“My story is not my own”: A qualitative analysis of personal and collective continuity

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Abstract

The concept of personal continuity is central to most theories of identity development, and one way it can be established is through the development of narrative identity. Narrative identity is represented by a story that is built through processes of autobiographical reasoning about the past, present, and future self. Building on the substantial literature focused on individual processes of personal reflection, the present study expands beyond the examination of the individual to explore the role that socio-cultural groups, and their shared narratives, play in personal continuity. In a qualitative and descriptive study, 13 adult children of immigrants, aged 18-52, were interviewed about their personal stories, the stories of their parents, and of their social group. Social constructivist grounded theory was used to analyze the interviews to examine the relationship between personal continuity and these three levels of narrative. Participants employed three different larger narrative structures to make sense of their own experiences in a larger context: The American Immigrant Story, The Origin Story, and The American Ethnic Minority Story. Each story differed in the focus on continuity between past and present versus present and future, as well as in the socialization agents for each story (i.e., family or peers). Overall, participants can create a sense of personal continuity by seeing themselves as part of a larger, continuously developing group narrative, though there are variations in how this is accomplished. Implications include the role of group narratives in personal identity development.

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...My story is not just my own. For sure, my story is a collective story of like, my mom's story. It ties into my mom's story, it ties into my sister's story, it ties into my dad's, and then from there, it ties into my boyfriend's, it ties into my really close friends, my teachers that I meet. My friends, and uhm, especially just like in a collective view...my story is only a small portion of this bigger story, is what it is. And every voice among the loud, like murmur of everyone is just...uhm, is just all so powerful. Even, like, if we were all just – my story alone, I know is powerful. And somebody else's story is powerful. But like, when we put us all together, we are just a force to be reckoned with. And so, yeah I mean...I don't know how much more there is to say, but just to know that what anybody shares is sharing a portion of somebody else's story, too. - Rosa, age 22

In this excerpt, Rosa describes the interdependent nature of her life story. In describing her own story as part of a shared narrative, Rosa is creating a sense of personal continuity that expands beyond her own life story into the lives of her parents, her ancestors, and other members of her group. This sense of personal continuity as connected to collective continuity is a relatively understudied phenomenon in the examination of personal identity development (cf., Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003), which has a relative focus on the individual. Thus, we use reflections such as Rosa's to understand how individuals use shared group narratives to create a sense of personal continuity, elaborating a more expansive view of identity development as necessarily interconnected (see Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Josselson, 1994; McLean, 2015; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne & Nam, 2007).

The focus on the creation of an integrated and coherent sense of self that persists over time and across context – *personal* continuity – has been central to many theories of identity development (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Epstude & Peetz, 2012; Locke, 1690/1996; McAdams 1993; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). In order for individuals to feel as if they have any sense of identity, it has been posited that they need to perceive a link between their past, present, and future selves. This sense of continuity has consequence, as there is a well-established link

between personal continuity and psychological well-being (see Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016; Sani, 2008 for overviews). In the most serious of cases, a lack of personal continuity can result in suicide (Chandler et al., 2003). In short, it is important for the individual to feel that a part of themselves is persistent through time.

We take a narrative approach to personal continuity by grounding it in the life story, or *narrative identity* (e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). In constructing a narrative identity, individuals create a sense of personal continuity by weaving together a coherent life story to explain changes and stability in the self over time, across context, and between self and culture (Syed & McLean, 2016). However, the great majority of work in this area has been focused on how individuals construct the self over time, and there has been a recent push to broaden this individualistic approach to emphasize the role that *others'* stories play in shaping personal identity (e.g., Hammack, 2006; 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015; Merrill & Fivush, 2016; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). Indeed, researchers have addressed the role that families (e.g., Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008; McLean, 2015), media (e.g., Breen, McLean, Cairney, & McAdams, 2017), and larger, shared cultural narratives (e.g., Hammack, 2006; 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015; Weststrate, 2020) play in guiding individuals as they develop their narrative identities. Building on research with families in particular, we take the approach that stories of social groups to which one belongs may be a particularly important place to develop a sense of personal continuity, as one sees the self as embedded in a larger story that may provide a sense of *collective* continuity.

Approaches to Personal and Collective Continuity

Personal continuity is traditionally theorized to be established through *autobiographical reasoning* (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), a mechanism that people use to construct a coherent and

integrated life story. Autobiographical reasoning is a process that connects past experiences and the current self by demonstrating change or stability in the way the narrator sees themselves in relation to the narrated past event (Pasupathi et al., 2007). When individuals explain change or a stability in the self over time, they are creating a sense of continuity by either integrating this change into the current understanding of self (e.g., “I realized how capable I was”) or illustrating a temporally stable aspect of the self (e.g., “This shows how strong I am”).

Beyond making connections between the *personal* past and the present, people can establish a sense of continuity by seeing themselves as part of a unified, temporally persistent social group (Chandler et al., 2003; Sani, 2008; Sani, Bowe, Herrera, Manna, Cossa, Miao, Ahou, 2007). This *collective* continuity also has implications for mental health and personal well-being. For example, suicide rates of First Nations youth in Canada – a community that has experienced historical genocide, forced assimilation, discrimination, and intergenerational trauma – were significantly lower in communities where traditions, historical artifacts, and language were preserved (Chandler et al., 2003; Hallett, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007). It is possible that adolescents achieve *personal* continuity by seeing themselves as a part of a group with *collective* continuity, a group that persists through time through the maintenance of language, traditions, etc. (see also Hammack, 2010; Weststrate, 2020).

As groups have the potential to exist beyond one’s lifetime, collective continuity may be a particularly useful place to understand the role of the *future* in developing continuity, a focus largely untouched in the work on personal continuity (Syed & McLean, 2016). For example, researchers have shown that seeing defining aspects of one’s group, such as language, as persistent through time is associated with perceptions of personal continuity (Smeeke & Verkuyten, 2014). Further, collective continuity can take the form of perceiving a shared future

(Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Colpe, 2004; see also Sani, 2008; Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008)¹.

Despite the importance of collective continuity established in the literature, the extant work has not actually examined personal and collective *stories*, making it unclear how group narratives shape personal continuity, which was the goal of the present study. In other words, our goal was descriptive, with a focus on examining individuals' personal and collective narratives to understand how personal and collective continuity are connected, and how such a connection allows the past and present to forecast to the future.

We examined how individuals narrated their personal stories, as well as stories of their families and their cultural groups, focusing on connections between these layers of the narrative ecology (McLean, 2015; McLean & Breen, 2016). Consistent with a social-constructivist developmental approach to narrative identity (e.g., Nelson & Fivush, 2004), we also examined the roles that parents and peers play in co-constructing these narratives and connections. Finally, although our aim was to describe how collective and personal continuity were developed in concert, we also examined those cases who did not experience collective continuity to guide future research in this area.

We decided to begin this exploratory work with a sample of adult children of immigrants in the United States (US). However, emphasize that because our focus was on collective continuity, we do not engage an extensive literature review on identity development in this population. We chose to work with this group because such individuals experience a more tangible threat to personal and collective continuity as immigration can sever ties between

¹ See also Tololyan, 1986 for the role of myth in group narrative, and Hirst and Manier (2008) for discussions of the construction of shared memories.

family, social groups, and culture of origin. For example, first generation Americans who are limited in their ability to speak the language from their parents' country of origin also tend to have limited connection to their parents' country of origin compared to those who more fluently bilingual (Nesteruk et al., 2015). Additionally, first generation Americans may feel a disconnect from the history of their parental country of origin, which is important for maintaining a sense of belonging to a nationality, one form of continuity (Obradovic, 2015; Saint Laurent & Obradovic, 2019).

This threat in continuity may create more urgency for individuals to devote narrative resources to maintaining continuity, and critically, more *awareness* of group narratives, which makes this population a prime group for this type of descriptive investigation. Additionally, we chose to collect sample diverse in cultural background, not for comparison, but to include a variety of voices and experiences in this descriptive study to guide future research.

Method

Both pilot and main study materials and procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board. The current study was preregistered on OSF (<https://osf.io/f7dgc>). We deviated from our preregistration by recruiting two fewer participants than originally intended, and with two unplanned analyses. In terms of unplanned analyses, we examined the socialization processes of collective continuity as this theme was present across interviews. Second, although our focus was not on *whether* collective continuity was storied, there were a small minority of cases who did not experience collective continuity, so we describe those cases as well to guide future research.

Participants

Inclusion criteria included being 18 years or older, having at least one parent who immigrated to the US, or participant immigration before the age of three. Additionally, based on pilot interviewing, we decided to recruit participants who had parents from countries that are more culturally distinct from the United States along issues of language, geography, etc., so that any issues with continuity would be more pronounced (e.g., we did not recruit participants with parents from Canada). In our sample, parental country of origin included Cambodia, Greece, India, Korea, Mexico, Puerto Rico², Samoa, and the Philippines. We recruited 12 participants, aged 18 – 50, and one participant from piloting was included in the analyses. In order to keep participant identity confidential, we describe demographic information in broad ranges (see Table 1).

Materials

We adapted McAdams' (1993; 2008) Life Story Interview. This interview protocol, at full length, includes chapters, a variety of key scenes, and discussion of the anticipated future, and is meant to elicit a coherent life story from the participant. We chose to adapt this methodology by shortening it because our goal was to first encourage participants to first share their own life story, and then to share others' stories, and we did not want to exhaust them.

Thus, we asked participants to provide the chapters of their life story, three key scenes (low point, turning point, wisdom event), and the next chapter of their story. Participants were then asked the same questions about one of their parents (chapters, three key scenes, and next chapter). Finally, participants were asked if they thought that there were others who have stories

² We note that Puerto Rico is considered to be a territory of the United States. However, some Puerto Ricans, including the participant in this study, consider it to be a country. We also note that each of these countries has a very different history and relationship with the US that may impact immigrant experiences. This historical context is beyond the scope of the present manuscript.

similar to their own and their parents, and if so, to describe those stories. Participants completed a demographics form, which was kept separate from interviews to maintain confidentiality. The first author (also the interviewer) transcribed all of the interviews verbatim.

Procedure

We describe our pilot protocol and procedure on OSF: <https://osf.io/7tjuk/>.

Participants were recruited in a mid-size northwestern city with flyers advertising a study on immigration and identity posted throughout community spaces (e.g., coffee shops), on a university campus, and through Craigslist. Interviews were conducted in private locations, primarily on campus. To build rapport, the interviewer disclosed that she is the child of immigrants. Interviews took one to three hours, after which participants compensated with a \$50.00 Amazon e-gift card.

Per recommended publishing guidelines for qualitative research (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, & Suárez-Orozco, 2018), we find it important to also describe the “era” in which these interviews took place. The interviews took place over the course of six months from late summer 2018 to late winter 2019. During this time, the US was in the middle of Donald Trump’s first term as President of the U.S., and issues of immigration and racism were pronounced in the larger cultural dialogue, given the threats to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), (Shear & Yee, 2017) and increased immigration arrests and raids (Sacchetti, 2017), for example, and these issues were also evident in participant interviews.

Analytic Approach

Before the analysis team began work, the first stage of analysis began after each interview was conducted. The first author wrote memos (i.e., formal and organized notes taken during the research process; Strauss, 1987) about what themes emerged after each interview, and

ideas about how to proceed in analyzing the interviews. These memos were used to document any emerging patterns in how participants storied their continuity as it relates to their peers, parents, and collective histories, and how these patterns connect to any existing literature on the subject. These memos served to organize the results.

The second stage of analyses was done with the analysis team using a social constructivist grounded theory approach (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson, & McSpadden, 2011). Such an approach embraces the existence of multiple realities within the data, the subjectivity of both researcher and participant, and the role that the researcher(s) plays in shaping the data. The constructivist nature of this qualitative analysis highlights the importance of having an analysis team with varied life experiences, in this case, of people who are and are not children of immigrants, so that observations come from ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives.

Per recommended qualitative reporting requirements (Levitt et al., 2018), we disclose background information on the researchers who read and analyzed the interviews to be transparent about how their experiences may have shaped the data. The analysis team for this study consisted of the first author and two undergraduate students: one psychology student, and one double major in psychology and sociology. The first author is a first-generation Icelandic American graduate student with two immigrant parents. One student was Black without immigrant parents. One student identified her ethnic background as Chinese and White, with one immigrant parent.

To ground them in the theoretical rationale of this project, the two undergraduates read relevant research articles, as well as the introduction and methods of the project proposal. The team discussed grounded theory as a methodology, as well as how potential biases of identities,

politics, academic foci, and past experiences could shape interpretation of the data (see Levitt et al., 2018).

The guiding question for analyses was how collective continuity was storied and internalized by the individual to create personal continuity. The team paid special attention to similarities and differences between participants in constructing continuity, and were also encouraged to take memos on anything they found relevant to the guiding question. The analysis team read the transcriptions and wrote memos of their own, all of which were discussed and compiled by the first author.

We used peer auditing procedures to ensure rigor in our interpretations of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peers outside of the analysis team read several transcripts and discussed them with the team to determine the consistency between interpretations. Four interviews were given to the second author (a White female professor of psychology with one immigrant parent from New Zealand), and two interviews were given to a separate team of undergraduate research assistants (one White male, one White female, one female who was Filipino and White, one White female with one immigrant parent from Germany).

Our results are structured by describing three kinds of narratives with which our participants were engaged, each establishing some kind of collective continuity, in different ways. We describe each story and how it serves the function of continuity, followed by a discussion of socialization processes, concluding with observations of those who did not perceive collective continuity.

Results

Across participant interviews we identified three group-level narratives that participants used to understand their own story in a broader context. *The American Immigrant Story* was

referenced by all participants, suggesting that it served as a broad master narrative for describing immigrant experiences. *The Origin Story* encompassed historical narratives from the parental country of origin. *The American Ethnic Minority Story* also encompassed historical narratives but focused on being an ethnic minority in the US rather than on the parental country of origin.

The American Immigrant Story

All participants referenced the American Immigrant Story, which focused on leaving behind all that is familiar, coming to the US with nothing, starting “from the bottom” of the socioeconomic ladder, and working hard to achieve the “American Dream.”

Theo³ (age 39), who comes from a large Greek immigrant family, outlines the general frame of the American Immigrant Story:

But yeah, the story is the same. Come with nothing, don't know English, learn English, work some job, like, figure out how to pay rent, you know, have nothing, still have nothing, and then all of a sudden you have a thing, you get some stability, and then, you know, a lot of Greeks start their own businesses[...] This is very common immigrant stuff, “I made it into something, I'm giving it to you to continue to be this great thing.” That's what my uncle did for my cousins. He came over here, he drove a cab, Greek immigrant. He drove a cab, which is a very common immigrant job. And then he opened a cab stand in [redacted] and became the biggest cab stand, and cab stand being like a hub, you know, “We lease a hundred Cabs” or whatever. Like, he was holding down [redacted]⁴. I mean this is – he turned being a cab driver into a – not even joking – he was a multimillionaire. Like, very affluent.

Similarly, Aleki (age 39) described his Samoan mother as living the American Dream:

So now, you know, she has her house, she's living - she has a great job, uhm, she's living the American dream, you know. She's got three cars and a beautiful house. And she came from the Islands, you know, maybe she may not have done it, you know, the most right way, but she got us - she got us, and she got herself, too, to this dream.

Finally, Ajay (age 40) describes his father's immigration from India:

He came with very little – I think it's a standard immigrant story, too. He came with very little. And then he just made it work – hustle, grind it out...

³ All names are pseudonyms.

⁴ Geographical location redacted.

All of these excerpts describe the same process: immigration to a different country “with nothing,” learning the language, working hard, and attaining wealth and stability.

Some participants were able to find personal continuity within the framework of this story. For example, Adriana (age 21), who is first generation Mexican American, referenced the American Immigrant Story to provide some scaffolding for her future self:

...me and my sister and like, my friend, like we're all an integral part of this. Like, a lot of times, we're the reason why this story is happening, you know, like some people – you know, like you leave for political asylum. But like, or you do like, financial situations. A lot of times, a lot of the stories – it's for the children, for their kids...

...I want to play a bigger role, but I'm not really sure how, but I know that just being successful is a big part of the story. As far as like, why my dad, you know, moved here. Why my grandparents moved here. Like, they wanted their future generations to be successful in a way that they didn't get. So, I know that by going, at the bare minimum, by getting an education I am helping in that story to – you know, sort of thing, to move us forward for the betterment of our people, sort of thing.

Adriana suggests that past generations had immigrated with the intention of altering the story of future generations, and she feels that it is important to extend this story into her own life by being “successful” – getting an education. She sees her own future as an extension of this collective past.

Although the American Immigrant Story was used to create some continuity into the past and future, it was never used *alone* – or without reference to the other two narratives we identified. The American Immigrant Story may lack the necessary specificity to provide enough narrative structure to create strong collective continuity, perhaps because of its breadth in encompassing such diverse immigrant experiences, and in some ways, its erasure of the past. Indeed, participants referenced the American Immigrant Story, but rather than tying their stories to the past and future of all immigrants, they explicitly tied their past and their future to the fate of their own groups, using The Origin Story and American Ethnic Minority Story.

The Origin Story

The Origin Story embraced the history of one's group, which was specifically tied to parental country of origin, including the history specific to those countries and cultures. For example, Eva (age 34) described the historical background behind her father's immigration from post-colonial India:

...the ethnic and religious violence in India, in post-colonial India, is like, something that a lot of people consciously left...

Theo (age 39) describes the foundations of Greek culture:

...Once you start boiling down the historical narratives and stuff, a lot of it towards the bottom of the drain is the Greeks...A lot of what became Greek culture...like philosophy, democracy, all of these ideals and things, these were concepts that were borrowed...from Africa, really...These are the things that shaped Greek culture.

Narin (age 19) details his experience of learning about Cambodian history:

...just reading about...my history... our country's past, and like how... it was like "Oh man, we used to be a great empire." ... from knowing the history, its just like, kings here and there didn't like, get along. They always fought for power.

Building on the description of history of colonization and colonialism, Clarita (age 25) describes wrestling with how the history of Puerto Rico affects her own identity:

I definitely feel like...if your island is a territory of the U.S., because you were won in a war that happened in, like, 1940 or 1904 or whatever, then when you learn your history more then you definitely feel manipulated, right? Like, "Oh, am I a conqueror? Or was I conquered?" ...At least that's how I think about it.

In short, knowledge of the historical past is critical to the definition of The Origin Story, and this historical past was used to understand the individual's present self.

In terms of continuity, this story was primarily connected to the past, seeing oneself as an extension of ancestors, and perceiving historical events as shaping one's own story. Narin, whose parents fled the Cambodian genocide, illustrates this:

Because each story is important because it, you know, explains what those individuals went through. And just hearing the similarities between my family, my parents, and their experiences. It was just like, 'They went through the same thing' you know, only about a hundred thousand survived out of the two and half million people that died. And it's just like, you know, I'm grateful, that I'm here to be able to be – like, I'm the byproduct of that. Like, you know, going against whatever the genocide was about was just, you know, going back to year zero, destroying all pieces of culture, tradition, education, and stuff. And I'm like, me going to college right now, I was just like, "I'm going against what that stood for." So, it's just like, have the shoulders of like, all those people who sacrificed for me to be here. It was just like, uh, something that I always think about.

We see here that Narin considered the historical past of Cambodians to be intimately tied to his own personal past. More importantly, Narin considers his own existence and his decision to get an education an act of rebellion against a violent attempt to eradicate his culture. Although the genocide is in the past and he did not personally experience it, he still sees his own story as playing a part in rebuilding his group identity after what happened in his ancestral home.

In the same vein, Adriana describes seeing herself as an extension of ancestors and how telling her story honors her heritage:

...I have to be able to express my whole story...And I can't do that without knowing my heritage...It's honestly disrespectful to ignore that part of myself. When... I have a really beautiful and tragic past, generations before me. My ancestors and stuff worked so hard, and everything happened for me to be able to come here.

Note the wording of Adriana's excerpt: "*I have such a beautiful and tragic past, generations before me.*" Adriana considers the historical past of her people as part of her own personal past, illustrating that her story extends beyond her own life into the lives of previous generations, and therefore, her group, a way of creating and experiencing collective continuity.

Finally, Amara (age 31) described visiting the Cambodian village where her mother grew up:

I loved going back to Cambodia...things that were just so unique to my upbringing in my family and the things that made me feel so isolated...all of a sudden, like, when I went back to Cambodia, it all made so much sense.... And for me it was like, a really, like, strange coming home experience because I was able to identify, like, that there was a nation and a people and a community that has quirks and things that I really like to eat,

and all these things that make up, like, who I am, explained.

Amara illustrates a type of retroactive piecing together of her collective continuity. Although she was born and raised in the US by her Cambodian mother grandmother, Amara struggled to feel connected to the historical past of her group because her mother and grandmother never shared stories of their prior life. However, once she was able to visit the actual land of her ancestors, she was able to make sense of her own personal identity. Additionally, we note Amara's language in this excerpt: "...when I went *back* to Cambodia" (emphasis added). When Amara went to live in Cambodia for a year, it was the first and only time that she had gone. She uses the phrase "went *back* to Cambodia" as if she had been there before. However, it is possible that she perceives that a part of herself had been there before, the part of her that extends beyond her own story in the stories of her ancestors who had lived in Cambodia generations before her, creating collective continuity.

Although Amara has a better understanding of her *past*, she experienced less collective continuity when thinking about the *future* after leaving Cambodia, characteristic of this Origin Story narrative:

It sounds kind of like, morbid to say, but not being surrounded by tons of Cambodian people, and losing touch, and being able to identify with that part of who I am, like, less and less it affects me. [...] it just becomes less and less of my identity I feel like, until I go back home.[...] So – I definitely think that, like, the chapter – I don't like to use the word diminishing, but that's kind of, the best way that I can articulate it.

In summary, the Origin Story was focused on the past in one's parental country of origin, including the history, politics, and mythology of those countries and cultures. Participants primarily used this guiding narrative to create continuity from the past to the present.

The American Ethnic Minority Story

The American Ethnic Minority Story concerns membership in a racial or ethnic minority group in the US without necessarily referencing immigration of specific groups, and was largely focused on continuity from the present to the future. In fact, there were no instances of participants using this story to create continuity with the past, and it was common to discuss the *absence* of historical knowledge.

Anthony (age 32), whose parents are both Filipino immigrants, primarily identifies as Asian Pacific Islander (API):

...I don't have a lot of historical context...my parents...when they raised me, it was never...based on...the history of...Filipino people...they never taught me Tagalog...I don't carry the history of the Philippines in me...And as my parents pass away, as my grandmother - my grandmothers are all gone, right. This history will die with them...

Instead, Anthony uses the historical context of the US as a means of exploring his racial identity:

...I have the historical context of what it means to be API or Filipino American in the United States. And only in the United States. And that has looked different for me in the way that I built connections with others or others who are different to me...the extent of historical context of API's in America, the United States, is like, transcontinental railroad, and Chinese immigrants having to build that, right, on the backs of the country...

In these excerpts, Anthony articulates that because he was raised without knowing the history, culture, or language of his parents' country of origin, he instead uses the historical context of being an ethnic minority in the US to give meaning to his experiences, some of which are heavily impacted by historical and current racism. He also focuses on articulating some of the historical facts and history of racism and oppression against Asian Americans in general, which is a connection to the past, but he does not tie this collective past to his own personal past. He may also be in the process of working on this, however, as he notes that he is trying to "explore his racial identity."

Similarly, Ajay (age 40) briefly described experiences for Indian Americans in the United States:

...we're kind of seen as like, the model minority. It's like, we don't make a big deal about things...we're not politically active...we're - contributors. Since we're contributors to society...[we] have good jobs, right.

He then goes on to describe his concerns for his son's future:

...it comes to the fact that he's brown...he perceives himself to be brown. The reason I bring that up is, I think about our last two presidents, like, President Obama. A Columbia undergrad, Harvard Law School, Professor in Chicago, the Editor in Chief of the Harvard Law Review... So, like, the best in everything, right? So, the top of the game, like, a good person. Well that part's not so much about race, but, the top of his game and became president. Fantastic. And he's Black. Or he's perceived to be black. Top of his game, he gets that. And then you've got this guy [President Trump] who's an idiot, like, can't do anything [but] he's the president, too, right? And what's the main difference? Is that one's white, and one's Black.

In sum, the historical context of the US, and its treatment of ethnic and racial minorities, is far more central to this narrative than specifics of one's own group.

Though there was relatively less rooting of this narrative in the past, there was elaboration on continuity as connected to the future. For example, Anthony articulates how representation in the media is important for his future and the future of his group:

So, let's say that I have a white counterpart who doesn't carry an ethnic or immigrant identity, right. And born, raised America, American family, that kind of thing, and they are curious to know about my background, or also carry assumptions on my background. And that's fueled by what media portrays, and the stereotypes that, still, media portrays. If we were to be represented in other forms of media, I think it'll help squash those assumptions, and provide a better narrative for other people so that when they do want to come from a curious place and ask these questions, these questions aren't fueled by just stereotypical assumptions.

Similarly, Ajay discussed the importance of seeing Indian Americans represented in politics:

... it's exciting to me... "Oh someone's made it."... "One of us has made it"... in time for my son to see that. My daughter eventually, too...if we're more integrated and in...visible, high profile roles, that's awesome. I think we're slowly getting there but...it takes time...But what upsets me, is that we are not standing up for what - Indian issue, political issue - that, I'm not a hundred percent sure what Indian political issues are...I'm hoping, like, my son's generations, and maybe further on, the Indian will probably get more voice

- and I'm already seeing it. Like, even in the last four or five years, you have Kamala Harris you have a lot of people in office. You have Ajit Pai, who I don't like, but at least he's a household name. Uhm, the guy from Louisiana - all these people are getting more and more involved in politics, which is awesome...but I think it's going to take maybe a generation or more for us to be more recognized in politics, and hopefully we'll get there.

Eva (age 34), also Indian American, expresses similar sentiments:

I'm really hopeful because I think...people in government and pop culture, with a few exceptions, who are Indian American, are really awesome, like, bridge builders...kinda use the privilege of being an immigrant who has been deemed as more desirable, even though they're brown, uhm, to open doors for like important conversations about race and racism that like, we have access to because of our experiences...which I think...is really cool...it makes me feel like, proud of us.

Finally, Rosa (age 22) looked to the future in describing how she wants to play a bigger role in helping other immigrants:

...The role I think that I see myself playing is...I could see going to law school perhaps. Or maybe even not going to law school but definitely doing something in the politics, government sort of realm...if it was law school – being an attorney to hopefully, eventually, be a justice. And then with that I could have a really elite kind of position to make change in the way that I hope to see and wish to see.

In short, this future focus is central to the American Ethnic Minority Story. The emphasis on understanding the systemic oppression and racism within the US may be an obstacle to connecting to a personal past because of the dehumanization and devaluing of the human experiences of immigrants and ethnic minorities in the US. Interestingly, there is also a prominent theme around obtaining political power in hopes of shifting power dynamics between ethnic and racial minority and majority groups in the US.

Socialization of Group Stories

In our analyses of socialization, participants highlighted the roles of family and peers, and we found that socialization agents differed by the type of narrative participants employed. First, participants reported that the American Immigrant Story and Origin Story were primarily

socialized by family. For example, Narin exemplified the emphasis on family sacrifice in the American Immigrant Story:

...my mom or my dad specifically would always tell me... "Think about why I came to this country just because, you know, to get a life better than what I had before. And give you something that I never had growing up."

In terms of the Origin Story, Adriana describes below how her grandfather encouraged her to take pride in her indigenous roots:

I know as far as like, in Mexico, my dad – my grandfather always said, like, "Take pride from the Aztecs." And, like the Aztec people were travelers...they traveled a really long way...you can trace back...they traveled through...California region and decided to settle in Mexico, in the base of Mexico City.

These two stories emphasized the historical past, and parental country of origin and sacrifice, so it makes sense that socialization would come primarily from family.

In contrast, the American Ethnic Minority Story was primarily socialized by peers.

Adriana describes her experiences of meeting peers with similar stories in college:

...as far as like, shared experiences go, I didn't get to learn a lot of it until I was in an environment, I could meet other people...I grew up in a really conservative, mostly white community. Uhm, and so I didn't really know a lot of people of color...I think it's really just the fact that I got the ability to be in a more diverse environment is what allowed me to find people with similar stories.

Similarly, Eva describes how her work colleagues socialized her to understand her own experiences as an Indian American woman compared to experiences of other women of color:

...I learned from my coworkers how...Indian American women are often...the model minority...Where you check the box of being a woman of color, but you're coming in with class privilege or something that a lot of other women of color don't have. And so, you're more palatable for the organization, you're not gonna challenge as much as a Black woman might...I learned that from my Black women coworkers, and from my south Asian coworkers...

In sum, the Ethnic Minority was primarily socialized by peers, which may be related to the greater expertise and knowledge-base that peers have about contemporary dynamics of race and ethnicity in the US, in comparison to immigrant parents with much different life experiences.

No Collective Story, No Continuity

In closing the results, it is important to note that three of the 13 participants did not perceive themselves as having collective continuity with a larger group. Our first question was whether these participants had more skeletal narratives in general. In fact, this may account for some of the variance in not perceiving cultural continuity, as one of the participants, Yumi (age 35), was relatively unelaborated about her identity in general. She identified as Korean and White, and after her parents divorced her (white) father married another Korean woman. Yumi was estranged from her mother, and her stepmother raised her “a little Korean girl.” However, when her father divorced her stepmother, he “forced her to be American.” Her story is saturated with feelings of lack of connection or belongingness. At a tearful moment in the interview, she reports:

It just sucks to be taken away from your culture...I know what my American half is like, but I don't know what my Korean half is supposed to be...I'm missing half of my heritage. So...its hard...and I've got a six-year-old daughter who doesn't even know any of these people, and she's a quarter Korean, and how am I gonna help her get in touch with that? You know? It's a lot of pressure.

In Yumi's case the lack of collective continuity, may overlap with the lack of intergenerational narrative webbing in general – an identity that is broadly unelaborated.

However, the other two participants who did not experience collective continuity had elaborated and clear personal and parental narratives, suggesting that this explanation does not fully explain a lack of collective continuity. These two participants raise another possible explanation, however. They were both white-passing, which, coupled with the lack of

knowledge and discussion in their families, may have lessened the necessity of exploration of their ethnic identity (e.g., Gonzales-Backen & Umaña-Taylor, 2011). Further, for one participant, Gina (age 37), this was coupled with explicit socialization towards the mainstream, or White, culture from her Korean mother, who she reported intentionally married a white man:

...I had such a white American upper middle-class upbringing that it was like...Of course I'll go to college, of course I'll date white guys. Of course, I live in like, this predominantly white neighborhood...And I don't even think about - I don't have any sort of insecurity related to being, like, "Oh, I need to pursue this American Dream or this wealth" or things like that. Because my mom was so intentional that she married my dad and got those things for our family that she could kind of erase that part of her life.

Another participant, Paula (aged 52), noted “I'm a Latin kid, but I'm White.” Indeed, she talked about identifying as bi-cultural rather than with a specific ethnic group (her mother was from Chile and her father was a White American), as well as her interest in connecting with others who are bicultural.

Thus, these participants raise questions about individual differences in heritage (e.g., being mixed), not fitting stereotypes or expectations of immigration (e.g., skin color), parental socialization or lack of it, and the loss of connection to one's parent and parental country of origin that leaves one adrift.

Discussion

We found that there are different ways in which collective continuity is constructed in relation to one's personal story. The Immigrant Story operated as a narrative structure for making meaning of immigration to the U.S., but was always used with one of the other two narratives to create personal continuity. The Origin Story and The American Ethnic Minority Story were both used to establish a sense of personal continuity but differed in their orientation to the past (the former), or orientation to the future (the latter), as well as in socialization agents.

Using the Origin Story to create continuity into the past allowed individuals to see their life stories as part of a larger narrative for their social group. Although previous literature has established that group historical narrative as important for personal continuity (Sani et al, 2007; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2014; see also Freeman, 2012), these results provide vivid description of the internalization of group narratives to create personal continuity by extending the personal past into the historical past.

There is currently little research on narrative orientation to the future (Syed & Mclean, 2016), but the current study shows how group narratives may be a useful location for such an examination of continuity. Although The Immigrant Story served as a broad master narrative that allowed participants to imagine a successful future self, The American Ethnic Minority Story allowed participants to conceptualize more concrete strides towards a favorable imagined future of both the self and the group, which included going into politics, striving for media representation, and getting an education for the betterment of one's group.

Additionally, the current study sheds light on the role that family and peers play in constructing collective continuity. Previous literature has established the role that family plays in constructing continuity beyond the self (Fivush et al., 2008; McLean, 2015), however, there is little research that empirically assesses the role that peers play in general narrative identity construction (for exceptions, see McLean & Jennings, 2012; McLean & Pasupathi, 2006; Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2019; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2011), despite peers being one of the most common audiences for personal stories in adolescence and emerging adulthood (McLean, 2005). In line with contemporary identity literature (See Nelson, Syed, Tran, Hu, & Lee, 2018), our findings show that peers play an important role in constructing collective continuity, and

therefore, personal continuity as well, perhaps especially for those who are defined by their ethnic minority status in the US.

Implications and Future Directions

Part of the goal of the present study was to build theory in the area of personal and collective continuity in narrative identity. Below we discuss two possible pathways for future studies, and hope that these data are generative beyond those issues that we raise here.

Developmental Questions

Our descriptive, qualitative analyses cannot speak to generalization, but there may be developmental differences in the use of these stories, particularly as they orient to the past or the future. It is possible that younger people will use the Origin Story as they begin to explore their identities and place in the world, which emphasizes understanding the present through the lens of the past. Further, given that families may play a larger role in socializing this story, it may be more prominent earlier in development. In contrast, the American Ethnic Minority Story may rise in prominence once participants create a coherent sense of continuity into the past and can then focus on creating continuity into the imagined future (McAdams, 1993), which also occurs as they begin to explore their identities with their peers (e.g., Nelson et al., 2018). It is also possible that as people age, generativity motivates them to focus more on the future than the past (Erikson, 1963; McAdams, 2001). For example, Ajay emphasized the importance of his *children* seeing other Indian Americans in politics. It is clear from Ajay's perspective that a favorable future for the group is also a favorable future for the next generation. In short, we propose that developmental questions about collective continuity may be ripe for future investigations.

Immigrant Children or Beyond?

One question we pose is whether these findings extend beyond the experience of immigration. Participants in this sample experienced a tangible threat to collective continuity, making it especially salient. There are many aspects of continuity that are specific to children of immigrants, such as age of arrival, duration of residence, country of origin, and country of residence that may shape the degree to which one maintains that sense of continuity to one's parents' country and culture of origin (e.g., Maehler, Daikeler, Ramos, Husson, & an Nguyen, 2020), along with issues such as the degree of exploration of one's ethnic identity and the practice of customs and language within the family (e.g., Nesteruk et al., 2015). Thus, this group experienced a unique threat and their experience of continuity may be unique.

However, we propose that that use of stories beyond the self to create continuity is not specific to immigrant children. Indeed, others have argued that our identities are tied to our historical past whether we are conscious of it or not (Freeman, 2012; see also McLean & Syed, 2015). Although yet to be examined, we argue that the *awareness* of the role of those stories may be heightened in groups that are particularly threatened in their sense of continuity, such as in the case of immigrants and their children. Indeed, we chose to work with this group because we thought they would have more awareness of these issues (which was confirmed in our pilot testing), making it more possible for us to 'see' these issues of continuity in this investigation.

In fact, more resources are devoted to maintaining collective continuity when it is perceived to be threatened (Jetten & Wohl, 2012), so collective continuity may be more important for marginalized groups who have had their history erased and colonized (e.g., Chandler et al., 2003). For example, individuals who are ethnic minorities tend to engage in more identity exploration in adolescence and emerging adulthood than white majority groups (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004). Additionally, identifying the unfavorable

stigmas of one's group as examples of prejudice and erasure helps group members maintain positive self-image (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and doing so involves some kind of reflective work (e.g., Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, Douglass, & Updegraff, 2018). Indeed, our participants who did not perceive collective continuity and were socialized not to consider their ethnic-racial identities, or were not perceived as ethnic-racial minorities, may reflect this phenomenon. Thus, in looking to other groups, some may be more aware of these issues of collective continuity and its tie to personal continuity, and methodologies that can surface such issues will be important to explore.

We also note that the participants in our study had origins in countries with very different histories and relations with the U.S., from friendly relationships to ones of war and colonization. Further, though all identified as immigrants, the participants entered into a country with very different stereotypes and degrees and forms of oppression levied against them and their families. These issues raise the question of what a systemic approach to the study of collective continuity would look like. Although we cannot answer that question here, we encourage other scholars to consider how systems of oppression and privilege may support or hinder the development of collective continuity in different populations.

Conclusion

Collective continuity is a storied phenomenon that allows participants to create a sense of personal continuity by perceiving their life story as part of a larger group narrative. The historical and ancestral past allows individuals to make sense of how their story is situated in a larger, shared story. The socialization of collective continuity, and therefore, personal continuity, emphasizes the importance of the co-construction of narrative identity (e.g., McLean, 2015), with the present results expanding the role of co-constructors outside of the family to larger

group narratives. Indeed, we emphasize the interdependent nature of life stories – the notion that our stories are not entirely our own. The current literature addresses the role that families (Fivush et al., 2008, McLean, 2015), media (Breen et al., 2017), and cultural narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015) play in helping the individual construct personal continuity, and our results add to the numerous authors and narrative structures at work in constructing personal continuity.

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Table 1

Frequencies of Demographic Information

Variable	Frequency
Age	
18-29	4
30 - 39	7
40+	2
Gender	
Women	7
Men	5
Decline to Answer	1
Sexuality	
Pansexual	1
Bisexual	2
Mostly Heterosexual	1
Heterosexual	9
Parental immigration	
Mother immigrated	11
Father immigrated	8
One immigrant parent	7
Two immigrant parents (same country)	5
Two immigrant parents (different countries)	1
Language spoken at home	
English	5
Parent's language only	1
Multiple languages	7
Participant education	

Some college credit, no degree	1
Associate degree	3
Bachelor's degree	6
Master's degree	2
Did not answer	1
Maternal Education	
High school graduate, diploma, or equivalent	3
Some college credit, no degree	3
Associate degree	1
Bachelor's degree	2
Master's degree	2
Professional degree	1
Did not answer	1
Paternal Education	
Less than high school diploma	2
High school graduate, diploma, or equivalent	3
Bachelor's degree	3
Master's degree	2
Professional degree	1
Doctorate Degree	1
Did not answer	1

Note: Options for education were: None, Less than High School Diploma, High School Graduate/Diploma, Some College Credit (No Diploma), Technical/Trade/Vocational Training, Associate Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Professional Degree, and Doctorate Degree. For maternal and paternal education, there were multiple modes and both of them are given in this table.