Bringing Identity Content to the Fore: Links to Identity Development Processes

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Abstract

In the present study we examined the role of identity content in relation to identity processes in a sample of college-going emerging adults ($n = 255$). Participants reported eight narratives each ($n = 2040$ narratives) in response to prompts for specific identity content domains (occupation, values, politics, religion, family, romance, friends, sex roles), and completed survey measures of identity exploration and commitment. Narratives were coded for content and meaning-making. In general, participants reported the content requested, but were less likely to do so in certain domains (e.g., religion) than others (e.g., family). Identity processes varied by content domain, suggesting that identity contents may require different forms of processing. Results reveal the importance of examining identity content for a fuller understanding of identity development.

Bringing Identity Content to the Fore: Links to Identity Development Processes

Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development inspired the two major contemporary approaches to identity: the identity status model (Meeus, 2011; Schwartz, 2001; 2015) and narrative identity model (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). Historically these two models have operated in parallel, but there has been a recent movement toward integration, both theoretically (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2015) and empirically (McLean, Syed, Yoder & Greenhoot, 2014; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Syed, 2012; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Indeed, both contemporary models have deep roots in an Eriksonian framework, so combining the two models may allow for new insights into identity development. The purpose of the present study was to build upon these theoretical and empirical developments by conducting a focused study on the content of identity in emerging adulthood, and how contents are associated with identity development processes from both status and narrative perspectives.

The Content and Process of Identity Development

Recently we have argued that there at least two components of identity that are necessary to capture for a full understanding of identity development: content and process (McLean et al., 2014; Syed & McLean, 2015; Syed & Azmitia, 2010). Content is the *what* of identity: what is developing? What issues, concerns, or topics are people considering when they think about who they are? By definition, then, the content of identity provides some indication of the context of identity; the situations, circumstance, and domains in which identities develop. Process is the *how* of identity: how do people develop an identity? In other words, processes are the activities in which people engage to consider those contents that are potentially relevant to their identities.

Without question, both contemporary models have focused almost exclusively on the processes of identity development to the neglect of the content of identity (cf., Lilgendahl, 2015). This is likely due to the emphasis on processes in developmental psychology writ large, a field founded on understanding *how* people develop. However, we have argued that a full understanding of the developmental process of identity development must include an understanding of *what* is developing (Syed & McLean, 2015). That is, examining identity development involves examining the processes of identity development in contents that are personally meaningful to the individual (McLean et al., 2014; see also Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011). In particular, examining content allows us to see how identity processes are (or are not) employed to *integrate* various aspects of the self, a central piece of Erikson's (1968) theory (see also McLean et al., 2014). This call for attention to content is not new (e.g., Kroger & Marcia, 2011), but is an issue that has waned in prominence in recent years as questionnaire measures of identity have become dominant in the field (Josselson & Flum, 2015; Kunnen & Metz, 2015).

Narrative Identity Model

The narrative identity model is rooted in McAdams' (e.g., 2001; McAdams & Cox, 2010) interpretation of Erikson's theory, in combination with personality theories. The model of narrative identity development rests heavily on the processes critical to constructing a personal story, based on autobiographical memories, about how one has come to be the person one currently is (e.g., Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). That is, this personal story should connect the past to the present in a subjective and reflective process. At the heart of this theory is the construct of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Kober, 2015), a process of reflection on past experiences to make sense of the current self. There are many ways of examining this reflective process, such as meaning-making (e.g., McLean & Pratt,

2006), exploratory processing (Pals, 2006), and making self-event connections (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006), but generally, the ability to engage in this kind of reasoning shows age-related increases from middle childhood through middle adulthood (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010), with spikes in these processes in adolescence (e.g., McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2008; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010).

Although content is rarely examined beyond description of what narratives are about, research has shown that autobiographical reasoning is more likely to occur in events that are challenging, disruptive, or negative (e.g., Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). In other words, reasoning occurs in the kinds of events that take more work to explain because they are generally unexpected (Bruner, 1990). Importantly, given the centrality of subjectivity to this theory, there is an assumption that the kinds of events that are reported are salient and personally meaningful, if not least because they are remembered (Pillemer, 1998). Some studies have examined specific content, such as ethnic identity (Syed, 2015) or religion (Alisat & Pratt, 2012), but these studies typically examine only one content, without comparing across content types, or examining the personal relevance of these contents. Thus, although the narrative approach has not provided a clear taxonomy of identity content, it does provide a relatively easy way to compare the relevance and meaning of various contents.

Identity Status Model

The identity status model is based on Marcia's (1966) interpretation of Erikson's theory, and focuses on the identity processes of exploration and commitment. Exploration is defined as active engagement with answering the question of 'who am I' by travelling, talking to others, taking different types of classes, etc. Commitment is defined by making a firm decision about a path to take or a way of defining the self. Using an intensive interview methodology, Marcia

identified four identity statuses, reflected by where one falls along these two dimensions: achievement (high exploration, followed by commitment), moratorium (high exploration, low commitment), foreclosure (high commitment, low exploration), and diffusion (low commitment and exploration).

Subsequent research has shown that there are *generally* progressive developments from diffusion or foreclosure through moratorium to achievement (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). Neo-Eriksonians have taken Marcia's operationalization of Erikson's theory to focus more exclusively on these processes of exploration and commitment, with less emphasis on the categorical groupings (see Schwartz, 2001; cf., Carlsson, Wängqvist, & Frisé, 2015), developing various measures of exploration and commitment, which are predominantly survey based (cf., Kunnen & Metz, 2015).

In terms of content, surveys either ask about exploration and commitment process in different content domains (e.g., EIPQ; Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995), or ask more generalized questions about these processes that are decontextualized from content (e.g., DIDS; Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Smits, & Goossens, 2008). The included contents in the status models have varied somewhat, but they are generally assumed to focus on ideological contents (occupation, values, politics, religion) and interpersonal contents (family, romance, friends, sex roles). Although the identity status interview and some of the survey measures ask questions about these processes in the context of different contents, responses are usually aggregated for analysis. Thus, like the narrative model, the status model is relatively decontextualized with regard to identity content. Further, closed-ended format of survey assessments does not allow for a clear assessment of personal relevance and meaning of various identity contents.

Model Integration and the Present Study

In examining the extant empirical work we see that there are links between identity processes as they are defined in the two models. For example, the status concept of exploration is linked to the narrative concept of meaning-making (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006; McLean et al., 2014). Theoretically, McLean and Pasupathi (2012) argued that narrative activities (e.g., autobiographical reasoning) may be one way that status processes are manifested.

In terms of content, there has only been one study of which we are aware that has examined content from a perspective of combining these two models. McLean et al. (2014) examined whether the content domains identified by status researchers appeared in common narrative prompts (e.g., self-defining and turning point memories). Overall, these content domains were present in these assessments of narrative identity, but to varying degrees of strength. That is, some of the content domains were absent (politics), or were extremely rare (sex roles, religion), while some were quite common (family). This suggests that some contents may be more salient, or important, than others. However, a more comprehensive test of this question is to explicitly prompt for narrative content in specific status domains to assess the relative ease with which individuals can comply. From there, assessing the processes that are engaged when discussing those contents can provide insight into how certain contents may be associated with the processes that undergird identity development. Thus, we examined the associations between the identity status processes of exploration and commitment and the narrative process of meaning making within narratives about specific identity content domains.

In developing this study, we were guided by a finding from our recent work concerning a construct we called co-occurrence (McLean et al., 2014). When we examined whether content domains appeared in personally important memories, we found that contents were not always

mutually exclusive – that is, sometimes the stories were about more than one content domain. Further, the co-occurrence of domains in a narrative was associated with identity processes, in this case more meaning-making. Thus, the extent to which individuals are connecting various contents may be indicative of important developmental processes.

In the present study we examined a variant of this phenomenon in two ways. First, we examined whether participants “matched” the domain we requested. Researchers have identified domains that they assume are personally salient (Balistreri et al., 1995; Marcia, 1966), but we do not have a good assessment of how salient they actually are. One way to test this is to see if respondents have personally salient stories that match the domain. That is, if we requested an “occupation” narrative did we, in fact, get an “occupation” story? Second, we examined what domains more commonly “spill” into other domains. Are there some domains that are more deeply connected to others, and therefore they make an appearance in content narratives even when not prompted? That is, does family emerge as a content in a prompt for occupation? We asked participants to report eight personally important narratives representing the eight content domains defined in the status model, and we had two primary research questions:

- 1a) Do participants “match” the content domain requested?
- 1b) Where are the mismatches?
- 2) How do identity processes (as measured by narrative and status assessments) vary by domain content?

Method

Participants

Participants were 255 students at a mid-sized public university in the Pacific Northwest. (M age = 19.15, SD = 1.71, range 17 - 29; 74% women; 92% U.S. born; 75% White). Self-

reported religious affiliation was as follows: non-Catholic Christian (39%), followed by Catholic (18%), Agnostic (16%), Atheist (8%), Buddhist or Hindu (4.5%), Muslim (3%), Jewish (2%); the rest did not answer. Self-reported political affiliation was as follows: Democrat (54%), Independent (17%), Republican (13%); the rest left the question blank or reported that they did not know/care. The majority of the participants reported that they were not in relationships (49%), followed by those in a committed relationship (33%), dating (11%), married (1.5%), in an open relationship or purely sexual relationship (1%), and separated (.5%); the rest did not report their relationship status. Sixty-four percent of participants' parents were married, 25% divorced/separated, and the rest were 'other' or left missing. In terms of parent education, 38% of mothers had a college degree (38% fathers), 17% had a graduate degree (24% fathers), and the rest had some college or high school, an Associates Degree, or certificate.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses, which serve a variety of students for general education requirements, as well as those who are, or intend to be, psychology majors. Participants completed the study in a room alone. After providing informed consent, participants wrote their narratives and completed surveys on a computer program (written with Media Lab v2008; Empirisoft, 2008). Surveys included those to measure identity development and demographics (described below), as well as measures psychological adjustment and personality, which we did not examine in the present study (see Syed & McLean, in prep). Once finished, participants were debriefed, and thanked. Participants were given course credit for participation, which took an average of 1.5 – 2 hours.

Measures

Identity Exploration and Commitment. The Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri

et al. 1995) is a 32-item survey that assesses exploration and commitment across eight identity domains: occupation, religion, politics, values, family, friends, dating, and sex roles. The response format is a 6-item likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Reliabilities were acceptable for overall exploration ($\alpha = .72$) and commitment ($\alpha = .74$)

Narrative Prompts. Participants were asked to complete eight narratives concerning the status domains of identity development in the ideological (occupation, religion, politics, values) and interpersonal (friendship, dating, sex roles, family) realms. The ideological and interpersonal prompts were counterbalanced. Prompts for each narrative were modeled on McAdams' (2006) guided autobiography:

Please think of an important autobiographical memory that highlights your [domain included here]. It can be a memory of actual past [domain] experiences or a memory that is related to your [domain]. Please take your time, and describe your memory of the event, including where you were, whom you were with, what happened, your reaction, the reaction of anyone else involved in the event, and why it is important to you.

Narrative Coding

Domain Content. The coding system was developed by McLean et al. (2014) to capture domain content (available from the first or second author): occupation, religion, politics, values, sex roles, family, friendship, and dating. Narratives that did not fit with these domains were coded as other (8%) (see McLean et al., 2014 for a discussion of the latter). Coders rated each domain as present or absent for each narrative. To be coded as present the domain had to be related to some aspect of plot, as opposed to background information. For example, if the event happened at church, religion would not be coded as present unless religion had a part to play in the plot or emotion of the story. One way to determine presence of content was to ask whether or not, theoretically, exchanging potential content would change the story – e.g., could church have been the workplace? If details could be exchanged, then they were not counted as present. If

more than one domain emerged, coders decided on the dominant domain, by asking what the *main* identity issue at play was. Reliability was acceptable (kappas range .74 – 1.00 per domain).

Meaning-making. Each of the memory narratives was coded for sophistication of meaning on a four-point scale (McLean and Pratt, 2006). A zero indicated no explanation of the meaning of the event. Narratives were scored as one if there was a specific lesson that the reporter learned from the event. A score of two was assigned to narratives that contained vague meaning; narratives of this sort describe some growth or change in the self, but the specifics of the change are not clear. Narratives were scored as three if there was evidence that the reporter gleaned specific insight from the event that applies to broader areas of the reporter's life (*intraclass r range* = .83 - .89).

Reliability was completed on 10% of narratives (54 cases, 164 narratives) from a different dataset (see McLean et al., 2015). Content was coded by an undergraduate who had acceptable reliability with the first author. Three research assistants who had acceptable reliability with a trained graduate student coded meaning. All coders were blind to the aims of the study. Once reliability was reached, coders discussed difficult cases as needed, and checked 20% of their codes with each other to prevent coder drift (see Syed & Nelson, 2015).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for all process variables are in Table 1: meaning-making, global exploration and commitment, and domain-specific exploration and commitment. These data indicate that, on average, participants are making some meaning of their past experiences, but the baseline levels are rather low, similar to other work (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006). When looking at global levels, participants are actively engaged in exploration of their identities and

demonstrating some degree of commitment. These processes vary a bit based on the specific domain of exploration and commitment (e.g., politics vs. religion), but most mean levels are generally in the same ballpark. The amount of missing data was very low, with a total of only 11 (out of 2016) narratives missing.

RQ1a: Do participants “match” the content domain requested?

For this first research question, we examined whether the narrative provided matched the prompt we gave by calculating the percentage of stories whose dominant domain matched the requested domain, both overall and within domains. The overall percentage match rate was 78% (1680 of 2145 narratives), indicating a reasonably high level of correspondence. As can be seen in Table 2, this rate, however, varied considerably by content domain. The five domains that exceeded the overall rate were family (92%), dating (91%), friends (89%), occupation (84%), and politics (80%). The remaining domains all had rates lower than the average: religion (74%), sex roles (64%), and values (51%). Focusing on the extremes, these findings indicate that when we asked for a family story we almost always got one, whereas when asking for a values story the participants complied only half of the time.

RQ1b: When there are mis-matches, what domains occur when not requested?

For the remaining analyses, we only included in the analysis the 92% of stories for which the dominant domain was coded as one of the eight identity status domains. Given that the majority of stories matched the requested prompt, many of the “mis-match” frequencies were quite small. Nevertheless, it is instructive to examine the patterns of these mis-matches, displayed in Table 2. For all eight content domains, the top mis-matched domain was either family (appearing in the friend, dating, sex roles, religion, and politics domains) or friends (appearing in the family, occupation, and values domains). This is consistent with previous work

that indicated the wide prevalence of interpersonal domains, particular family (McLean et al., 2014); this domain may ‘spill’ more often or easily into other domains.

The previous analysis looked at what domains were dominant when not requested. There are two ways to examine how the domains may spill into one another- by looking at which domains are present within a particular domain (e.g. family) when they were not requested, or by examining in what other domains each domain tended to be dominant. The former can be thought of as “inward spill” as it examines which domains “came in” or emerged when they were not requested, while the latter can be thought of as ‘outward spill’ – what domains show up elsewhere when we did not ask for them. In some ways, inward spill represents what, if any, other content is tied to any other specific content, such as family. For example, what else comes up when you think of the specific content of family? Outward spill represents how far a content domain stretches into other areas. For example, what else is family connected to? These are essentially the same analyses, but each provide a different lens.

Looking at the ‘outward spill’ (Table 3), we can see that the family domain was dominant in 110 stories over and above where it was requested, and tended to be dominant in sex roles ($n = 31$), values ($n = 28$), and religion ($n = 22$). In contrast, the sex roles domain was not dominant in any other domain other than when sex roles was requested (it was also the second least likely to match even when requested, as indicated previously).

RQ2: How do identity processes (as measured by narrative and status assessments) vary by domain content?

Because participants each reported up to eight narratives, the subsequent analyses were conducted using multilevel modeling (MLM) to account for the nesting of multiple stories within

participants. The dependent variable in these analyses was narrative meaning-making. Each of the eight narratives received its own story-specific code for meaning.

The first step in the analysis was to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient via an unconditional means model. This coefficient provides information as to the nature of the variance in meaning-making, namely the proportion of variance that is due to between-individual differences (i.e., relatively stable individual differences in the tendency to make meaning) versus within-individual differences (i.e., the tendency to make meaning being tied to specific stories). The between-individual variance was .25 ($SE = .04$) and the within-individual variance was 1.28 ($SE = .05$), and therefore the $ICC = .16(.25/[.25 + 1.28])$. Thus, 16% of the variance can be understood in terms of differences between people, whereas 84% can be understood in terms of differences between stories, providing strong evidence that meaning-making is much more a property of stories rather than a process stable across stories within persons (see also McLean et al., 2014; McLean, Pasupathi, Greenhoot, & Fivush, under review). Despite the imbalance, the ICC value does indicate that there is significant variance at both levels and therefore adding both level 1 and level 2 predictors is warranted.

Narrative Identity Processes. The next step was to add the eight content domains as level 1 predictors of meaning-making. As it is clear from the ICC that there is substantial variation between stories in meaning-making, adding content domain as a predictor allowed us to test for whether some of that variance could be accounted for by domain. The MLM analysis indicated that domain content was a significant predictor of meaning, controlling for word count¹, $F = 6.28, p < .001$, accounting for 2% of the within-individual variance in meaning. Follow-up pairwise comparisons (Table 4) indicated that religion stories displayed the highest level of

¹ Word count had a modest, but significant, association with meaning ($r = .19$). Despite this correlation, which is common in the literature, controlling for word count rarely changes the outcomes of analyses. This was true in the current case as well; we ran the analyses both with and without word count included, and the results were the same.

meaning ($M = 1.37, SE = .09$) and were significantly higher than friend ($M = 0.99, SE = .07$), dating ($M = 0.85, SE = .08$), family ($M = 0.92, SE = .07$), politics ($M = 1.08, SE = .08$), and values ($M = 1.08, SE = .09$) stories. Occupation stories had the second highest levels of meaning ($M = 1.28, SE = .08$), followed by sex roles stories ($M = 1.17, SE = .09$), both of which were higher than friend, dating, and family stories.

Status Identity Processes. Finally, we added the identity status processes of exploration and commitment as between-person predictors of meaning-making. We did this in two ways. First, we added the global exploration and commitment processes to the previous model in which meaning was predicted by content domain and word count. Second, we conducted a series of models in which domain-specific exploration and commitment were included as predictors of meaning-making in the corresponding content domain (e.g., occupational exploration and commitment predicting meaning-making in occupational stories).

In the global model, exploration was a significant predictor of meaning-making ($b = .13, SE = .06, p = .05$), but commitment was not ($b = .10, SE = .07, p = .15$). The domain-specific models yielded few significant relations: exploration was associated with meaning for sex roles ($b = .32, SE = .11, p = .004$), family ($b = .12, SE = .06, p = .05$) and politics ($b = .21, SE = .10, p = .05$), and commitment was related to meaning for politics ($b = .18, SE = .09, p = .05$) and religion ($b = .23, SE = .09, p = .01$).

Discussion

Overall, we found that the content domains identified by researchers are generally salient to our participants, but with some notable variability. Our analysis also showed us which contents are more connected to other contents – namely family and friends – and which *appear* more isolated – religion, values, and sex roles. However, the latter are not truly isolated because

that is where some of the relational content ‘spills.’ Finally, our analyses of identity processes revealed that meaning and exploration are linked (as has been shown previously; e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006; McLean et al., 2014), and those more ‘isolated’ contents were more likely to contain meaning.

As noted, although there was a relatively high level of match, there was variability. This is consistent with our prior work in which some of these ideological contents, such as religion and sex roles, did not emerge as contents in more generalized memory prompts (e.g., self-defining and turning point memories), suggesting that they may be less salient (McLean et al., 2014). We took this prior work further to examine what we have termed “spill.” We found that family and friends were highly spillable contents, and sex roles was clearly not spillable, similar to religion and politics. One way to interpret these findings is that contents like family provide an integrative function to identity (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008) – this type of content provides a way to make sense of a variety of other topics, and is also a context in which other contents are negotiated. Indeed, contents like religion, sex roles, and values are topics tightly linked to the family, as this is where individuals are likely to first learn about these issues, and perhaps also where these issues are discussed, debated, and storied. For example, the following narratives came from the religion prompt, but family and friends are heavily embedded in the stories:

In the past year I was discussing my dislike of organized religion with my father (who shares my view), and he told me that his personal policy towards life and existing in this universe is "Do good, because you are here, and you can." My reaction was to remember this quote word for word (and plan to get it tattooed on my wrist at some point). It put my world view into a succinct phrase, instead of the previous ambiguous thoughts floating around in my head. It also defined my view of and relationship with my father more than had previously been established.

I remember the day in my sophomore year in high school, when I told my avid Christian parents I was agnostic and didn't want to attend church anymore with them...My parents reluctantly accepted this fact about myself; however, demanded my attendance in church with them because it was considered "family time." My mother was adamant about me

going without any understanding of my perspective or outreach for other forms of spirituality or religion. My dad didn't really acknowledge his daughter as being the type of person to denounce God in the slightest. He most likely assumed it was teenage angst or rebellion and would soon phase out. This was important in helping me understand the spiritual oppression, among other things, I was living through under my parental tyrants.

When I lived at home I was very involved with my church, but mainly my youth group. When we reach the eighth grade, our church has us go through a year long class called confirmation. My younger sister was enrolled in the class now and went on a retreat with her class and the youth group advisors. The main advisor was also my confirmation advisor and we had become good friends. When my sister came back from the retreat, she told me of an activity they did for class. The advisor asked them to draw an example of someone who symbolized their beliefs in god. The advisor shared his drawing first. He drew me and three of my closest friends. He said "These girls are the fantastic four. They represent my faith because they have shown and taught me that god comes into our lives in many forms and blesses us with those who are there to improve our quality of life; and that's what these girls are for me." When my sister told me this, I felt so honored and immediately contacted the advisor about it and how happy I was that he appreciated the way my friends and I contributed to the church. This experience is important to me because it shows that I do have a purpose of being here and I do make a difference in others' lives.

In these examples we see how religion is placed within the context of family and friends. The first participant gains clarity about his religious beliefs and his relationship with his father from discussing their religious views. In the second, we see the process of negotiating religious beliefs within the family. And in the third we see how the presence of family and peers enhances and deepens one's religious experience. Thus, the experience of religion, in the examples provided here, is heavily couched in relational experiences, supporting the idea that these relational content domains spill into, or perhaps integrate, many aspects of identity, and also provide a context for the negotiation of other identity contents.

Although the lack of 'spill' for some of these contents and the lesser matching accuracy suggests that these contents are less salient to these emerging adults, they were the narratives in which we saw the most meaning. It may be that these contents are more isolated, more rarely encountered or thought about, or perhaps need more work to become integrated with other

identity contents. This is an explanation resonant with Bruner's (1990) arguments about narrative work being required for events that are rarer or difficult in some way. This analysis also pulls apart relevance and meaning. It is possible that some contents might be more defining, and thus salient, but perhaps *understandably* defining, so explicit meaning is not as necessary. For example, the importance of family is perhaps so broadly accepted that one does not need to explain the personal importance of this domain (see McLean, 2015). Other contents may require more explanation, such as one's views on religion, perhaps particularly in certain cultural contexts where not all members hold the same religious views.

The contents with more meaning were also those where actual decisions may be more important, such as politics and religion. One must *decide* what place of worship to attend, or what political party to register for, so explicit meaning-making may be more important in working out these decisions. This interpretation is resonant with McLean and Pasupathi's (2012) argument that narrative reasoning may be one way that processes of exploration happen in live contexts.

As in prior studies, we found that meaning and exploration were correlated, suggesting that they share some degree of conceptual underpinning. However, these data continue the trend of finding relatively small effects for the relation between these two constructs, even when we examined greater specificity within domain contents. This makes sense in terms of our analyses showing that most of the variation is at the level of narrative events. Features of events may really pull for different kinds of processes, limiting the strength of aggregated 'stability' of some narrative assessments (Greenhoot & McLean, 2013; McLean et al., under review).

Limitations and Conclusions

Our limitations center primarily on sample generalizability and the degree to which we fully assessed all aspects of identity. In terms of the former, although the institution from which the participants were drawn is a large state school, with variability in demographic background, the participants were all in college, and were primarily white and female. Had we sampled a from a broader population we may have seen differences in the relevance of certain content. For example, those who are not in college may find occupation more relevant to their identities. We also did not examine other aspects of identity, namely social identity. The ways that ethnic or gender identity, for example, intersect with identity domain content and process were beyond the scope of what we could examine, but are necessary questions for those interested in a whole person perspective. Indeed, the concept of identity content is highly contextualized. As we mentioned, non-college going emerging adults may differ in some of the relevance of identity contents, and across various cultures within the United States and in other countries, we may see variation on the content domains relevant to individual identity.

In sum our analyses shed light on the importance of examining identity content for understanding processes, as well as relevance. Our analyses also bring us to the question of *what is identity content?* Is content a place where a decision has to be made, like religion (where there is less spill and more meaning)? Is content an issue that connects to many parts of the self, like family? We argue that it is both, but that not all content is equal. Some contents ‘require’ different, or more, processing. Some contents work differently in the goal of integration. Attention to these variations in content will help us to consider the more complex, nuanced, and important connections between process and content as we understand how individuals develop an integrated and coherent sense of themselves.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Identity Process Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>
Meaning-making	1.06	1.24	0.00	3.00
Global Exploration	4.09	0.59	2.81	5.94
Values	3.76	1.05	1.00	6.00
Occupation	4.60	0.91	1.00	6.00
Politics	4.26	1.04	1.00	6.00
Religion	3.61	1.06	1.00	6.00
Family	4.14	1.04	1.00	6.00
Sex Roles	3.69	1.21	1.00	6.00
Dating	4.48	0.98	1.00	6.00
Friends	4.14	0.86	1.50	6.00
Global Commitment	3.95	0.60	2.44	5.88
Values	4.23	0.99	1.50	6.00
Occupation	4.02	1.22	1.00	6.00
Politics	3.71	1.13	1.00	6.00
Religion	4.09	1.00	1.50	6.00
Family	4.52	1.08	1.00	6.00
Sex Roles	3.10	1.13	1.00	6.00
Dating	3.93	1.24	1.00	6.00
Friends	3.99	0.92	1.50	6.00

Table 2

Percentage of stories whose dominant domain matched the requested domain

Content domain	Frequency	Total narratives	Percentage	Other domain(s) (frequency)
Family	245	265	92%	Friends (1), Occupation (1), Values (1)
Dating	247	270	91%	Family (4), Values (3), Friends (2)
Friends	241	271	89%	Family (6), Dating (3)
Occupation	226	269	84%	Friends (6), Family (5), Values (4)
Politics	215	268	80%	Family (14), Friends (12), Values (6)
Sex Roles	172	269	64%	Family (31), Values (24), Dating (14)
Religion	199	270	74%	Family (22), Friends (9), Values (7)
Values	135	263	51%	Friends (32), Family (28), Religion (12)
Overall	1680	2145	78%	

Table 3

Outward Spill by Domain

Dominant domain	Overall frequency	Dominance within matched prompt	Outward spill	Prompts in which domain was dominant (frequency)
Friends	294	225	69	Values (32), Politics (12), Religion (9)
Dating	252	229	23	Sex Roles (14), Friends (3)
Sex Roles	159	159	0	n/a
Family	342	232	110	Sex Roles (31), Values (28), Religion (22)
Occupation	227	208	19	Values (11), Sex Roles (4)
Religion	201	188	13	Values (12), Sex Roles (1)
Politics	207	200	7	Sex Roles (3), Values (3), Occupation (1)
Values	174	127	47	Sex Roles (24), Religion (7), Politics (6)

Note. Outward spill is calculated as the difference between the overall frequency of the dominant domain and the dominance within its matched prompt.

Table 4

Mean Levels of Meaning by Content Domain

Content domain	Mean (standard error)
Friends	0.99 (.07)
Dating	0.85 (.08)
Sex Roles	1.17 (.09)
Family	0.92 (.07)
Occupation	1.28 (.08)
Religion	1.37 (.09)
Politics	1.08 (.08)
Values	1.08 (.09)