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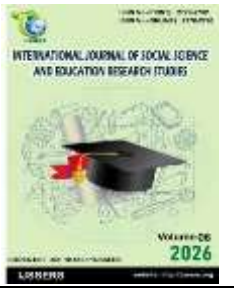

"Authorship of One's Life": A Narrative-Oriented, AI-Assisted Intervention for Self-Realization in Crisis-Affected Ukrainian Adults Aged 35–55

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ABSTRACT

Self-realization in mid-adulthood is increasingly disrupted by prolonged societal crises, yet structured, evidence-grounded intervention programs that target the narrative and motivational dimensions of this process remain scarce. This study reports the development and preliminary efficacy testing of "Authorship of One's Life," an eight-week, narrative-oriented psychological program that integrates structured group and individual sessions, an artificial-intelligence conversational assistant, and a reflective podcast component for Ukrainian adults aged 35 to 55. A quasi-experimental pre–post design (with sequential participant stratification) with a three-month follow-up was employed, involving 52 participants assigned to an experimental condition ($n = 26$, comprising Reactive and Fragmented narrative profiles) or a control condition ($n = 26$, Adaptive profile). The program was structured around four progressive narrative therapy stages – trust building, problem externalization, re-authoring, and re-membering – drawing on Innovative Moments theory to scaffold narrative transformation across sessions. Outcomes were assessed using five validated psychometric instruments measuring meaning in life, basic psychological needs satisfaction, personal growth initiative, self-reflection, and an original scale of realizational flexibility, administered at four time points. Significant pre–post gains were observed in the experimental group across all primary outcomes, with effect sizes ranging from moderate to large (Cohen $d = 0.64 - 0.83$), and gains were maintained at three-month follow-up. Analysis of session transcripts demonstrated a theoretically predicted shift from early-stage to advanced narrative transformation markers. The program demonstrates preliminary efficacy as a scalable, structured intervention for crisis-affected adults.

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KEYWORDS:

meaning-making, narrative transformation, realizational flexibility, identity reconstruction

I. INTRODUCTION

Self-realization in mid-adulthood – the active, agentic process by which individuals construct a meaningful, coherent life trajectory – is one of the most psychologically demanding developmental tasks across the lifespan (McAdams, 2013). For adults aged 35 to 55, this process involves integrating past experiences into a purposeful personal narrative, maintaining a stable sense of identity, and sustaining autonomous motivation toward personally valued goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hermans, 2001). Under conditions of prolonged societal crisis – including armed conflict, forced displacement, and collective trauma – these processes are profoundly disrupted. Identity continuity is threatened, narrative coherence breaks down, and the capacity for meaning-making is compromised at precisely the life stage when individuals are most likely to be primary caregivers, occupational contributors, and community anchors (Breakwell, 2010; Frankl, 2006). In Ukraine, where active armed conflict has persisted since 2022, the psychological consequences for the adult population are extensive and well-documented, yet structured, theoretically grounded interventions specifically targeting the realizational dimension of crisis-related distress remain scarce.

Contemporary psychological theory converges on a view of self-realization as a dynamic narrative process rather than a fixed trait or endpoint. McAdams (2013) argues that personal identity is fundamentally constituted through the construction and revision of a life story – an internalized, evolving narrative that integrates past, present, and anticipated future selves. Bruner (1991) demonstrates that narrative cognition is

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the primary mode through which human beings organize experience and assign meaning to events. Hermans (2001) extends this framework through the dialogical self-model, proposing that identity is maintained through an internal plurality of voices or positions that must be coordinated and authored. Breakwell's (2010) identity process theory further specifies how continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem, and efficacy operate as core identity motives that become particularly vulnerable under threat.

Within this theoretical landscape, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) contributes the motivational dimension: autonomous self-regulation, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs whose satisfaction is prerequisite for genuine self-realization rather than merely adaptive compliance. Research consistently shows that crisis conditions suppress need satisfaction, producing what Seligman et al. (2005) describe as a collapse of the positive psychological architecture that supports flourishing. For mid-life adults specifically, Robitschek et al. (2012) document that personal growth initiative – the active, intentional engagement with personal development – is a reliable predictor of well-being and represents a psychologically tractable intervention target.

Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007) provides a structured clinical approach to restoring narrative agency. Its core technique – externalizing the problem and identifying Innovative Moments – allows individuals to move from problem-saturated self-stories toward alternative, empowering narratives. Gonçalves et al. (2011, 2012) operationalize this process through the Innovative Moments Coding System, distinguishing six types across two levels: Level 1 markers create distance from the problem narrative, while Level 2 markers signal deeper narrative transformation and self-reconstruction. The progression from Level 1 to Level 2 is documented as a robust predictor of positive therapeutic outcomes (Montesano et al., 2017). Despite the well-established efficacy of narrative therapy in clinical populations (Gonçalves & Peri, 2024), its systematic application in structured, scalable, non-clinical programs for crisis-affected adults has received limited empirical attention.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence-assisted psychological support offer new possibilities for extending narrative interventions beyond the therapy room. Feng et al. (2025) demonstrate that large language model agents structured around Innovative Moment-informed therapeutic stages can reliably elicit Level 2 markers, nearly doubling their salience compared to unstructured conversational agents. This finding establishes a proof of concept for technology-augmented narrative intervention. However, translation of this approach into real-world, human-led programs – where artificial intelligence serves as a between-session scaffold rather than a substitute therapist – has not yet been systematically examined.

The present study is motivated by three converging gaps in the literature. First, there is an absence of theoretically integrated intervention programs that address self-realization specifically in crisis-affected mid-life adults as a distinct developmental and clinical population. Second, the Innovative Moments framework, despite its strong empirical base in therapy research, has not been applied as a guiding structural principle for psychoeducational group programs. Third, the potential for artificial intelligence conversational tools to augment human-led narrative intervention remains untested in applied settings. Taken together, these gaps justify the development and evaluation of a new, integrative program that addresses realizational disruption through structured narrative work, supported by an artificial intelligence assistant and a reflective media component.

The *purpose* of this paper is to report the development and preliminary efficacy of "Authorship of One's Life," an eight-week, narrative-oriented psychological program designed to enhance self-realization and realizational flexibility in Ukrainian adults aged 35 to 55 affected by prolonged crisis. Realizational flexibility is introduced here as a theoretically derived construct – the individual's capacity to maintain narrative coherence and identity continuity while adaptively revising meaning-making frameworks under adverse conditions – and is operationalized through an original psychometric instrument. The study addresses two research questions: (1) Does the program produce measurable gains in self-realization outcomes relative to a control condition? (2) Do technology-assisted components augment narrative transformation as indexed by Innovative Moment salience across the program arc?

II. METHODOLOGY

A quasi-experimental pre–post design with a three-month follow-up was used. The baseline sample ($N = 257$, mean age 43.7, $SD = 6.1$; 58.4% female) was recruited through community organizations and online platforms in Ukrainian cities during March–May 2025. A quasi-experimental rather than randomized design was adopted because randomization was not feasible in the crisis-affected community context in which the study was conducted, and because participant stratification provided a theoretically meaningful comparison structure. Cluster analysis of baseline assessment data yielded three participant profiles: Adaptive (24.1%, $n = 62$), Reactive (46.3%, $n = 119$), and Fragmented (29.6%, $n = 76$) – Table 1. The experimental group ($n = 26$) comprised Reactive and Fragmented profile participants who volunteered for the intervention; the control group (n = 26) was drawn from Adaptive-profile participants as a comparison benchmark. Groups were equivalent on age, gender, education level, and trauma exposure index at baseline (all $p > .40$).

Table 1. Participant Profile Typology (N = 257)

Profile	*n* (%)	SRF-15 M (SD)	Key Characteristics
Adaptive	24.1% (n = 62)	64.3 (7.1)	High narrative coherence; active meaning-making; stable autonomy
Reactive	46.3% (n = 119)	51.8 (9.4)	Moderate flexibility; situational motivation; identity uncertainty
Fragmented	29.6% (n = 76)	38.2 (10.6)	Disrupted narrative; low self-reflection; needs externalization support

Note. SRF-15 = Scale of Realizational Flexibility, 15-item version; scores range 15–75.

Outcomes were assessed using five validated psychometric instruments across four time points (pre-program, mid-program (Week 4), post-program (Week 8), 3-month follow-up), and session transcripts were coded for Innovative Moment types by trained raters following the protocol of Gonçalves et al. (2011).

- *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (Steger et al., 2006). Presence and Search subscales (α = .86 *and* .87, respectively in the present sample).
- *Basic Psychological Needs Scale* (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness subscales (α = .80 – .84).
- *Personal Growth Initiative Scale–II* (Robitschek et al., 2012). Total score (α = .88).
- *Self-Reflection and Insight Scale,* Ukrainian adaptation (Dmytriev & Voloshyna, 2026). SR and IN subscales (confirmatory factor analysis CFI = .944, $RMSEA$ = .064).
- *Scale of Realizational Flexibility* (adapted by Dmytriev). An original 15-item instrument with three subscales: Narrative Coherence, Adaptive Motivation, and Identity Continuity (α = .82, CFI = .931). Items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Total score range: 15–75.

The program comprised 16 sessions over 8 weeks (two 90-min group sessions per week via Zoom, plus optional individual coaching). Structure followed the four therapeutic stages of narrative therapy (Feng et al., 2025) mapped onto an explicit narrative arc – Table 2.

Table 2. Program Structure and AI-Assisted Components

Module	NT Stage	Weeks	AI / Media Component
I: Who I Am	Trust Building	1-2	@TheFutureMe_bot (Telegram): identity prompts; Podcast Ep. 1 "The Unfinished Book"
II: What Blocks Me	Problem Externalizati	3–4	Bot: externalisation exercises; narrative journaling task
III: New Possibilities	Re-authoring	5-6	Bot: unique outcomes expansion; Innovative Moment Level 1→2 scaffolding
IV: Authorship of My Future	Re-membering	7-8	Bot: relational identity prompts; progress reflection

Note. NT Stage = Narrative Therapy stage. AI component: @TheFutureMe_bot (SmartSender + Gemini API), can be accessed via: https://lifeauthor.customer.smartsender.eu/lp/0vcjaqV0

The artificial intelligence component, @TheFutureMe_bot, delivered between-session narrative prompts aligned with the current therapeutic stage and reflection level, adapted for asynchronous text-based delivery. The podcast component ("Chapter 3" podcast, Episode 1: "The Book I Never Finished") served as a reflective narrative trigger introduced in Module I to prime identity exploration prior to group sessions.

Between-group effect sizes (Cohen's d) were computed for each primary outcome at post-test. Innovative Moment salience was calculated following Gonçalves et al. (2011): salience = Σ words in Innovative Moment utterances / Σ total dialogue words, pooled across all participants' session transcripts. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used for within-group comparisons. Statistical analyses were conducted in *Jamovi 2.2.5.*

III. RESULTS

Primary Outcomes.

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and between-group effect sizes for all primary outcomes at post-test. The experimental group showed significant pre–post improvements on all five measures (all p < .01, Wilcoxon signed-rank), while the control group showed negligible

change. The largest effects were observed for realizational flexibility total score ($d = 0.83$), personal growth initiative ($d = 0.79$), and basic psychological needs autonomy ($d = 0.71$), consistent with the program's theoretical emphasis on narrative flexibility and autonomous motivation. Meaning in life presence gains ($d = 0.64$) indicated restored meaning orientation. Gains were maintained at three-month follow-up, with no significant regression from post-test values on any measure (all $p > .15$).

Table 3. Primary Outcome Means and Effect Sizes at Post-Test (Experimental vs. Control Group)

Measure	EG Pre M(SD)	EG Post M(SD)	CG Pre M(SD)	CG Post M(SD)	Cohen's *d*
Meaning in Life – Presence	3.91 (0.82)	4.48 (0.74) *	3.88 (0.79)	3.94 (0.81)	0.64
Meaning in Life – Search	4.12 (0.91)	3.96 (0.88)	4.09 (0.88)	4.11 (0.90)	0.18
Basic Needs – Autonomy	3.64 (0.77)	4.29 (0.71) *	3.61 (0.74)	3.68 (0.76)	0.71
Personal Growth Initiative	3.42 (0.88)	4.21 (0.79) *	3.39 (0.85)	3.46 (0.83)	0.79
Self-Reflection	3.58 (0.94)	4.19 (0.81) *	3.55 (0.91)	3.60 (0.93)	0.68
Realizational Flexibility – Total	48.6 (9.8)	62.4 (8.3)*	49.1 (10.1)	49.7 (9.9)	0.83

*Note. EG = Experimental Group (n = 26); CG = Control Group (n = 26). * $p < .01$, Wilcoxon signed-rank within experimental group. d = Cohen's d (experimental group pre–post).*

Session transcripts ($N = 416$ participant-utterances across 16 sessions) were coded by two trained raters (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.78$) following Innovative Moments Coding System protocol (Gonçalves et al., 2011). At program entry (Modules I–II), Level 1 markers dominated: Action I salience 5.8%, Reflection I salience 9.2%. By Modules III–IV, Level 2 markers emerged prominently: Action II salience reached 11.4%; Reflection II salience reached 18.9%. This Level 1 → Level 2 trajectory mirrors the progression documented by Feng et al. (2025) and by Montesano et al. (2017) in successful narrative therapy outcomes. Protest II (self-affirmation and empowerment) increased from 0.3% to 1.2% across the program arc. Qualitative analysis of artificial intelligence bot interactions indicated that @TheFutureMe_bot prompts most reliably generated Reflection II markers when deployed within the Re-authoring stage (Weeks 5–6).

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings support three substantive conclusions. First, realizational flexibility is a meaningful intervention target. The Scale of Realizational Flexibility total score produced the largest effect size ($d = 0.83$), suggesting this construct is both sensitive to narrative-oriented intervention and directly relevant to the self-realization deficit observed in the Reactive and Fragmented profiles. This extends McAdams's (2013) narrative identity theory to applied intervention settings under conditions of societal crisis, converging with Breakwell's (2010) prediction that identity processes become especially tractable – not merely destabilized – under threat.

Second, the Innovative Moments framework provides a theory-grounded mechanism account. The documented Level 1 → Level 2 shift aligns with the theorized progression from problem-distance to narrative reconstruction (Gonçalves et al., 2012). Critically, this shift was not epiphenomenal to session attendance: the artificial intelligence-mediated between-session prompts generated stage-appropriate Innovative Moment activation, with Reflection II salience substantially higher during Re-authoring stage delivery. This replicates, in a real-world intervention context, the simulation findings of Feng et al. (2025), who report that narrative therapy-structured agents nearly double Level 2 Innovative Moment elicitation relative to unstructured conversational agents.

Third, artificial intelligence-assisted components appear to augment rather than substitute for human therapeutic process. The bot was most effective when deployed within a structured therapeutic container – not as a standalone tool. The podcast component served a distinct function: as a narrative primer that lowered disclosure thresholds before group sessions, consistent with perspectives on narrative processing in media psychology (Fletcher, 2023).

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The quasi-experimental design, while appropriate for the applied context, precludes causal inference. The experimental group was drawn from non-Adaptive profiles, introducing potential regression-to-the-mean confounds; however, control group stability across time points argues against this explanation. Sample size is modest and geographically concentrated. Longitudinal stability beyond three months requires investigation. The effectiveness of the artificial intelligence component is contingent on its stage alignment – deployment without the broader structured program may yield substantially weaker effects, a hypothesis requiring direct empirical test.

V. CONCLUSION

"Authorship of One's Life" demonstrated preliminary efficacy as a structured, scalable psychological program for crisis-affected Ukrainian adults aged 35 to 55. By integrating narrative therapy principles, Innovative Moment-informed evaluation, and artificial intelligence-assisted conversational support, the program addresses a documented gap between theoretical frameworks of self-realization and accessible clinical practice. The convergence of behavioral outcome gains and narrative process indicators strengthens the interpretive claim that the program operates through theorized mechanisms rather than non-specific factors. These findings position realizational flexibility, and the Scale of Realizational Flexibility instrument, as viable targets for both further research and clinical application in trauma-adjacent, meaning-disrupted populations.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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VII. DISCLOSURE

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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