets as its goal the study of how older people 'are storying their lives' (Bohlmeijer *et al.* 2011). An entire human life can be described as one great narrative and many component stories. Similarly, our thinking has a narrative structure, and narrative is the nature of human identity (Mansfield and McAdams 1996; McAdams 2010). Narrative gerontology partially follows the work of the psychologist Erik Erikson, who stressed the task of attaining integrity in the last stage of human life (Erikson 1998). From a narrative viewpoint, integrity in old age can be understood as understanding and coming to terms with one's life story. Appreciating personal narratives is a way of expressing respect towards the uniqueness of the lives of older adults (Kenyon, Randall and Bohlmeijer 2010).

The storying process is perceived as meaningful as long as there is a 'balance between narrative stability and openness' (Bohlmeijer *et al.* 2011). One of the most important terms in narrative gerontology is narrative foreclosure, which is the premature belief that one's life story has ended and no new chapters, no new meanings that would change one's own understanding of one's life, will be added (Freeman 2010). This phenomenon is also described as 'arrested ageing' (McCullough 1993). Such a narrative lacks imagination, vitality and hope (Randall and McKim 2008).

Culturally conditioned ‘master’ narratives of decline may have a powerful impact on personal narratives, and the internalisation of such narratives may reinforce foreclosure (Freeman 2010). The opposite of narrative foreclosure is narrative openness, which seems to be typical of resilient narratives (Randall *et al.* 2015).

Resilience is one of the considerably new topics in the scope of narrative gerontology. To date only a limited number of studies exist that approach the phenomenon of resilience through the lens of narrative analysis; what was specifically important was Randall’s study of irony as a form of resilient narration (Randall 2013b), followed very recently by the preliminary results of a study in which the narratives of older adults who scored high and low on a resilience scale were compared (Randall *et al.* 2015). In our present study, we would like to explore how resilience is presented in the stories of older Czech adults.

### **Methods, data collection and analysis**

The present study is part of a larger project, based on the Database of Individual Experiences (DIPEX) methodology (Ziebland and Wyke 2012), which was created in the Health Experiences Research Group at the University of Oxford ([www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org)). The project was dedicated to various aspects of ageing and financed by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic. Besides the empirical goals of the project, there is also practical application of the project results; this consists of a Web portal with published assorted short excerpts from the audio/video recordings representing the main themes that come out from the study. The Web portal will serve for education of both the lay and professional audience. Within this active ageing project 50 in-depth interviews were conducted with older adults (age 65+) that explored several important aspects of ageing. Maximum variation sampling was employed, with the aim of approximating the sample to the demographic characteristics of the older Czech population. Despite the fact that we could not aim for representative sampling, our goal was to at least simulate a typical demographic distribution. For the recruitment of our participants, we employed a combination of the snowball technique, approaching older-adult organisations and advertising through social networks.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at Palacky University, Olomouc. All the participants signed an extensive informed consent, as well as consent to use the recorded interviews. Prior to the interviews, the participants were instructed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. There was sufficient time left for answering all of the

participants' questions about the DIPEX study and the planned use of the recordings.

The interviews were conducted by the authors of the study, all psychologists trained and experienced in qualitative interviewing. The interviews lasted from one and a half to four hours and were audio or video recorded. The interviews started with a narrative part aimed at the lived experience of old age, followed by questions on health behaviour, motivation, life satisfaction, physical, intellectual and social activity, and also values and attitudes towards ageing and the meaning of life. Thematic analysis of the whole sample was performed using the QSR NVivo 10 qualitative software package. The narratives of the resilient sub-group were analysed independently by the first and second authors.

### *Sample*

After initial coding of the whole sample, a sub-group of resilient participants aged 75+ was chosen for this study (for details see [Table 1](#)). The inclusion criteria, beside age, were: (a) past exposure to adversity; and (b) positive adaptation to this adversity in terms of quality of life, happiness and activity. The selection of the resilient 75+ group was performed consensually by two independent researchers.

### *Analysis of narrative construction*

The analysis of the narrative construction of the interview transcripts of the resilient participant sub-group was done in three steps. The first step was the open coding and identification of emerging ways of shaping experience; the second step consisted of a repeated 'zig-zag analysis', characterised by moving from the identified patterns of shaping the experience to the narrative concepts and theories and then back to the data (narratives). The result of this 'zig-zag' or bottom-up/top-down analysis was the construction of an analytical scheme that allowed the data to be fully examined and linked with relevant concepts. The third step was detailed analysis of five particular analytical categories, which can be understood as the particular criteria of the narrative construction of resilience: (a) thematic lines; (b) agency and positioning; (c) values and beliefs; (d) reflections and perspectives; (e) plots and genres.

A detailed description of the analytical scheme follows.

(a) *Thematic lines*. According to McAdams (1996), a 'theme' is a recurring pattern of human wishes and intentions, *i.e.* that which a person wants and pursues in life. In our own experience we usually want something or we aim for something, *i.e.* 'we go after something' (Chrzą 2004). The category of

TABLE 1. *Description of participants in the resilient sub-group*

Name	Age	Gender	Marital status	Region
Irene	89	Female	Widow	City
Suzanne	75	Female	Widow	City
Anne	89	Female	Single	City
Georg	80	Male	Widow	Village
Carl	93	Male	Widow	Small town
Peter	84	Male	Married	Small town
Katie	84	Female	Widow	City
Hans	81	Male	Widow	Village
Valerie	80	Female	Widow	Village
Diana	79	Female	Married	Small town
Rose	93	Female	Widow	Village

thematic lines, compared to other categories, does not need so much interpretation; therefore, it is vital to start with this category.

(b) *Agency and positioning.* According to Bruner (1996), a substantial feature of a narrative construction is the fact that rather than ‘behaviour and its causes’ a story forms ‘an action and its reasons’. To have a reason usually means to have an intention or aim, to be aware of this to a certain extent and to have a certain degree of freedom; and to have a reason for one’s action also means some form of responsibility for this action. People construct certain ways of agency (their own and others), with a certain capacity to act with respect to circumstances, abilities and commitments; a certain way and degree in which the acting characters have the power to achieve what is desirable and avoid what is not desirable (Chrz 2004). A significant function of narrative construction is that it explains and justifies action and evaluates the aims to which this action leads (Chrz 2004).

Positioning (Bamberg 1997) is a concept related to agency: here we study how the narrators actively position themselves socially using the available master narratives (or dominant discourses), or alternatively construe their own ‘counter-positions in a more agentive bottom-up fashion’ (Bamberg 2005: 588).

(c) *Plots and genres.* With its continuity, directing and shaping our experience has the character of plot. Through plot, experience acquires a time-based, a causal and a purposeful structure. Alongside this diachronic, time-based or linear dimension, however, a narrative construction also has a synchronous, quasi-spatial or figurative dimension. Biographical stories also belong to the rank of shapes, analogies and parallels. This means that the threads which give meaning to a life are created by permutations and the development of certain patterns and invariants (Chrz 2006).

Apart from the elementary figures, such as characteristic metaphors, and apart from the whole of the plot, it is also possible to analyse the genre of autobiographical narratives. In analysing the genre it is possible to make use of the typology of plots which was formulated by Frye (2000) for literary theory and which was used in the field of narrative psychology especially by Murray (1989). According to this approach, several basic perspectives on shaping a life exist which correspond to the classical genres: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony. The point of applying this typology does not consist of 'pigeon-holing', but of using the logic of these genres based on the combination of two dimensions: success and control.

Genre is a synthesising category. Thematic lines, values and beliefs, and also the level of agency, positioning and reflections, naturally manifest themselves within genre.

(d) *Values and beliefs.* If we follow the ways in which life is shaped in the interviews, then we can see that the narratives of the respondents include various interpretations of 'what goes on in life', *i.e.* answers to questions such as 'what is good?', 'what is worth striving for?' or 'what is the right action?' In this way, a certain system of values and beliefs is represented in the narrative itself (Bruner 1986; Gergen 1997; McAdams 1996). It is an aspect of value and a normative aspect, but it also provides a certain insight into the way 'things work in life (in the world)'. This aspect of shaping a life tends to be called 'philosophy of life', 'ideology', 'worldview', 'credo' or possibly also 'metanarrative' (Chrz 2004).

Bruner (1996) states that the key moment of narrative construction is the disruption of what is usual, proper or expected, for which he uses the term 'trouble'. The value and belief systems therefore 'make sense' mainly in the way in which they correspond to the challenges posed by 'troubles', *i.e.* by life difficulties, crises or cases of disruptions of the order.

(e) *Reflections and perspectives.* Experience depicted in autobiographical narratives takes place – following further the concepts of Bruner (1996) – in two 'landscapes': in the 'landscape of action' and the 'landscape of consciousness'. In the 'landscape of action', the narration is a sequence of events or actions represented 'so to speak from the outside' (often from the perspective of an omniscient and omnipresent observer). In this landscape, things only happen and it is not important how they are perceived. On the other hand, in the 'landscape of consciousness' it is important how the reality is perceived or experienced and by whom. This 'landscape' includes everything that the acting characters know, wish, feel, intend and strive for, as well as what they do not know, do not think or do not feel. According to Bruner, in the development of an individual – similarly as in the history of literature – a tendency going in the direction of increasing the use of the 'landscape of consciousness' exists. This

means that stories become ‘more epistemic’; they include more reflection, perspective, subjectivity and ‘mental events’ (Chrz 2004).

Experience is, in a narrative construction, shaped through the ‘filter of consciousness’ and this ‘filter’ creates a certain perspective. The category of perspective means the point of view – ‘from where’ the experience is shaped in a specific case. Thus, experience can be shaped from many perspectives: from one’s own subjective perspective, from the perspective of others, from a general perspective or in the way of an indifferent ‘news report’ (Adler 2004)

Reflexivity means that we actively and consciously participate in the creation of the ‘landscape of consciousness’. This type of reflexivity can be understood as ‘textual self-consciousness’ (Hutcheon 2005). As such, reflexivity is the prerequisite for narrative openness and also an ironic stance.

All the selected categories of analysis are mutually organically linked and jointly form the narrative structure. The proposed structure should not be perceived as something definitive; this is an expression of a certain ‘stop’ on the ‘path’ of the narrative approach which is, by its very nature, ‘on the road’ (Chrz and Čermák 2005). A summary of the categories of narrative analysis is shown in Table 2.

In the course of the analysis, the ‘thematic lines’ category was the entry category, which identified basic patterns of wishes and intentions. Then the analysis proceeded within the ‘agency and positioning’, ‘values and beliefs’ and ‘reflections and perspectives’ categories, which differentiated and enhanced the analysis of content with the analysis of form. The last category to be analysed was ‘plots and genres’, which is a synthesising category; all the other narrative categories naturally manifest themselves within genre.

## Results

One of the conditions required for the consideration of resilience is the existence of adversity, of certain risks, negative, stressful or traumatic situations in life that a person must come to terms with (Masten 2001; Wild *et al.* 2013). Obviously, the kind of negative situations that have influenced a person and to what extent they have done so is highly individual. In our opinion, simply to live to such an advanced age as our participants is itself a personally demanding achievement and thus it is possible to speak about resilience in all people who (for themselves) prosper satisfactorily in old age. But to the extent that we look at individual losses and stressful situations in our sample, these are primarily the death of a lifelong partner (all the participants had experienced this, aside from Peter and

TABLE 2. *Categories of narrative analysis*

Category of narrative analysis	Definition of category	Examples
Thematic lines	Recurring pattern of wishes and intentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interest in life</li> <li>• Ability to take pleasure from life</li> <li>• Enjoyment of small pleasures</li> <li>• Like to learn new things</li> <li>• Like contact with young people</li> <li>• Emphasis on importance of movement</li> <li>• Love of life</li> <li>• Good social relations</li> </ul>
Agency	Capacity to act with respect to circumstances, abilities and commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talking about resistance towards old age</li> <li>• Emphasising responsibility for active care for one's health</li> </ul>
Positioning	Construction of positions in which we accept certain responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't want to be like those who are 'always complaining' or 'only reminiscing'</li> <li>• It is important always to have something to work on</li> </ul>
Plots	Continuity, directing and shaping of experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More or less coherent storytelling</li> </ul>
Genres	Typical shared configuration, which construes human experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heroic coping</li> <li>• Affirmation of lucky moments</li> <li>• Ironic stance</li> </ul>
Values and beliefs	Answers to the challenges of 'trouble' such as specific systems of values and beliefs: 'philosophy of life', 'ideology', 'worldview', 'credo' or also 'metanarrative'. Explicit or implicit expression of 'what is good?', 'what is worth striving for?' or 'what is the right action?'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational values: love, friendship, tolerance</li> <li>• Existential values: acceptance of natural running of life, reconciliation</li> <li>• Spiritual beliefs: Nature, God</li> </ul>
Reflections and perspectives	All that the acting characters know, wish, feel, intend and strive for, 'filter of consciousness', 'textual self-consciousness'	<p>Appeal to the self:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not to acknowledge old age</li> <li>• be able to laugh at oneself</li> <li>• don't take things too seriously</li> </ul>

Diana, who are a married couple), further serious health troubles (Diane had had a stroke and a brain tumour; Katie had a breast tumour; Hans experienced a heart attack; Suzanne was bed-ridden) and Carl had experienced a stay in several concentration camps, where he spent four years of his life.

When surveying the stories of resilient individuals, we use the five categories of the narrative construction of resilience that have already been described.

### *Thematic lines*

Some themes of our respondents ‘carry’ resilience, or represent it, according to which we can assess the affected person as resilient: a generally positive, or, better said, constructive position towards life, the ability to take pleasure from life, is found; often, they like to learn new things (*e.g.* some of them proudly enjoy working with the internet); and an overall love of life is expressed. Resilient older adults often speak about favouring movement in any form, be it walks in the countryside, exercise or country dance. Even the immobile Suzanne (75) speaks about how she exercises her body daily in the hope that one day she will stand on her own feet again. Perhaps not completely coincidentally, all the respondents in our resilient sample describe their satisfactory social relations, even though the majority have already had to come to terms with the death of a life partner. They value their family and friends highly, and similarly they appreciate contact with young people, which is enriching and ‘recharges’ them. From the thematic lines narrative, openness is assessed as the opposite of narrative foreclosure (Bohlmeijer *et al.* 2011; Freeman 2010; Randall and McKim 2008).

Irene (89) is a former university lecturer in cultural studies, still actively publishing professional texts and participating in meetings of her favourite bonsai club. She feels the death of her husband as the greatest loss in her life. She lives in a house with the family of her daughter, in an independent housing unit. Irene feels grateful for her ‘good’ life:

I enjoyed myself, I was lucky that I enjoyed this and that, travelled enough and we did sports, went to the mountains, in that my husband was very energetic, so we enjoyed ourselves.

She values contact with young people, which is like medicine for her:

This is not always as it appears at first glance. So, what is most important, and young people perhaps cannot understand this well, is that an older person needs to talk, that to read is beautiful, to listen to radio and television programmes, but that a person needs to talk, to have live contact with someone who is alongside, but obviously not to babble (laughs) about where she was, why she was there, but these common questions; I think that for older people contact with young people is very important, even if it doesn’t seem so; you wonder what you will talk about with your grandma, or maybe that it could bother the older person, but that’s never the case. I’m thinking of just a few sentences when young people speak with an old person; it is like medicine.

Anne (89) is a former social worker. Even though she is childless and lives alone, she has maintained a rich network of social relations with colleagues from her former workplace, where she sometimes still helps out. She takes a vivid interest in the people and the events around her:

When I watch Zoom [a documentary channel]. Obviously, I want to know what is happening in the world.

Georg (80) is a widower living in a small hamlet in the southern part of the Czech Republic in a house which he built himself. Aside from the house, he takes care of rabbits and hens every day; he loves movement and mainly walks in the forest:

work and working out helped me rather a lot, like when I overcame several troubles ... it's a fact that I did and I still do like taking walks in the forest; for me the forest is a temple of nature, where I draw all the strength that is necessary for a person to live more actively.

### *Agency and positioning*

Agency in our sample is most distinctively manifested in the form of a kind of resistance towards age and ageing. The set of respondents emphasises that for them it is important not to submit to old age: this means to withstand, to overcome difficulties to stand one's ground – from a state of spiritual youth, joy in everyday things, composure and the ability to rise above problems associated with the state of old age. Old age means tedium, passivity, disappointment, self-pity and the acceptance of a typical geriatric role, which is manifested, according to our participants, in constant complaining and expecting the worst. In some participants agency also manifests itself in talking about active care for one's health, in particular an attempt to exercise regularly.

Irene (89) says that it is necessary to accept ageing but not submit to it: not to let age destroy or overwhelm you. She says that she does not want to become a crabby person who only complains about everything; she does not want to be crushed by old age:

Well, don't talk constantly and don't complain; I'm already old now and I simply cannot do this or that. Better to see the positive side, that I can still walk at all. Don't be overwhelmed when one day things don't go, they go awry, just try it the next day or after a bit and don't be discouraged, don't give up ... don't let ageing overcome you, or if you have some health problem, similarly, don't give in...

Suzanne (75) is the youngest of our sample; after an accident she has now been bed-ridden for two years. Each day she exercises on the advice of rehabilitation nurses in the hope that one day she will walk again. Her health problems have persisted since childhood, when she was in a

wheelchair for several years. Despite these complications, she maintains a very rich social life, and many friends come to visit her. Her state is slowly improving:

grit your teeth, work hard, train, I exercise so that I can finally stand on my own two feet and can at least shamle those two steps to the record player and perhaps cook a little something, sit down to it, in order to get rid of all of these cronos around me ... pains have been with me my whole life, yes, but in the meantime they are not such that they can't be dealt with, so to say: 'well, then, this would be deliverance', not this, and a few times now I've looked into the grave from the shovel, even in early childhood and later, I simply battle in this life and every other day is fine, even though it's problematic.

When on a tram, Anne (89) automatically jumps up to free a space when someone gets on with a walking stick. She emphasises that it is not necessary to submit to ageing, not to complain, to see the better side of things:

I can cry for ever – oh, I can't climb on to these trams, what if a tram comes by and someone helps me, and I think, to speak is silly, unproductive. When I see that people are willing for me, when I climb on to the tram and they let me have their seats for me and not to cry over the fact that I can't sit down.

Peter (84) lives with his wife in a small town, where he established and leads a church choir. In addition to this, he is a lifelong member of the Sokol (a Czech society for organised exercise) and he attends a country dance group with his wife:

when things seemed bad with our choir, some four or five years ago, I founded in Poděbrady, in order to have some activities, [another] choir, Senior-Cantilena, formed entirely of pensioners. And we have had entirely respectable results.

Peter actively takes responsibility for his health – since his youth he has taken daily exercise, which he modifies as needed. He says that old age is 'the best period of his life':

And ... no science, no miracle, the essence of this result is in the fact that for decades now I have exercised daily. I exercise for one hour each morning. Obviously, in the course of my life I've altered my exercise according to any health problems that I have.

Diane (79) is Peter's wife. In her fifties she experienced a stroke and a spinal operation and as this affected her health, whether she would even be able to walk depended only on how she alone prepared her active rehabilitation. Today she leads a country dance group, exercises, swims and loves hiking:

after the spinal operation, when I had a difficult operation, three discs and a pseudocyst. So I was actually paralysed before the operation and the doctors told me: 'If you don't exercise, after the operation you'll simply have great problems and you'll end up on crutches or in a wheelchair.' So for two full years after the operation I did all the exercises they recommended three times daily. And when, several times afterwards, I caught myself looking up at the ceiling and not doing anything, then I

spoke this [the warning of the doctors] into a recorder and actually played it for myself (laughter), so that I would exercise. Well, after those two years I got back into my original condition again and since that period I have always exercised. Several times a week.

Also associated with agency is the concept of positioning (Bamberg 1997). In our interviews it is significant how the participants delimit themselves or project or position themselves with regard to those who they will not come in contact with or identify with. Those they take the strongest position against are ‘pensioners who are only reminiscing’ or are ‘always complaining about something’.

Anne (89) prefers contact with young people, because her peers, in her opinion, only reminisce:

I live near a senior home where pensioners meet, but I don’t want this, as I prefer to be among people who are still active, and don’t only reminisce about what they’ve already experienced.

Katie (84) is still teaching nursing part-time at college. She lives alone in town and not long ago began to write another textbook. In order to maintain knowledge of her profession, she works daily on the internet and also often exercises her lower limbs, which are in chronic pain. Katie also prefers the companionship of younger people who do not complain:

I can’t stand those class reunions with former classmates, because no one there is still employed. And to just listen – this hurts me, this pains me, these sorts of complaints and I don’t enjoy it.

Diane (79) says that she cannot stand people who spread gossip and envy; she has completely eliminated such people from her life:

It is important that a person is able to surround himself with people of a similar type; this is terribly important. So that jealousies and gossip are eliminated; this really poisons life. And there is enough of this, really enough. Therefore, those who don’t have these activities in old age amuse themselves in this way. So, simply eliminate such people. I don’t have contact with them at all.

Agency is also manifested in talking about the need to do some activity, to be active, to have something to work on.

Carl (93) was deported to the Terezín concentration camp at the age of 21, then transported to Auschwitz and later to other camps in Germany. Overall, he spent four years in concentration camps and lost nearly his entire family. After an accident he has not seen through one eye for ten years now. He emphasises the need to remain active in old age:

Once a person remains only lying on a couch or in bed, then that’s the end. It’s necessary to do something; it doesn’t have to be physical work. He can do some research, he can study at the University of the Third Age, something.

Valérie (8o) lives with one of her sons in a house in a small hamlet. She goes daily to help her daughter at the family pension; she does the laundry, watches her grandchildren, works in the garden, cooks and chops wood. She does not think about old age, because it does not even occur to her:

You know, I don't think about old age at all. I think about what I can do in the morning and when the telephone rings, my daughter is calling to ask whether I could come and help. And when I have burned all the wood, then I slowly get up and slowly bring more. I don't even finish my coffee because I'm always thinking about what I have to do.

### *Plots and genres*

Resilient stories are characterised by more coherent plots. Persons who, despite different types of adversity, experience their own life as satisfactory show a greater ability to instil their lives with coherence, direction and sense: the stories told in the resilient group of participants contain a higher number of narrative–causal connections. These connections are of two types: action causes another action, or action enables another action. Another characteristic of these causal connections is that they are considerably directed to the final goal of the storytelling. In the non-resilient group there was observed a distinctively smaller presence of these goal-oriented narrative–causal connections; in addition, we found incoherence more often: cuts, confused or disjointed storytelling.

Alongside these coherent plots, the stories of resilient persons contain figures and configurations which are characteristic primarily of these three genres: (a) *heroic coping* (romance in Frye's and Murray's typologies: reaching of the desirable, in the hands of the actor), (b) *affirmation of lucky moments* (comedy in Frye's and Murray's typologies: reaching the desirable is in the hands of fate), (c) *ironic stance* (irony in Frye's and Murray's typology: this genre is also significant through the storyteller arranging the failure in his/her own hands). On the other hand, in biographical stories with less resilient characteristics, a narrative of decline, for which figures of a fall, catastrophes, ruination, enchainment or insurmountable obstacles are characteristic, is found significantly more often (tragedy in Frye's and Murray's typologies: among other things this genre is characterised by failure in the hands of fate).

The following snippets from Irene (8g) are examples of the genre *heroic coping*:

not to complain for ever ... to overcome certain health troubles ... don't be overwhelmed when one day things don't go, they go awry, just try it the next day or after a bit and don't be discouraged, don't give up...

In this genre resilience is constructed by a type of narration for which active and involved coping and the overcoming of trouble are characteristic. In contrast to this type of shaping the experience, in the statements of resilient persons it is possible to find effective narratives which are characterised by a smaller emphasis on 'one's own control'. In these narratives, which we called *affirmation of lucky moments* for work purposes, life passes satisfactorily as a result of the influence of 'lucky fate', *i.e.* lucky circumstances and moments. An example is the story of the participant Peter (89), for whom a repeating pattern of shaping experience in which events, despite often great and formidable complications, come out happily in the end, is characteristic. Alongside such dramatised occurrences (the citation of which exceeds the possibilities of this text), there are praiseworthy moments and circumstances of fortune on one's way of life repeatedly found in this story, as is shown by the following passage:

So I've had new lenses for three years now ... I read without spectacles, yes, and this is fantastic. I can't praise them enough ... Satisfaction with this life follows from the fact that I have a good relationship with my wife.

While in the genre of heroic coping it is possible to follow a certain accent on individual independence, for the genre *affirmation of lucky moments* a form of agency accenting relationships or fellowship is characteristic, which is in line with Frye's (2000) concept of the genre.

A third type of narrative configuration identified in the sample of resilient persons is an *ironic stance*. The following passages from the interviews with Suzanne (75) are examples of this genre:

I looked into the mirror and I said: Yuck, grandma, who are you? ... it is important to know how to make fun of yourself ... a person cannot take this life so seriously; outside it is dramatic, tragic and serious enough as it is ... Life is beautiful, but otherwise it's not worth shit.

The ironic genre is not so dependent on the possibilities of agency in the sense of having control over events. Instead, it is about a kind of 'rhetorical agency' (Chrz and Čermák 2005); and it is not so dependent on possible relations and fellowship. In the sense of Frankl's (1988) concept of values (creative, experiential and attitudinal), this genre is the least conditioned by 'fateful' events which old age carried within itself. This genre takes decline into its own hands. One of its main figures is belittling and self-belittling. Its cynicism and black humour are, however, often loving; it indicates a wise scepticism and an openness to the multivalued and paradoxical nature of reality. In line with Randall (2013b), an ironic stance can be considered as a complex and ripe genre of the narrative construction of resilience.

### *Values and beliefs*

The values and beliefs in the stories of our participants emerge as explicit proclamations, 'life truths' or 'credos', and also implicitly, as having a strong impact on the interpretation of one's own actions. Three main sub-categories of values and beliefs were identified: relational – tolerance, friendship, love; existential – to accept the natural running of life, to be reconciled; and spiritual – based on faith.

Irene (8g) has her own personal philosophy built on conciliation with the natural joy of being, with a life which also brings problems:

no day gets repeated; to live completely blissfully a person wouldn't even know he's living blissfully.

we are subject to the order of nature and we must reconcile ourselves to this; we must be happy that we were born at all, which is a huge gift, that which we were actually given and we must appreciate this.

Suzanne (75) sees this in a similar way; she says, somewhat ironically, that a person mainly should not fear making mistakes:

it's a fact that a person often falls on his face; this is a fact, but you again make your own mistakes and not the mistakes of others.

For Irene (8g), tolerance towards other people is important; she describes how mutual visits with the family of her daughter, who lives in the other part of the house, proceed:

we have such rules that when we go, I go to them, I always knock; when they come here, they knock, but the main rule is so that we don't bother one another, so that we preserve our privacy.

Carl (93) considers lecturing about the Holocaust as his duty; it is important that people do not forget it:

So I think that lecturing about the Holocaust in schools, that this is my moral duty. Therefore, the Holocaust has obviously become a part of history; it's now a part of history. But I still do this.

They always put into these books that this can never happen again, that it can never be forgotten. But I say that I'm not such an optimist that it will never be forgotten, but that this doesn't happen too soon.

The most important value for him remains friendship and love between people:

Simply put, friendship between people, friendship is the foundation of everything, tolerance, self-sacrifice, of every type of love.

Spiritual values manifest themselves in some narratives. Spirituality is marked as a source of inner strength and balance, no matter whether it is

institutional religiousness or, much more commonly in the highly secularised Czech Republic, unorganised spirituality, which is often expressed as a faith in ‘something that transcends us’ (Říčan and Jánošová 2010).

Anne has returned to practising the Catholic faith after many years:

Again, like when I was young, I became a practising Catholic and I think this helps me a lot. As I go to the church, I like the worship service, the Latin worship service, as it reminds me of my youth. I don’t know who, well, I think that someone up there is directing it and protects me, so I don’t fall into despair.

On the other hand, Hans (81) believes in the power of nature:

the forest is my cathedral, where I can draw all the strength.

Beside the above-mentioned sub-categories of values and beliefs, it is also possible to identify more complex systems of values and beliefs in the stories of some participants. For example, in the storytelling of Irene, a certain type of ‘liberal’ philosophy was repeatedly expressed clearly and explicitly: people are responsible for their lives, they should be active, independent and respectful of the privacy of others:

the main rule is not to bother each other or to keep privacy ... try to be active as much as possible, and some people are really brave as I can see; blind men or people in wheelchairs climb on big mountains, we should follow these examples.

### *Reflections and perspectives*

While in old age the ‘landscape of action’ becomes more or less impoverished, this does not have to be the case in the ‘landscape of consciousness’, which, by contrast, can be somehow enriched. Especially in this regard, the resilient participants differ, as their ‘landscape of consciousness’ (*i.e.* their world of intentional states consisting of wishes, convictions and intentions) is complex in a distinctive way. These people realise the inner strength of their attitude and their perspective and participate actively in the construction of this perspective. They can be characterised by higher levels of mentalisation and higher emotional and cognitive complexity (Chrz and Čermák 2015).

Reflexivity in our sample is often found as an appeal to the self – to refuse to acknowledge old age. For example, Suzanne (75) says that so long as she does not admit to old age, old age does not exist for her. For a long time she did not even notice that she is old, because there are young people around her and she feels like one of them:

I don’t admit it, when you don’t think and don’t suggest that you are old, then you simply don’t acknowledge it, life goes on, so always try, always try like I used to, right, and that I’m old. And who is this crone (laughter)? I don’t know her.

Anne (93) feels something very similar:

I simply don't say to myself that I'm old. Yes, as it is, as this is, I simply don't admit it.

Hans (81) is an active hunter and each day goes several kilometres into the forest. He lives in a house with his daughter's family. He associates the feeling of old age, for example, with medical care; therefore, he prefers to avoid doctors and says that he does not intend to feel old:

I say that I don't let myself feel old. I try a little to avoid it, even though, unfortunately, it's already afflicted me, but otherwise I said that it's necessary to be only in social contact with a doctor and if I can avoid the intensive care of doctors, then I can even perhaps survive 20 years more. If I begin to be in need of care, in terms of this medical society and science in the sense of these medicines or these interventions, then a person begins to feel that he really is already written off and old.

Humour, which often has an ironic nature, plays an important role in reflection and the adoption of one's own stance: Suzanne (75), who is bedridden, is, paradoxically, the wittiest of the entire group. It is evident that her ironic outlook helps her manage a difficult situation and preserve a distance from it:

I'm afraid of it [death], like anything unknown, if I die secondly, thirdly, then I'll know what it's all about and then perhaps I will no longer be afraid.

Peter (84) concisely concludes:

To enquire in everything, even at times when a situation is unpleasant, provided it's a little bit possible, or, when a person has the idea of simply having fun with it, right? To make fun from this, even though this may be a necessary and also more serious matter, right? Cheerfulness is half of being healthy.

In this passage we can see the creation of a certain specific perspective. This perspective is specific in terms of its context – Peter is talking about the need for and beneficial effects of humour, but this perspective is also specific in terms of its form, as it is about the creation of a generalising viewpoint, with a characteristic phrasing: 'one has to... [do this or that]. In this context, Bamberg (1997) writes about a third-person perspective. Peter is reflecting on himself using this perspective and thus creating a viewpoint of distance from his own life.

Narrative reflexivity is also applied in the above-mentioned genre of an ironic stance; this can be seen in the cited excerpt of Suzanne and her self-bellitting. Suzanne knows very well how important it is to be able to make fun of herself, and she is aware of the strength of her inner attitude. From the point of view of the construction of resilience, it is an effective strategy, which takes the decline in old age into one's own hands. Irony thus becomes an irreplaceable tool for the creation of narrative reflexivity

(Randall 2013*b*). The storyteller, Suzanne, is here reflecting on her own ironic self-belittling; she is aware of its importance and actively and knowingly participates in the creation of this perspective.

## Discussion and conclusion

The narrative construction of resilience in our sample is characterised in five aspects, namely: (a) thematic lines; (b) agency and positioning; (c) plots and genre; (d) values and beliefs; and (e) reflections and perspectives. These aspects can be understood as certain criteria of narratively constructed resilience. Obviously, our listing of the aspects of narrative construction with regard to its complexity cannot be final; it is a contribution to the running discussion about the narrative nature of resilience, which is still in its beginnings (Randall 2013*a*, 2013*b*; Randall *et al.* 2015).

Love of life, the enjoyment of small pleasures, an emphasis on the importance of movement and a preference for contact with young people were all shown to be the most significant thematic lines in comparison with the remainder of the sample (the non-resilient older adults). Similarly, in a recent study which provided comparisons of resilient and non-resilient older adults (Randall *et al.* 2015), it was shown that participants who scored highly on the resilience scale were rich in hobbies and interests and had a strong sense of narrative agency and narrative openness. Here we see a significant similarity.

Although the participants in this study witnessed rather big social, cultural and political changes following the so-called Velvet Revolution in 1989 and the subsequent transformational process, we need to take into consideration that most of their adult lives were spent during the period of communist totalitarianism. So, although the society has opened in many ways, this was not the case for the majority of the older adults, which was evident in the narratives of the non-resilient majority of our sample. This idea was supported recently by the findings of a multi-national study in which data on the values of older adults were analysed in four cultural samples: Cameroonian, Czech, German and Hong Kong Chinese (Hofer *et al.* 2014). One of the surprising results was that the Czech sample showed the lowest scores of openness to change (value types of self-direction and stimulation, choosing one's own goals). We may only speculate here that it could have been a consequence of the generally repressed openness during the communist regime that lasted for more than 40 years.

Agency manifests itself primarily as a kind of resistance towards old age and the process of ageing: 'don't let old age overwhelm you'; look at the positive side, do not give up. Zimmermann and Grebe (2014), whose

term ‘senior coolness’ refers to a certain form of resistance on the part of older adults towards stereotyped perceptions of old age and ageing, deal with similar resistance in a sample of older German adults.

In her study of the resilience of young women growing up in social housing, Bottrell (2007) notes that resilience can consist specifically of active resistance towards the beliefs and prejudices of the majority. In her opinion, resilience is a process which is dependent on cultural and social circumstances (Bottrell 2007). Our participants are also showing resistance, specifically against falling into a commonly accepted (and expected) picture of their age. They did not want to submit to ageing, they did not even want to meet their peers, and they did not want to think about old age. Here we can speculate about a certain normative pressure from society and, in this case, we can consider resilience as a form of resistance.

There are two possible explanations of why we found so much resistance: (a) it is a healthy resilient tendency of how to position oneself, which fights the dominant stereotype of the narrative of decline and ageism; and (b) perhaps it could also be, in some cases, a fulfilment of this stereotype. The study of Vidovicova (2008) demonstrated the presence of ageism, negative attitudes and prejudices against older adults in the Czech Republic. However, we prefer the first explanation on the basis of a holistic view of the stories of this resilient sub-group of participants.

Agency is also shown by actively adopting responsibility for one’s own health, primarily in the form of physical activity. Activity is also one of the protective factors that often occurs in studies of resilience in old age (Hicks and Conner 2014).

In analysing agency and other aspects of the narrative construction of resilience, it is important to pay attention to genre. Apart from the prevailing genre of *heroic coping*, it is also necessary to pay attention to the other genres of resilience in which a different type of agency is employed, whether it is *affirmation of lucky moments* or an *ironic stance*. From the point of view of genre as a complex way of shaping experience, it is also possible to see a connection with a system of values and beliefs. A narrative constructs partly explicit but largely implicit values and beliefs which are comprehensible only in the context of a particular genre. For example, the genre of *heroic coping* is associated with a value and belief system which can be called ‘liberal’. This means that the principal figures of overcoming and coping exist in the context of a belief in the value of independence, individual activity or respecting privacy; this can be seen, for example, in the case of Irene (89).

Focusing on the genre of the narrative construction of resilience also allows us to understand the aspect of reflection and point of view. Reflectivity is significantly employed, particularly in the genre of an ironic stance, which corresponds to Randall’s conception (2013b). To be

narratively reflective also means that we are aware of the 'inner strength' of our attitude and point of view and that we participate actively and reflectively in the construction of this point of view. In such a case, the narrative construction of resilience is an expression of re-authoring (Epston, White and Murray 1992).

The more coherent plots of the resilient sub-group in our study confirm previous findings on the link between the coherence of a life story and self-reported psychological wellbeing (Baerger and McAdams 1999). Similarly, in a study of psychotherapy narratives, Adler, Wagner and McAdams (2007) found that former clients at higher stages of ego development told more coherent stories about their therapy.

Although we perceive the small number of respondents as a possible limitation of our study, there was plenty of data confirming the usefulness of our narrative construction scheme. The study is further limited by the specific selected aspects of narrative construction; we do not consider their number to be definitive. The study design was also determined by the fact that it is part of the DIPEX project, which means that the interviews were not strictly narrative; they were a combination of narratives and semi-structured techniques, although the interviews always started with the narrative part and it formed the biggest part of the interview. The length of the narrative part differed as some participants needed more guidance; in those cases an interview schedule was applied. The selected methodology did not enable the participants to tell the 'big story' of their entire life, but focused more on old age, so in many participants (if they did not actively get to this themselves) it was not possible to track associations with childhood, their upbringing and the like.

Bruner (1996) assumes that narration constructs the reasons and justifications concerning the responsibility and actions of the agents with regard to the 'trouble'. Looking at the 'trouble' in resilient stories, it is usually adversity, which is also a substance to resilience. Thus, we can say that resilience always has a narrative structure. In order to assess resilience, we can use the five aspects presented above as a certain scheme. The advantage of this scheme is that narrative construction is differentiated into various easily identifiable levels which are, at the same time, organically linked. The usefulness of this emerging scheme would be worth confirming in further studies.

Our study is unique, not only in terms of the method of the analysis of narrative construction, but it is also, as far as we know at present, the only narrative study of resilience from the countries of the former 'Eastern Bloc' or Central and Eastern Europe. The historical and cultural associations here are significantly different from, for example, those of North America, from where the majority of similar studies originate. An intercultural comparison of narrative constructions is one of the challenges for future research.

## Acknowledgements

This paper was supported by the TA CR project DIPEX Methodology in Active Ageing (TD020339), GA CR project 14-35577S and by grant project RVO: 68081740, as part of Strategy AV21. Financial sponsors played no role in the design, execution, analysis and interpretation of data. We hereby confirm that the ethical guidelines including the adherence to the legal requirements of the Czech Republic have been met. The Ethics Committee at Palacky University, Olomouc approved the study on 31 January 2014. All the authors contributed to the preparation of the manuscript and approved the final version of the text; the first, second, third and fourth authors contributed to the data collection and analysis; the fifth author provided supervision and contributed to the interpretation of the analysis. The authors certify that there is no financial or other relationship that might be perceived as leading to a conflict of interest (*i.e.* affecting the authors' objectivity).

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Accepted 21 April 2016

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