
What Do We Know When We Know a Person Across Contexts? Examining Self-Concept Differentiation at the Three Levels of Personality

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Abstract

Objective: Previous research examining self-concept differentiation (SCD) has been characterized by (a) a focus on behavioral traits and (b) the conflation of mean-level and inter-contextual differentiation. In two studies, we considered non-conflated measures of SCD at the three levels of personality description in relation to adjustment.

Method: In Study 1, participants completed measures of adjustment, rated their behavioral tendencies (dispositional traits), produced a list of goals (characteristic adaptations), and recalled a self-defining memory (life narratives), from within professional and personal domains. In Study 2, the procedure was modified: Participants reporting either low or high levels of adjustment subsequently rated their behavioral traits, provided a list of goals, or produced a self-defining memory, from five contexts.

Results: In Study 1, adjustment related positively to SCD at the level of characteristic adaptations but negatively to SCD at the level of life narratives. In Study 2, well-adjusted participants exhibited a greater degree of SCD at the level of characteristic adaptations but a greater degree of thematic consistency at the level of life narratives, relative to those low in adjustment.

Conclusions: These results highlight the dynamic nature of SCD across levels of personality and align with the notion that differentiation represents virtue and vice.

Keywords: self-concept differentiation, psychological adjustment, life narratives, personal goals, behavioral traits

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

—Walt Whitman

Evident from the quotation above, Whitman (1855/1959, §51) recognized that his complexities afforded him the possibility of inconsistency and, in the same breath, dismissed the notion that such inconsistencies were particularly impactful. Those who find this position puzzling will no doubt be able to seek comfort in numbers. For some time, psychologists and laypeople alike have exhibited strong intuitions that there is either something maladaptive about accentuated personological inconsistency (Rogers, 1961) or that such inconsistency is most appropriately considered boon rather than bane (Gergen, 1991). Few, however, have dismissed it as trivial or unimportant. Despite the prevalence of those championing personal inconsistency as vice or virtue, researchers have yet to identify a meaningful relation between inter-contextual variability in personality and psychological adjustment (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006).

Before placing a feather in Whitman's cap and moving on, it is prudent to note that investigations seeking such a relation

have focused exclusively on variability with respect to one element of personality—behavioral traits. While traits are no doubt an important component in understanding the person, matters of consistency are incapable of being thoroughly assessed by focusing solely on one type of personality description—the degree to which behavior dispositions vary across contexts. Rather, an appropriately thorough assessment of inter-contextual variability requires a consideration of behavioral, goal, and narrative inter-contextual differentiation. In the current project, we assessed inter-contextual variability at each of these “levels” of personality description (McAdams, 1995) in relation to psychological adjustment.

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Personological Inconsistency and Adjustment

The belief that personological inconsistency shares an impactful relation with psychological adjustment has permeated psychology since its inception. The traditional interpretation of this relation, represented by individuals including Rogers (1961) and Lecky (1945), is that personal inconsistency is indicative of a weak sense of self or lack of a core identity. Interpreted in this light, inconsistency represents a form of fragmentation and, thus, should be inversely related to adjustment. This conception of inconsistency went largely unchallenged until the nascent emergence of postmodernity, wherein theorists such as Goffman (1959) and Gergen (1991) recast personal inconsistency as adaptive and indicative of multiple specialized identities. Interpreted in this light, inconsistency represents a form of flexibility and, thus, should be positively related to adjustment.

To test hypotheses pertaining to flexibility and fragmentation, Donahue, Robins, Roberts, and John (1993) examined the relation between self-concept differentiation (SCD; the tendency to perceive differing personality characteristics across contexts) and psychological adjustment.¹ Operationalizing SCD as the degree of variability between context-specific ratings of behavioral traits, these researchers identified a negative relation between SCD and adjustment. Since this seminal paper, the relation observed by Donahue et al. (1993) has been replicated several times (e.g., Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), concretizing the notion that personological inconsistency is, in fact, indicative of self-fragmentation.

There is, however, an important caveat to note when interpreting the work of Donahue and others. As Baird et al. (2006) have shown, the “traditional” method for calculating SCD (using a principal component analysis; PCA) is influenced by the degree of personological variability both across *and* within contexts. By definition, however, only the former is relevant to matters of contextual differentiation. Thus, the traditional measure of SCD conflates inter-contextual variability with intra-contextual variability.

Two alternative methods of calculating SCD have been proposed to mitigate the conflation of inter-contextual variability and intra-contextual variability. The first, advanced by researchers including Diehl and Hay (2007), entails a consideration of inter-contextual standard deviations. In addition to obvious gains in face validity, this “deviation” measure removes some of the erroneous variance subsumed by the traditional measure of SCD. It does not, however, completely disentangle inter-contextual variability from mean-level information. As Baird et al. (2006) noted, the mean level of an item dictates the amount of inter-contextual variability possible. When the distribution of means is skewed, an association between item means and variability will be observed. To mitigate this possibility, Baird et al. proposed a method of assessing SCD which avoids the conflation present in the traditional and deviation measures. In this “corrected” measure, SCD is

assessed based on the portion of an item’s standard deviation that is not accounted for by mean-level information.

When a measure of SCD independent of mean-level information is considered—that is, when Baird et al.’s (2006) method is adopted—a significant relation between SCD and adjustment is typically not observed (see Diehl & Hay, 2007). Thus, Baird et al.’s (2006) results indicate that the relation between SCD and adjustment previously reported is the result of a methodological artifact. This finding leads to the somewhat nihilistic conclusion that personal inconsistency is, contrary to Rogers (1961), Goffman (1959), and others, an irrelevant individual difference.

The Landscape of Personality

SCD is defined as the tendency to see oneself as having different personality characteristics in different contexts. Researchers examining the relation between SCD and adjustment have operationalized this variable solely in terms of behavioral traits, thereby equating the two. The manner in which one behaves within and across contexts is no doubt an important characteristic of personality and the self-concept. Such behavioral displays, however, do not constitute the entirety of either construct (McAdams, 1995). Few would feel as though they truly knew someone if their knowledge of this person consisted solely of behavioral mannerisms. Indeed, as McAdams (1994) cautioned, examinations of personality and the self-concept based entirely on behavioral traits threaten to limit one to a consideration of “the psychology of a stranger” (p. 145).

If personality is not comprised solely of behavioral traits then of what, precisely, does it consist? Over the last two decades, researchers have largely converged on the notion that personality is most aptly conceived of entailing conceptually distinct levels (e.g., Little, 1996; McAdams, 1995). Of these conceptions, McAdams’s (1995) framework, in which behavioral traits, characteristic adaptations, and the integrative life narrative represent distinct yet related levels of personality, is particularly germane given its conceptual breadth and integrative nature.

The foundational level of McAdams’s (1995) typology is comprised of behavioral dispositions (*viz.*, traits), which are broad, decontextualized manifest tendencies. The Five-Factor Model (John & Srivastava, 1999) is a particularly compelling scheme for this level. The second level of McAdams’s typology consists of characteristic adaptations, which refers to motivational and developmental variables. Whereas behavioral traits are decontextualized in nature, characteristic adaptations are most aptly tuned when situated within specific contexts and roles. These adaptations “speak to what people want, often during particular periods in their lives or within particular domains of action” (McAdams, 1995, p. 376). Viewed as “overly stretched” (Little, 1996, p. 340) by some, it has been proposed that this level of personality be focused primarily on personal goals (Little, 1996). Of the many means available to

assess personal goals, Emmons's (1999) personal strivings measure, which solicits recurrent goals, is particularly noteworthy due to its predictive ability and conceptual richness. The third level of McAdams's typology consists of the integrative life narrative. The story produced at this personality level works to synthesize the many varied facets of the self-concept in the interest of consistency, unity, and coherence (McAdams, 1990, 1997). Although variability exists in the assessment of the life narrative, the relevance that self-defining memories hold for this construct is largely uncontested by researchers within this field (see McLean & Fournier, 2008).

Differentiation and the Levels of Personality Description

We contend that, within McAdams's (1995) model, it is manageable to offer affordances to notions of both flexibility and fragmentation. The twist, however, is that recognition of these perspectives cuts largely along level lines. Recall the distinctive element of the goal variables found in the middle level of person description. These goals are most adept when specific to extant social roles and contextual pressures.² Thus, here, personological flexibility receives import. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of someone as the picture of adjustment whose goals with his or her romantic partner and boss take the same form.

Interpreted at the second level of personality, Gergen's (1991) assertion that life can be "a candy store for one's developing appetites" (p. 150), provided flexibility is maintained, becomes sensible. Ideally, ample variability in our goals should be exhibited within distinct domains. The notion that a pastiche, hodgepodge collection of elements represents a virtue, however, loses considerable traction when interpreted at the third level of personality. Here, unity and consistency are championed in the interest of developing a coherent understanding of the self in all of its "cheerfully multiple" manifestations (McAdams, 1997, p. 51). At this level, inconsistency seems largely a matter of personological fragmentation. Whereas context-specific goals conjure up images of a candy store complete with countless aisles of potential pursuits, life narratives function much more like a restaurant menu (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Although there are many options available, it behoves one to pick and choose a collection that coheres to form a complete and congruent meal.

And what of behavioral traits? How does this level of personality relate to matters of flexibility, fragmentation, and adjustment? Although behavioral traits may constitute the bedrock of any viable typology of personality, the evidence available aligns with the conclusion that contextual variability in overt behaviors lies largely orthogonal to psychological adjustment (Baird et al., 2006). In this regard, a consideration of differentiation within McAdams's (1995) typology allows for accommodation of more than just arguments of flexibility

and fragmentation. Indeed, even Walt Whitman's indifference gains recognition when differentiation is examined with sensitivity to traits, goals, and narratives.

The Assessment of Goal and Narrative Differentiation

Speculation of the manner in which goal and narrative differentiation relates to adjustment is common (e.g., McAdams, 1997), but empirical examination of these relations is rare. Such an inquiry requires assessing goals and narratives in as comparable a manner as possible to the approach adopted in research examining trait-based SCD. This necessitates the elicitation of context-specific goals and narratives.

Researchers examining goals and narratives most commonly assess these constructs in a relatively decontextualized manner (but see Sheldon & Elliot, 2000). In these assessments, participants are prompted for a series of personal goals that they are pursuing (Emmons, 1999) or stories constituting critical periods in their past (McAdams, 1993). Attempts to contextualize these idiographic responses are made; however, they are almost invariably done after the fact by way of conceptual coding (e.g., Kaiser & Ozer, 1994). As a result, the landscape of contextualized goals and narratives remains relatively uncharted (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). By logical extension, empirical examinations of adjustment with sensitivity to inter-contextual goal and narrative inconsistency have yet to be undertaken.

Assuming that such context-specific goals and narrations were assessed, the next empirical hurdle would consist of quantifying these qualitative data in a logical and internally consistent manner. Just as the assessment of trait SCD requires an inclusive set of overarching dimensions (e.g., the "Big Five" personality dimensions; John & Srivastava, 1999), so too does inter-contextual variability in goals and narratives require an encompassing and coherent taxonomy. Drawing upon the writing of Bakan (1966), several research groups have deemed agency and communion as sufficiently encompassing meta-concepts (e.g., McAdams, 1993; Wiggins, 1991).

Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, and Riches (2011) further proposed that agency can be subdivided into themes of self-enhancement and independence, and that communion can be similarly subdivided into themes of self-transcendence and relatedness. As Frimer et al. suggested, these themes roughly align with the quadrants proposed by Schwartz (1992) in his values circumplex. Specifically, *self-enhancement* is represented by themes of power and achievement, *independence* is represented by themes of stimulation and self-direction, *self-transcendence* is represented by themes of universalism and benevolence, and *relatedness* is represented by themes of tradition, conformity, and security.³ Given their conceptual depth and encompassing nature, the motivational duality of agency and communion in general, and their four manifestations identified by Frimer et al. (2011) in particular, represent a prime

candidate for a coherent coding system to apply to both goals and narrations (see McAdams, 2006).

The Current Studies

In the current studies, we examined SCD at the trait, goal, and narrative level of personality in relation to psychological adjustment. As specified above, such an examination requires both (a) a consideration of the personality characteristics associated with each descriptive level within two or more contexts and (b) an inclusive typology to categorize the idiographic data generated at the goal and narrative levels. These requisites were satisfied through (a) a consideration of goals undertaken within, and important memories from, two contexts in Study 1, and five contexts in Study 2, and (b) a coding system which tapped the four themes of self-enhancement, independence, self-transcendence, and relatedness (Frimer, Walker, & Dunlop, 2009). Trait SCD was also considered through the assessment of behavioral ratings within parallel contexts. Finally, trait, goal, and narrative SCD were all examined using a variety of measures (e.g., Diehl & Hay, 2007; Donahue et al., 1993), including those accounting for mean-level information (Baird et al., 2006).

In Study 1, we examined psychological adjustment in relation to trait, goal, and narrative SCD concurrently. This study relied upon personality characteristics taken from two broad contexts (viz., one's professional and personal life). In Study 2, we built upon and extended the results found in Study 1 by considering differences in SCD at the trait, goal, and narrative level between groups of individuals who had reported either low or high levels of psychological adjustment. In this subsequent study, we considered the five contexts most commonly assessed in previous research (e.g., Donahue et al., 1993; Sheldon et al., 1997).

In line with past research (Baird et al., 2006; Diehl & Hay, 2007), we predicted that a negative relation between adjustment and trait SCD would be observed when the traditional measures of differentiation were considered. We further predicted that such a relation would not be observed when employing a corrected measure of trait SCD, confirming the artifactual nature of prior findings. In contrast, given the context-specific and integrative nature of characteristic adaptations and life narratives respectively (McAdams, 1997), we predicted that goal SCD would relate positively to adjustment whereas narrative SCD would relate negatively to this criterion.

Two final points are worth noting before transitioning to our empirical efforts. First, recall that, at the level of characteristic adaptations and life narratives, the focal constructs are agency and communion. At the level of behavioral traits, in contrast, five constructs are considered, with extraversion and agreeableness mapping onto the dimensions of agency and communion, respectively (Wiggins, 1991). For this reason, to determine whether any relation observed between SCD and adjustment at the second and third levels of McAdams's

(1995) model could be attributed to the nature of the levels themselves rather than the nature of agency and communion *per se*, in Studies 1 and 2 we also considered measures of SCD calculated through reliance on trait-based conceptions of agency and communion. We predicted that the results observed when considering this flavor of trait SCD would parallel those noted when trait SCD was calculated on the basis on all five personality factors.

Second, and needless to say, a proper test of the above predictions requires at least a passing consideration of alternative explanations for any findings observed. At the level of characteristic adaptations and life narratives, such explanations manifest in decidedly distinct forms. With regards to differentiation at the level of characteristic adaptations (i.e., goal SCD), our account privileges inter-context variability in terms of thematic content, rather than simply the number of goals pursued. As outlined in detail below, participants in our studies were allowed to vary the number of goals they provided within each context (five to eight goals were requested within each context). Thus, to discount the possibility that any relation observed between goal SCD and adjustment was a product of variability in the number of goals pursued across contexts (rather than inter-contextual variability in the content of these goals), we relied upon the proportion (rather than the frequency) of goals entailing themes of agency and communion in each context. In contrast, at the level of life narratives, other elements of the narratives in question—elements noted in previous research to correspond with adjustment—may correlate strongly with narrative differentiation, as well as account for the relation between this form of differentiation and adjustment. The affective tone of the story told represents such an element (e.g., Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). To examine the possibility that the relation between narrative differentiation and adjustment is explained by the collective affective tone of participants' stories, we also considered the correspondence between story valence and narrative SCD.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we assessed the relation between adjustment and SCD at each level of personality description. This was done through a consideration of the differentiation between participants' personality characteristics in professional and personal domains. Traditional, deviation, and corrected measures of SCD were derived at each level. Our prediction was that a relation between trait SCD and adjustment would be observed using the traditional measure. It was anticipated, however, that this relation would disappear when the corrected measure of SCD was considered. We predicted a similar pattern of findings when scores of differentiation were based upon trait-based conceptions of agency and communion rather than the five factors considered in our main analyses. In contrast, drawing upon the writing of McAdams (1997) and others (e.g., Little, 1996), we hypothesized that goal SCD and narrative SCD would relate to adjustment positively and nega-

tively, respectively. We also predicted that the affective tone of participants' stories would not correspond with narrative SCD and, therefore, not mediate the relation between narrative SCD and psychological adjustment. As a final objective, assuming that more than one indicator of SCD (assessed using the corrected measure) corresponded with psychological adjustment, we were interested in determining whether these measures independently predicted the outcome variable of interest. Such independent prediction would underscore the importance of conceptualizing personality at different levels of description.

Method

Participants. A sample of 92 adults volunteered to participate by way of an online survey-based website (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011, for a discussion of the appropriateness of collecting data from such sources). Their average age was 31.5 years ($SD = 10.8$, $range = 19-61$), 60 were women, and 71 self-identified as being of Euro-American descent. Participants received a \$1 honorarium.

Procedure. Participants were informed that we were interested in their goals, stories, and behaviors from within different contexts. Consistent with previous research (Baird et al., 2006; Donahue et al., 1993), participants completed measures of SCD prior to measures of adjustment. They were first asked for a list of goals they typically pursued in professional contexts and then a list of goals they typically pursued in personal contexts. Next, participants were asked to report an important personal memory from within a professional context and then an important personal memory from within a personal context. Participants were then prompted to rate their behavioral dispositions within professional contexts. This prompt was followed by a request for a report of their behavioral dispositions within personal contexts. Finally, participants completed three measures of psychological adjustment: self-esteem, depression, and satisfaction with life. Completion of these measures typically took about 30 minutes.

Measures. There were four sets of measures: behavioral traits, goals, narratives, and finally, psychological adjustment.

Behavioral traits. We assessed behavioral traits using John and Srivastava's (1999) 44-item Big Five Inventory. In the interest of context specificity, participants were asked to complete this inventory based on how they saw themselves "in professional contexts" and "in personal contexts." This inventory was completed twice (once for each context). An example of an item from this inventory is "I see myself as someone who is reserved." Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Context-specific factor scores were then derived (average $\alpha = .82$; $range = .62-.88$).

Goals. We assessed goals using Emmons's (1999) personal strivings measure. This measure was modified for context specificity by prompting participants to list the "things they are typically trying to do in professional contexts" and "... in personal contexts." Five goals were requested for each context (space was provided for eight goals in each case). On average, participants generated 5.58 goals ($SD = 0.97$) within each context. Examples of the professional and personal goals produced by participants include: "speak with more complicated words," and "give my children everything they need but not everything they want," respectively.

Narratives. We assessed life narratives using Singer and Moffitt's (1991) Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire, which prompts participants to report emotionally salient memories that are (a) at least 1 year old, (b) in regard to a specific event, (c) relevant for self-understanding, (d) strongly emotive, and (e) thought about frequently. This questionnaire was modified to tap context-specific memories by prompting participants for self-defining memories both from a professional and personal context. Responses averaged 136.2 words ($SD = 134.6$) in length.

Psychological adjustment. Consistent with previous research on SCD (e.g., Baird et al., 2006; Donahue et al., 1993), we operationalized psychological adjustment as self-esteem, depression, and satisfaction with life. Self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .91$); depression was assessed using Dempsey's (1964) 30-item revised Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory Depression scale ($\alpha = .93$); and satisfaction with life was assessed using Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin's (1985) 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale ($\alpha = .93$). Example items from these three scales include: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities," "I don't seem to care what happens to me," and "In most ways my life is close to ideal," respectively. Participants rated items corresponding to measures of self-esteem and depression on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. A 7-point Likert-type scale, anchored with the same descriptors, was used when assessing satisfaction with life. Participants' responses on the depression inventory were reflected such that higher scores were indicative of less depression. Adjustment measures were found to correlate at a level suggestive of multicollinearity ($rs \geq .67$). Thus, psychological adjustment was taken as the average of the standardized scores from the three measures ($\alpha = .90$).

Conceptual Coding of Goals and Narratives. Frimer, Walker, and Dunlop's (2009) Values Embedded in Narrative (VEiNs) coding manual was drawn upon when coding participants' goals and narratives for agential and communal themes. To assess affective tone, participants' narratives were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count computer program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007).

Goals. Professional and personal goals were entered into a single spreadsheet, and their order was randomized. The primary coder determined the presence/absence of each of the 10 VEiNs considered in each goal produced. Thus, goals could be coded for multiple VEiNs. The agreement between the primary coder and the secondary coder (who independently coded a quarter of the sample) was substantial with 94% agreement for individual VEiNs (*range* = 83–98%) and $\kappa = .69$ (*range* = .60–.83) across VEiNs. The presence/absence of a value reflecting each manifestation of agency or communion (*viz.*, self-enhancement, independence, self-transcendence, and relatedness) was then determined. The proportion of strivings representing each of these four themes within each context was subsequently tabulated by dividing the number of strivings within a context exemplifying a specific theme by the total of number of strivings produced in that context.

Narratives. The order of participants' narratives was randomized for blind coding. For each narrative, the coder determined the frequency of words, phrases, and statements embodying each of the 10 VEiNs outlined in the Frimer et al. (2009) VEiN coding manual. The agreement between the primary coder and the secondary coder (who independently coded a quarter of the sample) was substantial with $r = .85$, *range* = .64–1.00 on individual VEiNs, and no difference in frequency threshold, $ps \geq .15$. The frequency of VEiNs for each of the four themes of agency and communion within each narrative was then determined.

The LIWC (Pennebaker et al., 2007), a software program which analyzes qualitative text along multiple dimensions, was used to quantify the affective tone of participants' stories. In the current research, we made note of the proportion of positive and negative affective words in these stories (for a discussion of the relation between this narrative content and adjustment, see Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). For each participant, a single measure of positive affect and of negative affect was taken by averaging LIWC scores across narratives.

Analyses and Results

Analyses. The calculation of the traditional, deviation, and corrected measures of SCD was largely parallel across the levels. The data imputed into these equations were, however, quite different. Scores for trait SCD were derived using 10 factors (with each context entailing five factors). Scores for goal and narrative SCD were derived using the frequency of eight themes (with each context entailing four such themes).

To calculate the *traditional measure* of SCD, the factor/theme scores for each personality level were subjected to a single PCA. The percentage of variance that was not subsumed by the first component of this analysis was then recorded (following Donahue et al., 1993). Conducting such analyses requires at least three values within each context. For this reason, we were unable to derive measures of traditional SCD when we considering trait-based conceptions of agency and communion (*i.e.*, extraversion and agreeableness, respectively). To calculate the *deviation measure* of SCD, we derived and averaged the standard deviations (across contexts) of each applicable factor/theme score within each level of personality. Finally, to calculate the *corrected measure* of SCD (*i.e.*, the measure of differentiation appropriately independent of mean-level information), we regressed each of the standard deviations calculated in correspondence with the deviation measure of SCD onto the mean and mean-squared cross-context score of the respective factor/value. The unstandardized residuals resulting from these regression equations were retained and averaged within each personality level.

Results. Measures of differentiation were largely independent across personality levels (see Table 1, which presents descriptive statistics for, and the intercorrelations among, SCD scores at each level of personality description considered in our main analyses and psychological adjustment). Age and gender did not correspond with adjustment ($ps \geq .39$) or corrected measures of SCD ($ps \geq .13$). As such, these demographic variables were not considered in subsequent analyses.

Table 1 Intercorrelations Among Variables (Study 1)

Personality Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Trait SCD—traditional	—									
2. Trait SCD—deviation	.71**	—								
3. Trait SCD—corrected	.65**	.98**	—							
4. Goal SCD—traditional	-.06	-.05	-.07	—						
5. Goal SCD—deviation	-.02	-.01	-.02	.28**	—					
6. Goal SCD—corrected	-.02	-.01	.01	.17	.91**	—				
7. Narrative SCD—traditional	.04	.03	.01	.04	-.12	-.11	—			
8. Narrative SCD—deviation	.02	-.01	-.03	.03	-.02	-.10	.22*	—		
9. Narrative SCD—corrected	.09	.07	.05	.08	-.05	-.08	.43**	.60**	—	
10. Adjustment	-.21*	-.23*	-.11	-.13	.22*	.25*	-.19†	-.12	-.23*	—
M	0.08	2.31	0.00	0.22	0.17	0.00	0.19	2.18	0.00	0.00
SD	0.10	1.34	1.32	0.14	0.08	0.07	0.15	1.54	0.96	2.73

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Trait SCD. Consistent with previous research (Donahue et al., 1993; Diehl & Hay, 2007), a negative relation was observed between adjustment and scores on the traditional and deviation measures of trait SCD, $r_s = -.21$ and $-.23$, $p_s = .04$ and $.02$, respectively. Also consistent with past research (e.g., Baird et al., 2006), this relation disappeared when scores on the corrected measure (i.e., the measure that isolates inter-contextual variability from all mean-level information) of trait SCD were considered, $r = -.11$, $p = .30$.

Agency and communion at the trait level. Deviation and corrected scores of SCD based on trait-based conceptions of agency (i.e., extraversion) and communion (i.e., agreeableness) did not correspond with adjustment, $r_s = -.05$ and $-.04$, $p_s = .32$ and $.35$, respectively. Thus, irrespective of whether trait SCD was calculated through reliance on five factors or proxies for the “big two,” its relation with psychological adjustment was similarly anemic.

Goal SCD. Scores on the traditional measure of goal SCD did not correlate with adjustment, $r = -.13$, $p = .22$. However, a positive correlation was observed between adjustment and scores on the deviation, $r = .22$, $p = .03$, and corrected measures, $r = .25$, $p = .02$, of goal SCD, the latter indicating that those who evinced high levels of goal SCD tended to report higher levels of adjustment.

Narrative SCD. A marginally significant relation was observed between scores on the traditional measure of narrative SCD and adjustment, $r = -.19$, $p = .08$; no relation was observed between scores on the deviation measure of narrative SCD and adjustment, $r = -.12$, $p = .27$; and a significant negative relation was observed between scores on the corrected measure of narrative SCD and adjustment, $r = -.23$, $p = .03$. This indicates that those with high levels of narrative SCD tended to evidence lower levels of adjustment.

Narrative differentiation or affective tone? Narrative SCD (derived using the corrected measure) did not correspond with the proportion of positive affective words or negative affective words in participants’ stories, $r_s = .06$ and $.03$, $p_s = .28$ and $.39$. Thus, the relation observed between narrative SCD and adjustment cannot be attributed to the affective tone of participants’ stories.

Do goal SCD and narrative SCD independently predict adjustment? Scores on the corrected measures of goal SCD and narrative SCD each predicted psychological adjustment, albeit in different ways: Goal SCD evidenced a positive relation with adjustment whereas narrative SCD evidenced a negative relation. We were thus interested in examining whether these measures of inconsistency independently predicted this outcome variable. When the index of psychological adjustment was simultaneously regressed onto these predictors, goal SCD, $b = 10.12$, $SE = 3.94$, $\beta = .26$, $p = .01$, and narrative SCD,

$b = -.58$, $SE = .29$, $\beta = -.20$, $p = .049$, each accounted for a significant portion of variance in adjustment. In addition to regressing adjustment onto goal and narrative SCD simultaneously, we performed two sequential regressions wherein the additive predictive ability of each of these variables was considered. Goal SCD and narrative SCD each significantly contributed to the predictive ability of adjustment in these analyses, R^2 changes = $.07$ and $.04$, $F_s(1,85) = 6.62$ and 3.99 , $p_s = .01$ and $.049$, respectively.

Discussion

In Study 1, the relation between SCD, conceptualized at each of the levels of personality identified by McAdams (1995), and adjustment was examined. Replicating past research, the negative relation observed between trait SCD and adjustment using a traditional measure of differentiation disappeared when the corrected measure of SCD (i.e., the measure of inter-context variability appropriately independent of mean-level information) was considered (Baird et al., 2006). Null effects also abound when SCD was calculated using only scores of trait-based conceptions of agency and communion rather than scores on all Big Five factors. At the level of characteristic adaptations, we observed a positive relation between goal SCD and adjustment when considering a corrected measure of differentiation. This relation could not be attributed to the degree of inter-contextual variability in the number of goals participants pursued. In contrast, at the level of life narratives, a negative relation was observed between narrative SCD and adjustment using the corrected measure. This relation similarly could not be accounted for by the affective tone of participants’ stories. Finally, goal and narrative SCD were found to be independent predictors of adjustment. The current findings thus add credence to conceptions of personal inconsistency as both virtue *and* vice, thereby offering concessions to both hypotheses of flexibility *and* of fragmentation in a manner consistent with the theorizing of McAdams (1997).

The findings reported in Study 1 offer preliminary support for our proposal regarding a differing relation between SCD and adjustment at each level of personality description. Personality functioning is dramatically different across these levels. Several features of this study, however, limit the ability to form definitive conclusions regarding this relation. First, given that all associations were observed within a single sample, it is possible that some of these associations were a product of capitalization on chance and/or artificial inflation. Second, our predictor and criterion variables were assessed concurrently, and it is possible that participants’ provision of context-specific traits, goals, and narrations influenced their subsequent report of adjustment. It is also possible that the completion of earlier measures (e.g., goals specific to professional contexts) carried downstream consequences for responses on subsequent measures (e.g., goals specific to personal contexts, context-specific narratives). Finally, we calculated differentiation on the basis of professional and personal

domains. This is less than ideal insofar as (a) these domains may be relatively privileged compared to others (Sennett, 1998), and (b) this focus deviates from previous research examining SCD, which has conventionally entailed personality trait ratings from within five specific social roles (e.g., Donahue et al., 1993; Sheldon et al., 1997). These limitations were addressed in Study 2.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we sought to build upon and extend the results of Study 1. First, to determine whether our preliminary results were the product of capitalization on chance or artificial inflation, we assessed psychological adjustment and SCD in different sessions. Second, to determine whether our results were a product of the order in which we administered measures of trait, goal, and narrative SCD, we used a between-subjects design in which different participants completed each of these measures. Furthermore, the order in which prompts for context-specific information were presented to participants varied within and across each level of personality description. Third, to more readily align our results with previous research on SCD (e.g., Donahue et al., 1993), we considered differentiation across the five contexts most commonly assessed in this literature. Finally, to aid in interpretability, we compared the degree of SCD present at each level of personality description between groups of individuals reporting either high or low adjustment, rather than relating SCD to adjustment assessed continuously.

Drawing from the theoretical rationale outlined in the Introduction as well as the results observed in Study 1, we hypothesized that highly adjusted individuals would exhibit a greater degree of trait SCD than individuals low in adjustment when relying upon scores derived using the traditional measure of differentiation. This group difference, however, was predicted to dissipate when trait SCD was assessed via the corrected measure. We also predicted that, when SCD was calculated based solely on the trait-based dimensions of agency and communion, no relation would be observed between differentiation and adjustment. In contrast, at the level of characteristic adaptations, we hypothesized that, when the corrected measure was considered, highly adjusted individuals would exhibit greater goal SCD relative to those low in adjustment. Finally, at the level of life narratives, we hypothesized that highly adjusted individuals would exhibit more consistent themes in their stories relative to low-adjusted participants. We once again predicted that our measure of narrative differentiation would be independent of the affective tone of participants' stories.

Method

Participants and Procedure. A sample of 511 adults volunteered to participate in the first session of this study by way of

an online survey-based website. Their average age was 33.1 years ($SD = 12.0$, $range = 18-70$), 326 were women, and 383 self-identified as being of Euro-American descent. These participants received a \$.50 honorarium and were told that, dependent on their responses, they may be asked to participate in a second session. In the first session of this study, participants completed the measures of adjustment used in Study 1. As in Study 1, responses were amalgamated to arrive at a single adjustment score for each individual. Participants were then rank-ordered on the basis of their level of adjustment.

Approximately 1 month after their initial participation, individuals who evidenced a relatively high or low level of adjustment were sent a request for participation in the second session of our study, with an offer of a \$2 honorarium. Doing so required rank-ordering persons from the first session on the basis of psychological adjustment, then sending requests for participation to those exhibiting the highest and lowest levels of this variable. Requests were made in batches until approximately 75 highly adjusted and 75 lowly adjusted individuals had participated. The response rate to our request for participation in this second session was 50%. Although women were more likely to agree to our request than men (54% of women vs. 40% of men), $\chi^2(1, N = 324) = 5.72, p = .02, \phi = .13$, those who did and did not participate in the second session were similar in terms of psychological adjustment, $F(1,322) = 0.06, p = .80, \eta_p^2 = .00$; age, $F(1,322) = 3.05, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .01$; and ethnicity, $\chi^2(1, N = 324) = 0.51, p = .42, \phi = .04$. Thus, these groups were, by and large, comparable. In total, 159 people provided data in the second session (the average interval between completion of the two sessions was 30 days, $SD = 12.5$; this span did not differ as a function of level of adjustment, $F(1,157) = 1.31, p = .25, \eta_p^2 = .00$).

The highly adjusted group consisted of 83 participants, with an average age of 34.3 years ($SD = 11.8, range = 18-67$), 58 were female and 63 self-identified as being of Euro-American descent. The low adjustment group consisted of 76 individuals, with an average age of 35.5 years ($SD = 11.9, range = 18-62$), 51 were female and 56 self-identified as Euro-American. These groups did not differ in terms of age, $F(1,157) = 0.46, p = .50, \eta_p^2 = .00$; gender, $\chi^2(1, N = 159) = 0.04, p = .84, \phi = .02$; or ethnicity, $\chi^2(1, N = 159) = 0.01, p = .92, \phi = .01$. Of course, because of selection procedures, these groups were strongly differentiated in terms of level of psychological adjustment, $M_s = 1.04$ vs. $-1.20, SD_s = 0.34$ and $0.52, F(1,157) = 10.25, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .87$.

Participants reporting high and low adjustment were randomly assigned to complete measures corresponding to one of the three levels of personality description. Thus, for each of the trait, goal, and narrative SCD measures, we collected responses from approximately one third of the sample, half of whom were high in adjustment and half, low. The order in which participants provided context-specific personality characteristics within each descriptive level varied. The distribution of participants high and low in adjustment within levels and across order-based conditions, however, did not

deviate from chance, $\chi^2(7, N = 159) = 10.58, p = .16$, Cramér's $V = .26$.

Participants, irrespective of whether they were asked to produce context-specific traits, goals, or narratives, provided personality characteristics for five role contexts: employee/worker, friend, romantic partner, son or daughter, and student (Donahue et al., 1993).

Measures. There were four sets of measures: first, psychological adjustment, and then behavioral traits, goals, or narratives.

Psychological adjustment. In a manner analogous to Study 1, participants completed measures of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965; $\alpha = .93$), depression (Dempsey, 1964; $\alpha = .93$), and satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1985; $\alpha = .93$). Scores on depression were subsequently reflected. Consistent with the results of our first study, these variables correlated at a level suggestive of multicollinearity ($r_s \geq .68$). For this reason, psychological adjustment was taken as the average of these measures (which were first standardized; $\alpha = .90$).

Behavioral traits. We once again used John and Srivastava's (1999) 44-item Big Five Inventory. In this study, however, participants were asked to complete this inventory based on how they saw themselves in each of the five contexts specified above. Context-specific factor scores were then derived by averaging responses on the applicable items (average $\alpha = .87$; range = .80–.91).

Goals. Emmons's (1999) personal strivings measure was once again used to assess goal motivation at the level of characteristic adaptations. Participants were asked to list five things they were "typically trying to do" in each of the five contexts considered (consistent with Study 1, space was provided for eight goals in each case). On average, participants generated 5.49 goals ($SD = 0.95$) within each context. Examples of the goals undertaken as an employee/worker, friend, romantic partner, son or daughter, and student include: "anticipate requirements and complete tasks independently," "make time to share with them," "do nice things for him because I want to and because he is special," "understand my parents' shortcomings and mistakes," and "overcome my shyness and reclusive tendencies so I can exchange ideas," respectively.

Narratives. We once again assessed life narratives using Singer and Moffitt's (1991) Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire. In addition to modifying this measure for context-specificity (viz., the five role contexts noted above), we removed the stipulation that each memory must be at least 1 year old. This was done in the interest of making our narrative measure as comparable as possible to trait-based and goal-based measures of differentiation. Responses averaged 123.9 words ($SD = 82.8$) in length. Examples of the narratives

produced under these conditions are provided in the General Discussion.

Conceptual Coding of Goals and Narratives. Goals and narrative coding paralleled that of Study 1, once again drawing upon Frimer et al.'s (2009) VEiN coding manual. The frequency of VEiNs for each of the four themes of agency and communion was then determined (self-enhancement, independence, self-transcendence, and relatedness). In the case of goals, to derive proportional scores, these frequencies were once again divided by the total number of strivings produced within the applicable context. Inter-rater reliability, calculated as before, was substantial at the goal level, with 94% agreement for individual VEiNs (range = 82%–99%) and $\kappa = .68$ (range = .61–.83) across VEiNs, and at the narrative level, with $r = .79$, range = .65–.93 on individual VEiNs, and no difference in frequency threshold, $ps \geq .10$. As in Study 1, narratives were also coded for affective tone (viz., the proportion of positive and negative affective words) using the LIWC (Pennebaker et al., 2007).

Analyses and Results

Analyses. The calculation of the traditional, deviation, and corrected measures of trait and goal SCD paralleled that of Study 1. However, perhaps because participants were asked to supply self-defining memories in five contexts (rather than two, as in Study 1), it was found that their narratives contained fewer agentic and communal themes than the narratives produced by participants in Study 1, $M_s = 11.12$ and 17.03 , $SD_s = 5.60$ and 10.13 , $F(1,136) = 14.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$ (although the length of the narratives themselves did not differ across studies, $F(1,136) = 0.45, p = .50, \eta_p^2 = .00$). As a result, we treated the narrative data categorically, distinguishing narratives on the basis of whether they did, or did not, contain themes of self-enhancement, independence, self-transcendence, and relatedness (McLean & Fournier, 2008). To assess narrative consistency, we considered the proportion of each participant's stories involving each of these four themes (i.e., if three of a given participant's five narratives had themes of self-enhancement, then this participant would receive a score of .60 on this variable). Thus, for each participant, four proportional scores were derived. To arrive at a single score of narrative consistency, these proportions were averaged. Due to this coding, and in contrast to the measures at the other levels of personality, higher values on this narrative measure correspond with greater consistency (rather than differentiation). Thus, although conceptually similar and boasting a higher degree of face validity, the computational logic informing the derivation of narrative consistency was largely unrelated to other measures of SCD.

Results. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for measures of context variability for both the high- and low-adjustment groups considered in our main analyses. At the

Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations for the Variables at the Three Levels of Personality Description as a Function of Level of Adjustment (Study 2)

Variable	Adjustment Group	
	High	Low
Behavioral Dispositions ($n = 54$)		
Trait SCD—traditional	0.18 (0.17)	0.29 (0.16)
Trait SCD—deviation	0.38 (0.18)	0.42 (0.21)
Trait SCD—corrected	-0.01 (0.17)	0.01 (0.20)
Characteristic Adaptations ($n = 55$)		
Goal SCD—traditional	0.36 (0.10)	0.32 (0.11)
Goal SCD—deviation	0.22 (0.05)	0.19 (0.05)
Goal SCD—corrected	0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)
Life Narratives ($n = 50$)		
Narrative consistency	0.69 (0.11)	0.61 (0.14)

level of behavioral traits and personal goals, scores on the corrected measure of SCD did not vary as a function of the order in which context-specific personality characteristics were requested, $F(2,51) = 0.02$, $p = .98$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, and $F(2,52) = 2.34$, $p = .11$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, respectively. The same was found regarding scores on the measure of narrative consistency, $F(1,48) = 1.24$, $p = .27$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Thus, within our sample, no order effects were observed. Age and gender did not correspond with corrected measures of trait SCD and goal SCD ($ps \geq .28$) and, for this reason, these demographic variables were not considered in subsequent trait-based and goal-based analyses. In contrast, narrative consistency, although unrelated to age ($p = .98$), differed by gender, such that females exhibited a higher level of consistency than males, $F(1,48) = 8.16$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. As a result, in a subsequent analysis, we considered the relation between adjustment and narrative consistency while controlling for this demographic difference.

Trait SCD. Consistent with hypotheses, when scores on the traditional measure of SCD were considered, highly adjusted individuals exhibiting less trait differentiation than those low in adjustment, $F(1,48) = 4.97$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. This difference became nonsignificant, however, when deviation and corrected measures were employed, $F_s(1,52) = 0.55$ and 0.10 , $ps = .46$ and $.75$, η_p^2 s = $.01$ and $.00$, respectively.

Agency and communion at the trait level redux. Also consistent with hypotheses, deviation and corrected measures of SCD derived using scores of trait-based conceptions of agency and communion (i.e., extraversion and agreeableness, respectively) did not distinguish high- and low-adjustment groups, $F_s(1,52) = 0.21$ and 0.04 , $ps = .65$ and $.85$, both η_p^2 s = $.00$, respectively.

Goal SCD. When comparing levels of SCD using the traditional measure, highly adjusted individuals and those low in adjustment did not differ, $F(1,51) = 1.10$, $p = .30$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. In

contrast, when SCD scores based on the deviation measure were considered, highly adjusted individuals exhibited a significantly greater degree of goal differentiation relative to participants low in adjustment, $F(1,53) = 4.92$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Consistent with hypotheses, this result remained significant when we examined scores on the corrected measure of SCD, $F(1,53) = 4.38$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$.

Narrative SCD. Highly adjusted individuals exhibited a greater degree of consistency in their narrative themes than low-adjustment individuals, $F(1,48) = 4.58$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$.⁴ This relation remained significant after controlling for gender, $F(1,47) = 4.68$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$.

Narrative consistency or affective tone? Scores on the measure of narrative consistency did not correspond with either the positive or negative affective tone of participants' stories, $rs = .02$ and $-.16$, $ps = .91$ and $.28$, respectively. Thus, affective tone did not mediate the relation between narrative consistency and psychological adjustment.

Discussion

In Study 2, we sought to build upon and expand the results of Study 1 by considering the level of trait, goal, and narrative SCD across five role contexts and between those high and low in psychological adjustment. Consistent with previous research, when relying upon the traditional measure of trait SCD, we noted that highly adjusted individuals were less differentiated in their self-concept than those lower in adjustment. This difference disappeared, however, when a more appropriate measure of trait SCD was used. A relation between trait SCD and adjustment was also notably absent when relying exclusively upon trait-based conceptions of agency and communion.

In contrast, at the level of characteristic adaptations, highly adjusted individuals exhibited a greater degree of goal SCD relative to individuals low in adjustment. This group difference could not be attributed to the degree of inter-contextual variability in the number of goals proffered. Finally, at the level of life narratives, highly adjusted individuals evinced a greater level of thematic consistency in their personal narratives, relative to those low in adjustment. This group difference could not be attributed to the affective tone of participants' stories. These results support our proposal that trait differentiation is largely orthogonal to psychological adjustment, whereas goal differentiation is positively related and narrative differentiation is negatively related to this criterion. This position steers a middle ground between proposals of fragmentation and of flexibility by way of sensitivity to the multilevel nature of personhood.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In one of the most cited passages within social and personality psychology, James (1890) proposed that a person "has as many

social selves as there are individuals who recognize him [sic]" (p. 294). In the decades following this astute observation, psychologists have expended a great deal of energy attempting to unravel the implications that this composition of selves carries for psychological adjustment. By all contemporary accounting strategies, however, the sheer volume of theorizing regarding the warp and woof of these selves greatly outweighs the sum total of conclusive empirical evidence on the topic.⁵

In the current project, we proposed that the lack of a definitive relation between SCD and adjustment was at least partially attributable to a predominant focus on trait variability, at the expense of other types of differentiation. Drawing upon the framework of personality description championed by McAdams (1995), we examined the relation between SCD and adjustment at not only the level of behavioral dispositions, but also those of characteristic adaptations and life narratives. In two studies, we observed that trait differentiation was largely unrelated to adjustment, goal differentiation was positively related to adjustment, and narrative differentiation was negatively related to adjustment. The results observed at the levels of characteristic adaptations and life narratives could not be attributed to the degree of inter-contextual variability in the number of goals participants pursued nor the affective tone of the stories they told, respectively. Collectively, these results accord with the notion that context-specificity represents a virtue at the level of characteristic adaptations, adding support to the theorizing of Goffman (1959). This very specificity, however, represents a vice at the level of life narratives, an observation that aligns with the proposal of Rogers (1961). Thus, when an appropriately broad conception of the person is adopted, differentiation can be recognized as indicative of both flexibility and fragmentation.

On the Context-Specificity of Personal Goals

Goffman (1959) can be credited for introducing to the social sciences the metaphor of life as theatrical performance. Within this dramaturgical framework, adaptiveness is based on situational flexibility. Indeed, for Goffman, identity itself is something intertwined with context, devoid of personological signature. Such sentiments resonate well with the writings of Gergen (1991) who argued that, provided one was contextually varied, "the rewards can be substantial—the devotion of one's intimates, happy children, professional success, the achievement of community goals, personal popularity and so on. All are possible if one avoids looking back to locate a true and enduring self, and simply acts to fulfill the moment at hand" (p. 150).

The fulfillment of the moment at hand is certainly evident in the goal profile of "Joan,"⁶ a participant from Study 1. Joan's levels of goal SCD and adjustment were both approximately one *SD* above average. Her professional goals were flavored largely by themes of agency (e.g., self-enhancement). When asked to describe what she typically tried to do in professional

settings, Joan produced goals such as "prepare myself for the work that needs to be done." In contrast, her personal goals were largely communal in nature, flavored by themes of relatedness. When asked to describe what she typically tried to do in personal settings, Joan produced goals such as "be a loving wife and good mother." For individuals such as Joan, a clear delineation exists between professional and personal goals, suggesting a varied palette.

Joan's profile contrasts sharply with the profile of "Lana," another participant from Study 1. Lana's levels of goal SCD and adjustment were approximately one *SD* below average. Her professional goals were largely communal in nature, exhibiting themes of relatedness (such as conformity and security). When asked to describe what she typically tried to do in professional settings, Lana produced goals such as "satisfy my superiors." Consistent with this orientation, her personal goals, which included "maintain friendships from the past," were also largely rife with communion. For individuals such as Lana, themes blur between contexts. The same values are pursued in professional and personal realms, suggesting a relatively monotonous palette.

Inter-Context Variability or Intra-Context Variability?

Here, an important clarification needs to be made regarding what is intended by *context-specificity*. In this article, we have equated the term with inter-context variability (i.e., the degree of variability *across* contexts) rather than intra-context variability (i.e., the degree of variability *within* contexts). Although our evidence aligns with the notion that inter-contextual variability in goals is adaptive, it is conceivable that the opposite is true for intra-contextual goal variability (for a similar distinction, see English & Chen, 2011). Indeed, such intra-contextual incongruence may be associated with inner turmoil and strife. For example, consider a student who both wishes to impress his professor in class while remaining unobtrusive to his fellow classmates.

The available empirical research on the topic is consistent with this possibility. Sheldon and Emmons (1995) examined variability in participants' ratings of personal goal difficulty, past attainment, current progress, and commitment in relation to goal congruence with possible selves. Relying upon a non-contextualized prompt for personal goals—thus making their measure akin to the degree of goal differentiation within a single, broad context—they noted a negative relation between goal differentiation and the degree to which participants aligned their goals with possible selves. Although goal specificity within contexts appears to be adaptive, a dissonant composition of goals within a given context may hinder psychological functioning.

On the Integrative Nature of Life Narratives

Gergen's (1991) notion of life as "candy store" in which one works to fulfill the moment at hand carries with it a certain

appeal. One wonders, however, whether inter-level spillage in this overindulgence carries with it the danger of a tummy ache. The negative relation we observed between narrative SCD and adjustment suggests a limit to Gergen's theorizing by offering support for more fragmented conceptions of personal inconsistency. It also offers credence to McAdams's theorizing wherein the life narrative ideally "incorporates the reconstructed past and the imagined future into a more or less coherent whole in order to provide the person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning" (McAdams & Pals, 2006, p. 209; see also McAdams, 1993).

Such unity is evident in the narrative profile of "Jeff," a highly adjusted participant from Study 2 exhibiting an accentuated level of narrative consistency. Jeff's narratives as a student and a romantic partner each involved themes of agency (*viz.*, self-enhancement) corresponding to performing "so well that I didn't even have to take the finals," and confronting a partner who was cheating on him, noting that "It really hurt that she didn't respect me enough to just tell the truth, but I guess you live and you learn." The consistency present in Jeff's narratives diverges significantly from the narratives of "Greg," a participant from Study 2 who reported a low level of adjustment and exhibited a relatively diminished level of narrative consistency. His narrative as a student is largely absent of motivational themes, consisting instead of a pedestrian description of a time he attended a college party. In contrast, Greg's narrative as a romantic partner, in which he describes organizing a Valentine's Day dinner for him and his wife that was "picture perfect," is flush with both agentic (*viz.*, self-enhancement) and communal (*viz.*, relatedness) content.

On the Contextualized Nature of Personhood

The significant relations observed between goal SCD, narrative SCD, and adjustment, when considered in light of the lack of relation observed between trait SCD and adjustment, add further vigor to calls to broaden the conceptualization of personality beyond behavioral traits. Traits are certainly an important part of personality. If one, however, is concerned with the "whole person" (McAdams, 1995, 1997), then goals *and* narratives must be considered alongside traits. Furthermore, as the current results suggest, there are potential gains to be made by researchers considering goals and narratives in their contextualized forms.

In the current series of studies, we relied upon a non-experimental design and employed self-reported indices of psychological adjustment collected within a predominantly Westernized sample. In future, to disentangle the proposal that differentiation influences adjustment from the possibility that adjustment influences differentiation (as well as the possibility of a bidirectional relation between these variables and the potential for both to be influenced by some third variable,

unmeasured in the current efforts) researchers are encouraged to test the causal relation between differentiation and adjustment by way of experimental designs. The relations observed here should also be replicated while relying upon more objective measures of adjustment (e.g., other-report). Furthermore, researchers may wish to consider these forms of differentiation within additional (*i.e.*, non-Western) cultural contexts. East Asians have been found to be less concerned with inter-contextual consistency than Westerners (e.g., English & Chen, 2011). It follows that the correspondence between adjustment, goal SCD, and narrative SCD may vary cross-culturally.

The notion that certain persons, or certain groups of persons, value consistency more than others suggests the possibility of mediators in the relations observed here. A potentially fruitful avenue for future research is to explore whether conscious, self-reported beliefs regarding the clarity and consistency of one's self-concept (*i.e.*, self-concept clarity; Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003) correspond with measures of goal and narrative SCD and, furthermore, whether these self-reported beliefs mediate the relations between SCD and adjustment. In addition, it may be that perceived clarity itself takes a distinct form at different personality levels (*i.e.*, clarity may manifest as context-specificity at the level of characteristic adaptations and unity/consistency at the level of life narratives). Researchers are encouraged to assess the viability of measures designed to tap self-concept clarity at each level of personality description.

Westerners may indeed value consistency. When asked to complete contextualized measures of trait-based personality description in the manner most common within the SCD literature, however, inter-contextual variability has been found to become artificially inflated (rather than truncated; Baird & Lucas, 2011). The same artificial inflation may lurk behind the measures of goal-based and narrative-based measures of contextualized personhood employed here. For this reason, subsequent research stimulated by the current studies should consider examining differentiation using the more subtle methods of assessment suggested by Heller, Watson, Komar, Min, and Perunovic (2007). These researchers have assessed trait SCD via the diary approach, experimentally "priming" the sensibilities particular to one context relative to another, or by asking participants to rate themselves as they function in their day-to-day lives, context-to-context. Greater reliance upon the diary approach and experience sampling will also increase the ecological validity of SCD-based research.

In our research, we sought to thematically code all qualitative material collected (*i.e.*, participants' goals and narratives) in a manner that was both conceptually and theoretically meaningful. As a final point, it is worth highlighting the difficulty (and perhaps the impossibility) inherent in coding such material in a way that allows for the retention of the richness, complexities, and particularities therein. Although there is much to be gained by future idiographic-nomothetic research examining SCD, exclusively idiographic undertakings should also be pursued. These more descriptive accounts will no doubt

help to flesh out the manner in which differentiation manifests within the framework of the individual life.

In sum, through a consideration of the association between goal SCD and adjustment, support was garnered for the notion of personal inconsistency as flexibility. Individuals who produced personal goals which deviated contextually tended to report higher levels of adjustment. Such findings align with Goffman's (1959) notion of the socially constructed nature of personal identity. In contrast, through a consideration of the association between narrative SCD and adjustment, support was garnered for the notion of personal inconsistency as fragmentation. Individuals who produced narratives which deviated contextually tended to report lower levels of adjustment. Such findings align with McAdams's (1995) notion of the life story as a unifying agent used to construct a coherent personal identity. Finally, the independent predictive ability of goal and narrative SCD provides support for broader conceptualizations of personhood. In light of these findings we would thus like to respectfully disagree with Whitman's (1855/1959) poetic conclusion. When inconsistency is considered within an appropriately inclusive framework of personality, it is anything but dismissible.

Notes

1. For discussion of SCD in relation to other measures tapping the structure of the self, see Campbell, Assanand, and Di Paula (2003).
2. This, of course, is dependent on the level of abstraction considered. Very specific goals (e.g., completing a term paper due next week) are much more contextual than broad, far-reaching goals (e.g., being a nice person). Consistent with the premise of characteristic adaptations, the majority of goal constructs cater to the former rather than the latter (see Austin & Vancouver, 1996). In addition, broad, far-reaching goals are likely manifest differentially across contexts (e.g., trying to tell the truth in one context, trying to avoid confrontation in another) and, thus, not entirely devoid of contextual impetus.
3. Schwartz (1992) places his tenth value (i.e., hedonism) as straddling the self-enhancement and independence quadrants. Due to this conceptual overlap, hedonism was not considered in the calculation of goal or narrative differentiation.
4. Although corrected measures of SCD control for mean-level information, this was not the case for our measure of narrative consistency. To examine whether such mean-level information might mediate the relation between consistency and adjustment noted here, we contrasted the mean-level of themes in the stories of our high- and low-adjustment groups. The groups did not differ along this dimension, $F(1,48) = 2.94$, $p = .09$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Thus, the mean-level of themes in participants' stories did not mediate the relation between narrative consistency and adjustment.
5. James (1890) himself recognized that the composition of one's social selves could represent either a "discordant splitting" or a "perfectly harmonious division of labor" (p. 294). He was less equivocal when discussing the spiritual self, proposing that contextual

variability in terms of this component of the self was maladaptive and led to a sense of self-alienation.

6. All participant names reported are pseudonyms.

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