Narrative identity in adolescence and adulthood: Pathways of development

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As we embark on a discussion of narrative identity development, we ask you to consider a young man whom we call Stephen¹, a participant in our longitudinal study of identity and personality development in the college context. We have thus far collected nine waves of survey data from Stephen, beginning just before he started college. In this study one of our foci is career identity, particularly for those interested in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) majors, and who come from under-represented backgrounds. Stephen is biracial (Black and White), and just before beginning college reported a desire to major in Chemistry as part of his goal of becoming a physician. As we have followed him, he has indeed remained committed to his goal of entering the medical field and has indeed majored in Chemistry. His survey measures show a well-adjusted young man who is quite normative for his cohort, scoring within one standard deviation of the mean for multiple measures of well-being, personality traits, and identity exploration and commitment over the first two years of our study. However, something changes at the beginning of the third year of college, and the steady, normative pathway suggested by his scale scores takes a dramatic turn. All of a sudden he begins to deeply explore his identity, co-occurring with a large dip in his commitments (moving him outside of one standard deviation from the mean for his cohort); these changes seem to be particularly prominent in the domain of ethnic identity. Thus, seemingly out of nowhere, Stephen moves from a place of relatively normativity and stability, to a unique and unstable place. Although we have gained all of this information from his survey measures, we still don't really know what happened. What has prompted this shift? What does this change in his self-views look like?

¹ Stephen is a pseudonym, and we have changed some details of his case to protect privacy.

Luckily, Stephen did not only complete survey measures of well-being, personality traits, and identity processes, he has also completed multiple narrative assessments during each year of college, data that tell a much more elaborated story. These narratives not only include some explanation for why we see this shift in his identity during his third year of college, but also point us to how he actually develops over those three years, despite the general stability in his survey measures of development. These narrative data begin to tell us about the experiences that underlie relatively abstract processes of exploration and commitment, the shifts we see in these processes, and they also tell us about the content of identity – *what it is that is actually developing*. With these data we see that a narrative approach highlights how someone who seems relatively average, like most other people in his cohort at least, is an individual with experiences worthy of study as they help to illuminate how and what develops as young people come to understand who they are.

We tantalize you with this abstract rendition of Stephen's case, to which we will return in more detail after a discussion of the extant research on narrative identity development. We begin with a brief comment on the history of the field and a theoretical overview, followed by methodological considerations. We then highlight the most up to date findings, and elaborate on Stephen's case, and what it reveals about narrative identity development.

Historical Context and Theoretical Considerations

As is articulated in the opening to this Handbook, the fields of personality and developmental psychology have historically existed as separate disciplines, and narrative identity is a particularly good example of this division. But it is also an example of the potential for the integration between these fields. Indeed, beginning around the same time, in the mid-1980s,

developmental and personality psychologists began to consider the importance of stories, albeit in very different ways.

The current iteration of the study of stories within the discipline of personality was largely driven by the motivation to return greater breadth and depth to the study of individual differences beyond traits, which were the focus of the field of personality in the 1980s. Motivated by this emphasis on broader, more holistic definitions of persons, researchers began to examine individual differences in ‘life stories,’ or in the construction of in-depth personally defining autobiographical memory narratives (e.g., McAdams, 1985). This work led to a new framework for the study of personality that included multiple ‘levels’ of personality, one of which was narrative identity (McAdams, 1995; McAdams & Pals, 2006; see also McAdams, 2015; Singer, 2004; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne, 2000). Though conceptualized as a framework for *personality*, McAdams’ (1985) original work was both personological *and* developmental. McAdams emphasized the Eriksonian roots of his framework, offering this approach to identity as an alternative to Marcia’s (1966) status approach to identity (see also McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2015). McAdams argued that the narrative approach was more closely aligned with Erikson’s emphasis on temporal integration, as a part of the development of personal continuity (and see more recent iterations of this approach, McAdams 2015). Thus, in this area, narrative identity is defined as an integrative story that explains how one came to be the person one is, a story that provides unity and purpose to the individual. Not surprisingly then, variations in the construction of this story are associated with psychological functioning in predictable ways.

In a parallel empirical universe, developmentalists, largely driven by the motivation to understand childhood amnesia, began to examine the development of autobiographical memory

in early childhood (e.g., Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; see also Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

Researchers identified past-event conversations between parent and child as a location for the development of self and autobiography, as children learn to tell stories about themselves through time with the help of their parents, or storytelling ‘experts.’ Therefore, the focus of this line of research is on the inherent social action and activity of narrative, which creates a link between self and other, and the individual and his or her larger culture (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Through storytelling practices children learn not only about the structure of a story, but also the content – what kinds of stories are valued, and how should they be shared. As children gain narrative skills they continue to construct the stories of their lives in conversation with others (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006 for a review), and in light of the larger cultural messages and pressures to which they are exposed. Adolescents and adults begin to wrestle with these ‘master narratives’ as they negotiate a place of individual self-understanding within a larger cultural and social context that can both encourage and impinge on personal identity (Hammack, 2011; McLean & Syed, 2015). This theoretical perspective broadens the lens of empirical study beyond the individual to other people and broader cultural structures connected to that individual, with the emphasis on the co-authorship of the self (McLean, 2015).

Thus, these two strains of work led to quite different emphases – the latter focused on conversations between parents and children about specific past events as a mechanism of narrative development, and the former focused on how patterns in these much larger stories are associated with psychological functioning. Around the turn of the century, these literatures began to find connection (e.g., McAdams, 2001; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000), and the past 15

years has seen a flourishing of conversation between these researchers, nicely seen in this section of the current volume (see also Fivush & Zaman, 2015; McAdams & Zapata-Gietl, 2015).

As is often the case when disciplines merge, the intersection of these two fields creates a far more comprehensive understanding of the construct of narrative identity. The developmental focus brings an emphasis on skill development and normative changes that are linked to other shifts, such as cognitive development. A developmental lens also highlights the contextually relevant mechanisms of development, such as the emphasis on relational contexts and conversations as drivers of skill development and narrative elaboration (Fivush et al., 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). For example, McLean et al., (2007) proposed that *situated stories* are stories told in particular proximal and distal contexts, to particular audiences, by individuals with particular needs and goals. The repeated process of situated storytelling is a mechanism by which selves develop, both in terms of the maintenance of stable aspects of selves, as well as for growth and change in narrative identity. Similarly, personality psychologists address mechanisms, but from a different lens, as with the examination of how traits may set the stage for certain components of autobiographical reasoning within narratives, or in how autobiographical reasoning may contribute to changes in personality over time (Pals, 2006; Lilegendahl, Helson, & John, 2013). Personality psychologists also bring an emphasis on variability, rather than normative trends, opening the possibility for thinking about *trajectories* of development, on which we elaborate with Stephen's case.

Given this now robust literature, there is also some agreement about some of the basic narrative features that are reliably associated with important outcomes. Broadly these features of narrative can be thought of as capturing motivational themes, affective themes, coherence or structural elements of narrative, and processes of autobiographical reasoning, or integrative

meaning. We bring the reader's attention to Adler's chapter (this volume) for a more intensive review of the primary constructs in the field (see also Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013). However, pertinent to the work we describe in this chapter is the construct of autobiographical reasoning. This feature of narrative centers on the degree to which an individual has engaged in reflection on the past and what it means to his or her current self-understanding (see Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pals, 2006; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007), representing a critical process for developing a more integrative identity. Finally, we note that narrative methods, to which we turn next, are especially generative, and researchers need not be constrained by examining only the constructs we list here. There are many ways to examine personal narratives, which is one of the benefits of this approach.

Methodological Considerations

In general, narrative psychologists who take a quantitative approach do so by eliciting narratives via written, interview, or conversational assessments, which are then coded by third parties for a variety of dimensions, some of which were listed above (e.g., coherence, emotional valence). These narrative codes are often then examined in relation to constructs such as well-being, personality traits, and the like (see Adler, this volume). We do not review coding processes here, as these issues are well-covered in the literature (see Adler, Dunlop, Fivush, Lilgendahl, Lodi-Smith, McAdams, McLean, Pasupathi, & Syed, in press; Syed & Nelson, 2015). Instead we draw attention to three particularly relevant issues for the study of narrative identity *development*. First, we address the issue of capturing the entire life story versus specific memory narratives, in terms of what prompts are most appropriate at different developmental stages. Second, we discuss the choice of using specific versus open-ended narrative prompts,

which brings attention to capturing identity-relevant content, as well as identity processes.

Finally, we discuss the issue of repeated narration, or story development over time, of obvious developmental interest. We elaborate on each of these below.

The Life Story versus Memory-specific Prompts

The first concern is the decision of whether to assess the entire life story or specific memory narratives. Although there are a number of reasons why one may consider one or the other, a significant factor is stage of development. The life story is a comprehensive (but not necessarily all-encompassing or veridical) account of how one has come to be the person one is today (see Adler, this volume). The full life story has typically been assessed with the McAdams' (1993) Life Story Interview, which includes a set of prompts that invite the participant to divide his or her life into chapters and identify many qualities of the life story, including themes, high points and low points, and significant interpersonal influences. To construct meaningful responses to such prompts may take years of practice at storytelling, learning about one's self and the culture in which that self is defined, as well as employing the cognitive skills and motivation to understand and communicate who one is. Thus, although the precursors to its construction begin in early childhood and continue to develop throughout adolescence (Reese, Jack, & White, 2010; see Habermas & Reese, 2015 for a review), it is not until adulthood that the full and comprehensive assessment of the life story, as assessed with the Life Story Interview, is likely to be most valuable and appropriate. It is not surprising that this interview has primarily been used with middle-aged, or older, adults who have reached a point in life when identity has fully formed and providing an integrative account of one's life is a meaningful exercise.

In contrast, adolescents and emerging adults typically do not yet have a fully constructed life story or narrative identity; in this case, the collection of more specific memories, such as turning points and self-defining memories, can help to uncover patterns of narration that may be important to linking together a fuller life story as development progresses (but see Reese, Chen, Jack, & Hayne, 2010 for a developmentally-appropriate life story measure for adolescents). Studies using specific memory narratives have fruitfully focused on one highly significant memory narrative (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006) or several memory narratives selected for their self-defining qualities (Blagov & Singer, 2004). These specific prompts can tell us about the relevant concerns to those at different developmental stages (e.g., school, romance, work), as well as processes used to understand those more specific experiences, without requiring participants to construct an entire life story. Recently Syed (under review) has suggested that these prompt-specific narratives, which do not require the kind of integrative work of a full life story, may better reflect level two of personality, as they concern developmental tasks and concerns.

Open versus Closed-ended Prompts

A second methodological distinction to consider is between broad, open-ended prompts that give participants a wide range of latitude with respect to memory content (e.g., self-defining memories, high points, etc.), and prompts that are tailored to specific identity contents, such as social identities (e.g., ethnicity, Syed, 2010; gender, McLean, Shucard, & Syed, 2016a), or other domains of identity (e.g., relationships, religion, or values; McLean, Syed, & Shucard, 2016b). Both have value for the study of narrative identity development. At the broad, open-ended level, participants are unconstrained and able to share from the domains of identity and experience that are the most emotionally salient and authentically connected to current self-understanding (see

McLean, Syed, Yoder, & Greenhoot, 2014). In contrast, prompting participants to narrate experiences relevant to specific identity domains and contexts allows the researcher to tailor the narrative approach to specific developmental concerns and challenges (Syed, under review). For example, in our longitudinal study of narrative identity development during college, we prompt for academic and romantic high points and low points at the end of each school year. In this way, we have adapted the classic high point and low point prompts to be specific to two domains that are central to self-exploration and identity development during college, with the goal of tapping into active narrative identity processes as they are unfolding in context. As we will demonstrate with Stephen's case, our aim with this study is to make effective use of combining broad and context-specific prompts in order to elicit the fullest picture of narrative identity development during emerging adulthood.

Prompts targeting specific events and identity contents have also been useful for research on narrative identity development throughout adulthood. In particular, several studies have demonstrated the usefulness of prompting for identity-challenging and difficult life experiences (Pals, 2006), such as divorce or having a child with a disability (King & Raspin, 2004; King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). In this context, the narrative approach has proven to be useful in revealing how adults attempt to make sense of disruptive experiences and rebuild their identities in the aftermath. Nevertheless, the use of prompts about specific identity contents has not been particularly common in research on adult narrative identity development, and we suggest that this is an underutilized methodological approach that researchers should consider more often for midlife and aging samples (e.g., parenting, retirement, health). Regardless of developmental stage, researchers who have relied solely on traditional quantitative approaches to study domain-specific aspects of identity development may benefit from adding narrative

prompts to their studies. The qualitative richness and open-ended nature of narratives often reveals unpredicted new insights about the experience of identity development within specific contexts. For example, narratives allow participants to describe identity-relevant experiences holistically, which can reveal how, and where, different identity contents intersect (see McLean et al., 2014), which we also explore in our case study.

Repeated Narration

Finally, it may be argued that the narrative approach to personality and identity is especially well-suited for studying how the self is constructed, maintained, and transformed through *time*. This makes it quite surprising that so few studies of narrative identity and its development have involved the repeated measurement of narrative; that is how, or if, stories are repeated over time. Even when studies have been longitudinal, it has typically been the case that qualities coded from narratives at one point in time are used to predict outcomes and changes over time in other measures, such as ego development or well-being (e.g., King & Raspin, 2004; Pals, 2006). However, this is starting to change with recent longitudinal studies (Dunlop, Guo, & McAdams, 2016; Lilgendahl & McLean, 2015). For example, in our current longitudinal study, we collect narratives three times during each year of college in order to track patterns of both stability and change in self-narration and predict patterns of change in personality and identity measures from those pathways of narration. The value of examining repeated narration is that we can see not only where the stability lies in narrative identity, but also what changes and how, as we expect normative growth and evolution in stories (e.g., McAdams, 1993). The value of repeated narration for advancing our understanding of narrative identity development is also a theme of our case study.

Narrative Identity Development: Normative Trends and Individual Differences

One could almost say that the beginning of one's narrative identity is in utero. As parents anticipate the child they will have, they may begin to have ideas about characteristics of this child, and even create stories about the developing being. Arguably the first big story (perhaps beyond conception) is birth, an experience that of course is not remembered by the main character, but is often narrated with frequency to the child, becoming a part of the 'narrative ecology' in which the child is raised (McLean, 2015; McLean & Breen, 2014; Reese, Hayne, & MacDonald, 2008; see also Zaman & Fivush, 2011). Thus, as parents tell stories to and about their children, the seeds of narrative identity are planted.

Beginning in very early childhood, around two or three years of age, parents and children begin the process of engaging in 'past-event conversations,' the kinds of conversations that can seem mundane – what did you do at Grandma's, or what you had for breakfast – but that lay the foundation for learning the skill of narration, as well as for learning about developing self. The vast literature on narrative development in early childhood is well covered in this volume (Fivush; see also Fivush et al., 2006), so suffice to say that parents play a large role in scaffolding the skills for telling stories, the interest in doing so, as well as early individual differences in narration, such as how elaborative a child is when telling stories.

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are heightened times of identity development, as we see increases in autobiographical reasoning processes used to construct that larger story (e.g., Habermas and de Silveira, 2008; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2008). For example, normative gains are made, especially between ages 12 and 20, in forming causal links between time periods and between events and the broader self, as well as providing broader biographical understanding and context to one's life story (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). These increases are likely due to continued development and refinement of cognitive skills that allow for the careful reflective and

analytical work of constructing a life story, and the responses to the many changes that occur during this time period that need sense-making. During the college years, the narration of major life story scenes shows normative increases in emotional positivity and self-differentiation, which is consistent with continued gains in identity development during this period (McAdams et al., 2006).

Another press for the emergence of identity development is the social and cultural demand to define oneself. Erikson (1968) emphasized the need for individuals to define themselves in relation to the larger culture, or to find their place in their communities (see also Syed & McLean, 2016). More recently various researchers have proposed refinement on these ideas, refinements that center on the understanding of the life course (Arnett, in press); the cultural concept of biography (Habermas, 2007), the life script (Rubin & Berntsen, 2003), and the biographical master narrative (McLean & Syed, 2015). The common thread across these proposals is that there are culturally normative events that should occur in a person's life (e.g., marriage and childbearing), depending on the culture that they are in, as well as culturally normative timing of those events (e.g., marriage before childbearing). It is now clear that this knowledge about the normative biography for given cultures is acquired beginning in late middle childhood, and into adolescence (e.g., Bohn & Berntsen, 2008, 2013; Habermas, 2007). In sum, there are various internal and external pressures that make adolescence and emerging adulthood a time ripe for identity development.

Although these earlier stages play a special role in identity development, identity continues to be relevant across the lifespan (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2015; Lilgendahl, 2015; McAdams, 2015; Syed & McLean, in press). As new events are experienced, such as marriage, divorce, childrearing, and retirement, new chapters or interpretations of one's life story may

emerge. Indeed, the research on adulthood has also found normative changes, such as the increased reflection and integrative meaning-making that continues through mid-life, and the increase in stable understandings of self in later adulthood (McLean, 2008; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2008; Singer, Rexhaj, & Baddeley, 2007). However, there is a rather significant gaping hole in the narrative identity literature on adults in their later 20s and those in their 30s, and even 40s (for exceptions see Carlsson, Wängqvist, & Frisé, 2015; Habermas & Kober, 2015; Dunlop, Walker, Hanley & Harake, 2016). Research on personality traits has shown that the important developmental transitions that take place during those years, including the transition out of school and into the workforce, transitions between jobs or careers, transitions in to and out of romantic relationships, and the onset of parenting and children leaving the home (e.g., Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003). Given the extent to which such experiences may transform identity and require sense-making and narrative integration, it is notable that there has not been substantial empirical (or theoretical) work in the field of narrative identity on these topics.

Along with the differences in processes of autobiographical reasoning at different life stages, it is likely that there are differences in the content of identity at different life stages. Identity content, as opposed to process, has been relatively neglected in the field of identity development (see Galliher, McLean, & Syed, in press). However, as we just noted, we would expect that the contents of identity may shift in developmentally normative ways from the intensity of schooling and romance in adolescence and emerging adulthood to the intensity of work-life and parenting in mid-life. Examining what contents individuals are working on provides us not only with the necessary descriptive information about the phenomenon under study, but also shows that individuals reason in different ways about different kinds of contents.

For example, there appears to be more reasoning amongst emerging adults about contents that involve some degree of choice or volition, such as politics and religion, compared to contents that are more ascribed, or for which their personal importance is culturally obvious, such as family (McLean et al., 2016b).

Much of the work that we have reviewed here has focused on normative developments, such as the increase in autobiographical reasoning skills, consistent with many developmental approaches. However, there are also individual differences in development. Much of the work has been on how individual differences at levels one and two, and primarily at level one, are associated with narratives. For example, extant research has demonstrated how narrative identity may be involved in both the continuity and development of personality. On the side of continuity, research has shown that the basic Big Five traits, which are relatively stable over time (e.g., Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006), are correlated with predictable qualities in narratives. For example, the traits of extraversion and agreeableness are associated with more themes of love and friendship in life stories, the trait of openness is associated with greater complexity and self-differentiation, and the trait of neuroticism manifests itself with muted positive affect and more negative conclusions in narratives of past events (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; McAdams, Anyidoho, Brown, Huang, Kaplan, & Machado, 2004).

Longitudinal research suggests that such findings may reflect more than mere trait expressions and that narrative processes may play an active causal role in continuity by mediating the influence of traits on later life outcomes (e.g., Pals, 2006; Sutin & Robins, 2005). Further, under some circumstances, narrative processes may also be the agents of personality growth and change, particularly in the context of narrating difficult and identity-challenging life events. Specifically, several studies have shown that narrating life's challenges in adulthood

with an emphasis on accommodative or exploratory processing – i.e., examining the ways those events may transform the self – is predictive of increases in ego development over time (King et al., 2000; Lilgendahl et al., 2013).

Our review of the current state of the field, brings us to the conclusion that combining developmental and personality approaches is a fruitful avenue. What is relatively lacking in the existing literature is an examination of *individual differences in the trajectories of narratives themselves*, an approach we have taken in a recently launched longitudinal project.

Trajectories of Development in Emerging Adulthood: The Identity Pathways Project

“ . . . After my first study participation I remember being so excited because I knew exactly what I wanted to do. As I was hooked up to an EEG machine and asked several questions, I remember being in awe by the whole process and all the equipment. It made me want to do research, and the more I thought about it the rest of the day I realized I wanted to do research in medicine which has sculpted my life since then . . . It felt so good to have a direction, a goal to work towards . . . ”

“Last semester was the first time in my life that I legitimately failed any exam . . . I remember picking up my exam and just crying for about ten minutes. It did then and still does cause me to question my academic interests and whether I even have the capability to excel in organic chemistry--whether I even have the capacity to think in the specific way that organic chemistry requires. I know I am really interested in chemistry, but I have doubted my major and future plans ever since.”

“ . . . I remember when my boyfriend and I broke up, it was really hard for me. He was my first time love, my first serious boyfriend; he taught me a lot about people, relationships and myself. . . Then one night about two weeks after it happened, I called him up and things were o.k. at first, we were just talking, and then it got serious . . . I totally lost it. All he could say was “listen to yourself!” And I did in that moment, I stopped and heard myself and heard how pathetic I was, how I had lost all self-respect. I think it really made me realize how ridiculous it is to invest all of your happiness into a relationship . . . I knew after that, I had to find happiness in myself. . . I have been stronger in myself and in relationships ever since.”

The preceding memory narratives come from emerging adults in the midst of their college years. We use these narratives to demonstrate the close-up snapshot they offer of the typical emotional ups and downs of college life, which commonly revolve around

academics/career and relationships. The underlined portions also vividly illustrate active engagement with the dynamic process of narrative identity development, via processes of autobiographical reasoning. These narratives provide a glimpse of the utility of narrative for understanding identity development in terms of content, context, and process; however, alone, they provide only one relatively static snapshot of narrative identity. With our new longitudinal study, the Identity Pathways Project, we are aiming to further enrich what is so valuable about the narrative identity approach by capitalizing on the value of repeated narration over many points in time (see also Dunlop et al., 2016). Further, our goal in this study is to use a variety of different types of narrative prompts, both broad and domain-specific, to examine how individual differences in pathways of identity development differentiate between those who make a successful transition into adult life and those who struggle. Our outcomes include personality maturity, well-being, and career identity achievement, outcomes linked to role-related success in adulthood, such as occupational attainment and relationship stability (e.g., Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Roberts, et al., 2007). As mentioned earlier, we are also particularly interested in understanding issues of persistence in STEM majors in college. Stephen's case allows us to highlight how some of these empirical goals are well-served with a narrative approach.

The Case of Stephen

As we briefly reviewed in our opening, Stephen is a biracial male (Black and White) who is pre-med, majoring in Chemistry. Although there are layers of richness to Stephen's case, we focus primarily on issues related to his choice of major, as this particular aspect of his identity development is illustrative of the richness and unique value of a narrative approach. In this case, his academic trajectory and his ethnic identity become intricately linked in meaningful ways, and in ways that are not clearly visible from other types of data.

Stephen reports that his father is a doctor, which seems to be the main reason he has chosen this career path. For example, just before beginning college he writes about why he is interested in being a doctor, “My dad is a doctor and he took our family on medical mission trips around the world. Seeing him help those in need was really cool and I want to do the same.” In the middle of his second year he wrote, “The fact that my father is a doctor probably has something to do with my desire to become a physician, but the reason for this is that I have grown up watching what he does and it looks more like fun than work.” Thus, he is very stable in linking his father’s work and his own career goals, but they are not particularly developed or reflective goals, and there is also little evidence in his narratives at these assessments points of serious exploration of other career possibilities; thus, Stephen initially provides an excellent example of apparent identity foreclosure (see Schwartz, 2001).

Early in college, Stephen also seems to compartmentalize his ideas about academics and career from other parts of himself. He does not connect his goals to relationships (besides the relatively surface-level connection to his father), to his larger value system, or really to any other part of himself. When asked about his academic high and low points at the end of his freshman and sophomore years of college, he talks about his struggles in classes and study habits, but not much else. Given the work on ethnic minorities and identity in relation to STEM fields (see Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011 for a review), it is interesting that he never talks about his ethnicity in the context of his academic and career goals. It is possible that growing up with an African-American father who is a doctor gives him a sense of belongingness in his science courses that many ethnic minority students do not feel (e.g., Syed, 2010b).

In fact, Stephen’s ethnic identity appears only twice in our assessments so far; however, it does so in particularly vivid ways. In his first assessment, just before beginning college, he

reported an experience with racism in response to a self-defining memory prompt. Meaning, that for Stephen, this is a vivid, emotional, important event that he has thought about many times, and that he thinks defines an important part of who he is. The event is the birthday party of a friend in 4th grade. Stephen writes:

We were in the middle of a Nerf battle and I was one of the last people who had not been hit. Suddenly, I heard one of the kids who I did not know scream, "Get the darkie!" It took me a while to realize that he was referring to me because I was half black, didn't really consider myself to be very dark, and had never experienced anyone singling me out as different before that moment. This was the first time that I realized that my skin color and hair really were "defining" parts of who I was or what other people thought I was. I brushed the comment off, and didn't even tell it to my parents for the worry that they would call the boy's parents and embarrass me. Now I realize that this is one of the first memories that I have of people treating me differently because of my ethnicity. After not talking to the boy about why his comment was an awful one or not discussing that moment with my parents I have come to learn that my response to the situation was the wrong one. I do not believe that I should have started a fight over it, for that could only result in the wrongful propagation of a false stereotype, but I do believe that I should have explained to the boy why what he said was so inappropriate. Thankfully, this memory has helped me learn from the past and now whenever I experience racism or stereotyping, I am sure to call it out in order to try to dwindle racism down so that my children's memories contain none such as this one.

There are many levels of analysis that we could target here. But let's begin with the underlined portions of the narrative, which display autobiographical reasoning. Here Stephen has taken this event and has drawn some kind of meaning from it, meaning that not only changes his behavior, but also allows him a deeper form of self-understanding. Stephen decides to combat racism, and feels that his behavior can be one way to do that – both in what he does not do (fight), and what he does do (call it out).

After we read this first narrative, we assumed that ethnicity was central to Stephen's identity and that we would see him continue to reason about it and bring it into reasoning about other aspects of his identity through the college years. This is a time of heightened reflection on one's self, perhaps especially for those emerging adults who must begin to think about how their

ethnic identities interact with other parts of themselves, such as major and occupational choice. Indeed, Moin Syed has shown that college is a time of heightened ethnic identity exploration and questioning for ethnic minority students (Syed & Azmitia, 2008), and also that ethnic minority students tend to gravitate towards majors that allow exploration of this aspect of their identities, such as those majors in the social sciences or humanities (Syed, 2010a). Would Stephen lose interest in pre-med, instead finding room for exploration in psychology or politics?

Well, no. We hear nothing about Stephen's ethnic identity, or ethnicity *at all*, for almost two and a half years (we also did not ask). He writes about classes and dating, in ways that are relatively typical of college students, not particularly unique or notable. Then ethnicity reemerges. In the beginning of his junior year, he again responds to a self-defining memory prompt, though this time the prompt was shifted to focus on a self-defining memory that has a significant impact on one's *ideal future self*. Stephen writes:

My racial identity. This is something that I have been trying to figure out how it fits into my life for, well, my whole life, but in the past year and really past couple months, it has really exploded. I am half black and half white- or at least that is what I used to say. I've recently been saying "My dad's black and my mom's white" because I'm not really sure what I am. I think I have been losing part of my white identity. I don't know if this is a good or bad thing, but it sure has been fucking with me and I can assure that it has contributed to the depression that I have been feeling lately. I feel lost. However, I have finally allowed myself to open my eyes to the fucked up racist world that we live in. I think that I used to try to hide it from myself because I don't know how to deal with the fact that half of who I am has been, and will be for the foreseeable future, the oppressor of my other identity. I have darker skin than almost everyone in my classes. I have the black hair, large lips, wide nose. I am seen as black. However, I grew up in a predominately white neighborhood and had mostly white friends. I could never talk about race like I do now. I couldn't even address it with my parents- or at least my mom because I was scared of hurting her feelings. But these are not things that I learned suddenly as a result of some instance, but putting all of my life experiences together has happened so suddenly that I feel like I am in shock and I feel in a daze most days, thinking about every interaction that I have had with my white friends, professors, and even mom, trying to piece together what they all mean. I am becoming an angry black man. I hope to learn something from all of this and I hope to be able to learn to love all parts of myself, but honestly, I have some hate for myself- at least the white part- which I need to channel into something productive.

Like his first narrative, Stephen is forced into considering his ethnic identity from experiences with racism. Unlike his first narrative, however, he does not know what to make of his experiences. He is in a state of confusion, uncertainty, and anger. He has not yet drawn meaning, or a full understanding, of these events. But he is working on it.

First, Stephen is beginning to draw links *between* the parts of himself, something he had done little of in his previous assessments. He sees his ethnic identity as tightly connected to his family, to his friends, and to the culture in which he lives. This process of constructing an identity is not a process that involves introspection on isolated parts of the self. This process involves reconstructing and revealing the links between various parts of the self (Syed & McLean, 2016), some of them impossible to ignore – such as the ethnicities of his parents, as well as the societal structure that might require confrontation of these issues, as he intimates in his comments about “a fucked up world” and how he is “seen as black.”

Because Stephen still appears to be working on this integration, and has not yet articulated it to us (or perhaps to himself), we offer some speculations about what these links might look like. In the other narratives he reported, we see a repeated mention of his high school friends, friends that he let go of quickly, and with some apparent anger. In his first year he calls them “childish.” In the second year they are “immature, elitist brats.” They are not even mentioned in the third year. Based on what he says in the self-defining memory narrative above about his White friends, perhaps they did not allow for, or embrace, his full expression of himself; it seems that he did not even want to try to express that part of himself with them.

Another speculation involves the timing of this narrative. It was written at a time when the preceding year saw the events in Ferguson, Missouri, followed by the deaths of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, two police officers in Brooklyn, and Sandra Bland in

Texas. This was (and still is) a time of extreme heightened attention to being a Black male in America; it may have been a time that would have been near impossible to *not* examine this aspect of self – both at the distal level of a national movement, for example, as well as in proximal daily experiences of being a Black man. Thus, the cultural context of his identity development is intertwined with how he begins to think about himself, as he makes links to the stereotype of the angry black man, the implied meaning of his physical features, the history of oppression that has such a painful intersection within his family, and understandable self-hatred connected to his White self. This is a very vivid example of the link between the individual and the culture as it plays out in a very specific context, in a very specific life.

We have drawn some possible conclusions about what is going on with Stephen, but in his narrative he portrays himself as in a state of disarray, with so many components of himself to understand and to link together, knowing he needs to find some meaning, some peace, and some integration of his self. And we are left in some disarray too. What happens to Stephen?

Thank goodness this is not his last narrative.

At the end of this same school year, spring of junior year, he reports on the academic high point of his year.

A high point of my academic life was when I applied for a program that I thought was going to be another year doing more hard science research internship turned out to be the most amazing internship opportunity I have ever had. While I thought I wanted to do clinical research this summer to add to my Medical School apps, the program I had applied to, informed me DURING MY INTERVIEW that this was not going to be benchwork at all and that they have a focus on social science research. I had to keep the shock off of my face. Turns out, the program is centered on research to improve health equity among minorities which I had not yet known was the perfect thing that I needed in my life at the time. I was already worried I would burn out from the research if I didn't have a break and I have always been interested in social justice but I didn't fully know how much bias comes into play in health care. This was the perfect thing for me and especially because I want to go into the health care field, I can take what I learned with me and work within the system to make progression. So far it's a pretty dope internship.

Although Stephen does not (yet) make an explicit connection to his own ethnic identity (and we eagerly await the coming narratives), this seems an event ripe for possible integration and meaning-making in understanding his career goals and trajectories as linked to, and as a part of, his ethnic identity. He has not mentioned social justice explicitly before, but he stories this as a relatively stable part of himself. Did he just neglect to mention it, or is this something new that he reconstructs as having some continuity? Or perhaps he has not made the explicit links that might be there implicitly. In his very first narrative he writes about standing up to racism, to ‘call it out.’ This suggests that he *has* thought about issues of social justice, so perhaps as his story evolves he will create these links across the events in his life to create a greater sense of personal continuity and coherence.

We see also see other, more recent, hints that the internship experience was an event in-the-making. His academic high and low points from the end of sophomore year show that his interests in the ‘hard’ sciences are being challenged and social sciences are becoming more interesting to him, much as Syed (2010) would have predicted. For example, he struggles in a Physics course, but finds great inspiration in a Sociology course which, “...was the most influential class I have ever taken... ever.” He wants to switch majors to sociology but cannot do it because of the credit requirements, but does write, “It did make me start considering more of a social science route in terms of down the road and after graduation.” Thus, the internship comes at a very opportune moment in his life. Perhaps this is an event that allows him to start finding some integration in the various parts of himself that began to come to the fore during this third year of college.

Indeed, it can take time for events to find their place with each other, and for parts of the self to find their place with each other. In Stephen’s case, this time may have been lengthened

by the level of untroubled identity foreclosure he exhibited as he entering into college. He was confident and unreflective about being pre-med, and he also seemed to have ethnicity all figured out, in that he had learned the positive (but perhaps overly simplistic and optimistic) lesson from the 4th grade birthday party that he should always stand up to racism. Thus, it seems to have taken some challenging and unsettling experiences – struggling with and not truly enjoying the hard sciences, along with increasingly difficult experiences with racism – to break through that foreclosed identity and push Stephen into a more open and exploratory state (see also Neville, & Cross, 2017). This more exploratory identity state may be part of what allows some new and positive experiences like the Sociology class and the internship to take root and have an impact on his identity development. In the internship narrative, we see how these two critical pieces of his identity – career and ethnicity -- starting to deepen as they intersect. In developing a vision of himself as someone who will work within the health care system to eliminate racial bias in the delivery of health care, we simultaneously see Stephen's career identity and interest in social justice (arguably closely related to his ethnic identity) transform from underdeveloped simplicities to concrete meaning and purpose.

Will this new direction in Stephen's career plans be a catalyst for resolving the difficult questioning he has recently experienced with respect to his multi-racial identity? We do not know, and only time will tell. It is worth noting that career and race/ethnicity are fundamentally different aspects of identity in one important way. While one's major and career plans are relatively chosen components of identity, ethnicity is an *ascribed* identity, and is therefore a fundamentally unchangeable part of the person that some would argue *must* be addressed in some way, at least if one is of minority status in the U. S., particularly in the current climate. Race is also a fundamentally social identity that is intertwined with many other aspects of

identity in complex ways, including family, religion, culture, politics, sexuality, peer relations, etc., and may therefore be informed by a variety of events that are unplanned and unfold non-linearly (e.g., encounters with racism). Race is always there, but may float in and out of the forefront of identity depending on life circumstances. Thus, it makes sense that ethnic identity may take a great deal of time and effort to construct, as we see so vividly in Stephen's narrative.

In sum, in our analysis of Stephen, in which we have gone beyond the typical measures of personality and identity development, we have gained some real insights. We have learned that despite the stability in his major choice, there has been an incredible change in the attitude about that major, the meaning of it, and the possibilities that it holds for his future self. It becomes more of his own, not just linked to his father's career. We see how some issues become more or less salient over time within one person. We see how experiences accumulate into moments of seemingly sudden insight. We see how various components of the self do or do not work together. All of these insights are insights that are exceedingly difficult to 'see' with survey measures (Syed & McLean, 2016).

New Lines of Inquiry Arising from Stephen's case

The observations we have made about Stephen's unique pathway of narrative identity development point to several broader conclusions that illuminate important new lines of inquiry for the field. First, Stephen's pattern of narration shows the non-linear ebb and flow of identity over time, something only intense repeated measures can truly reveal. We see how the explanation of why Stephen wants to be a doctor remains quite stable, and foreclosed, until new experiences open up exploration. We also see how the compartmentalization of the various aspects of his identity, in particular ethnicity and occupational contents, may stifle exploration. When he starts to consider himself more deeply, the possibility arises for creating more coherent

spaces of intersection. We also gain some insights about identity foreclosure and the dangers of staying on the STEM path simply because it is encouraged by family and has a long history of personal commitment (beginning before college). Stephen's commitment to a pre-med major may have closed him off to exploring other interests in the first two years of college, something he is only fully understanding now. In sum, Stephen's case suggests many possibilities for how repeated narration can be used in future research to examine not just the presence vs. absence of identity processes, as has typically been the focus, but also how events and life circumstances can serve to dynamically suppress or trigger identity processes over time, in sometimes non-linear and intersecting ways (see McLean & Pasupathi, 2012 for calls on this issue in the context of combining status and narrative approaches to identity).

Second, we also see that it is not only the difficult and challenging events that inspire identity work, an implicit and sometimes explicit argument in research on narrative identity (e.g., Pals, 2006), but also that positive events can affirm self or stimulate exploration, change, and meaning, which may be especially important in emerging adulthood when identity is first forming (Lilgendahl, 2015). The class in sociology revealed a new aspect of Stephen's self that prompted exploration from his excitement about possibilities for different areas of study. That opening up and excitement may have been what allowed him to embrace the opportunity that unfolded in his internship. Without that positive experience in class, the internship may not have been received with such enthusiasm. Still, these positive events may have been so influential in that particular moment of Stephen's life because they were occurring in parallel with difficult ones, namely struggles in pre-med courses and encounters with racism. Thus, an examination of various types of events and the dynamic relations between them seems critical for a full understanding of identity development.

Finally, as we have discussed above, like many developmentally oriented research programs (see Galliher et al., in press), the extant research on narrative identity has primarily focused on processes of narrative identity development. We see an area ripe for investigation to be the *content* of identity development, as connected to those processes (see McLean et al., 2014; 2016a; 2016b; Syed & McLean, 2015). A recent framework suggests four levels of content: culture, social roles, domains, and everyday experiences (Galliher et al., in press). All of these aspects of content are critical to understanding *what* is developing, something important to consider before we target *how* these aspects of identity are developing (i.e., process). In Stephen's case we see his identity content situated in contemporary American *culture*, a context of heightened attention to race-related violence. We see his *role* as the son of white and black parents, complicating the cultural context. We see the *domain* content of identity in the intersection of his ethnic and occupational identities as he begins to lean towards social justice in his pursuit of a career in medicine. And we see how the *everyday experiences* of taking a class in college and getting an exciting internship can reveal identity developments. Across all of these levels of content, Stephen must construct a coherent self that holds all of these levels and makes sense of them in one person. This new framework and Stephen's case make a compelling argument for the consideration of identity content to better understand the processes of identity development.

Perhaps most critical for a field such as identity development, which has focused almost exclusively on the individual (see McLean & Syed, 2015), the lesson from Stephen is that identity development *cannot* be understood outside of a cultural context; in fact, identity development cannot *exist* outside of a culture because it is the culture that gives that identity the meaning it holds for the person and for others. Stephen says this explicitly when he talks about

becoming an angry black man, a cultural stereotype, and being part oppressor and part oppressed, part of the history of the culture in which he is now defining himself. Recent calls for putting culture at the forefront of identity development research suggest an analysis not only of *personal* narratives, but of cultural *master* narratives to understand the ways in which individuals and cultures interact in constituting themselves (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015). In line with this reasoning, we concur that narrative approaches allow for the kind of data that facilitates an examination of these cultural and individual processes in a way that is limited with other kinds of data. With narratives we can see how personal reconstruction is set within a proximal and distal context that give meaning to that reconstruction. In Stephen's case specifically, we see how being biracial gives rise to tensions between more than one master narrative operating within oneself. Although there is a large literature on biracial identity, little of it if any has taken an explicitly narrative approach. We argue that narratives are especially well-suited to reveal how people negotiate the kinds of intense identity conflicts produced by competing master narratives imposed by the broader socio-historical context.

In conclusion, we hope to have provided a review of the history, theory, methods, and current state of the field in the study of narrative identity development. We hope to have shown the reader the rich history of the field, the innovative methodology that reveals a person's development unlike many other methods in psychology, the returns on this type of method with the extant, robust findings, and how the individual case can reveal the complexities of identity development and the fruitfulness of such an approach. Narrative can be best understood as a highly generative method, one that can offer answers to important and complex questions, and provide many new questions with each story that is read.

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