

The Role of Domain Content in Understanding Identity Development Processes

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The current studies examined the importance of domain content in the processes of identity development using two approaches—narrative and status. We examined personal narratives for identity domain content, the co-occurrence of different contents, and the relations between content and processes, using two approaches to identity—status and narrative. Across two studies, 762 participants (average age = 19 years) and 2214 narratives, traditional ideological and interpersonal status domains were present, but so was a novel domain: existential concerns. Narrative identity processes were more frequent in narratives with multiple contents, and relations between identity statuses processes and narrative processes were modest. We discuss theoretical implications, the importance of examining content, and the utility of narrative approaches for doing so.

Identity development is the major psychosocial task of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). It is through the processes of exploring one's roles and beliefs across domains and time that individuals come to feel a sense of coherent integration, and to understand their place in society. However, we see two current problems in the field that limit our understanding of this developmental task. First, the bulk of the extant research has focused on *processes* of identity development to the neglect of the *content* of identity. Second, there are two prominent approaches to identity development—status (e.g., Marcia, 1966) and narrative (e.g., McAdams, 1993)—that exist largely in parallel, with little knowledge about how they differ or complement each other (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; Syed, 2012). In the current study, we take on these two problems by reporting findings from two studies in which we adopted both status and narrative approaches to better under-

stand the link between identity process and content.

Erikson's Theory of Identity Development, Contemporary Approaches, and Critiques

In his seminal life span theory of development, Erikson (1950) proposed that individuals negotiate qualitatively distinct tasks at each life stage. The stage on which he spent a great deal of intellectual effort was identity versus role confusion. He argued that adolescence is the first time that individuals begin to consider questions of identity, as part of the process involves the realization that childhood identifications are no longer useful (Erikson, 1968). In emerging adulthood, individuals gain new cognitive skills that make complex self-exploration increasingly possible (Labouvie-Vief, 2006; Piaget, 1965). Further, cultural norms about personal exploration in contemporary American society make emerging adulthood an optimal time for identity work. Given a tolerance for, or even expectation of, delayed adulthood in modern society, Erikson (1959/1980) viewed this as a time to engage in role experimentation, and scholars have pointed to emerging adulthood as the primary stage for identity exploration, even more so than

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adolescence (Arnett, 2000; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010).

Erikson proposed that to prepare individuals for the tasks of adulthood, a full and healthy resolution of the identity crisis involves engagement at three levels, two of which we address—ego and personal identity, which are the foci of contemporary research on identity development. We propose that these levels have been differentially captured by narrative and status approaches to identity development, which is one reason that prior research has found few or small relations between them (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006; Syed & Azmitia, 2008).

Status Approaches

Personal identity centers on how one defines one's beliefs or goals via negotiation with culturally relevant roles. This process hinges on the availability of these roles and belief systems, the meaning of them to the individual, and how they intersect with each other (Erikson, 1968). For example, one's beliefs about religion, or one's role as male or female, will be influenced by one's own experiences and perceptions, as well as the possible religious belief systems or gender norms available to the individual. We propose that personal identity is best captured by the identity status approach that focuses on the processes of exploration and commitment in various interpersonal (e.g., dating) and ideological (e.g., religion) identity content domains (e.g., Marcia, 1966, 1993; see also Schwartz, 2001 for a review). Exploration entails information-seeking behaviors about major life decisions, such as exploration of different religions by attending various services. Commitment is defined as adhering to a set of values or beliefs, such as engaging in daily prayer. Based on the degree of exploration and commitment, Marcia (1966) arrived at four different statuses as follows: achievement (exploration and commitment), moratorium (current exploration without commitment), foreclosure (commitment without exploration), and diffusion (neither exploration nor commitment). Achievement represents the successful negotiation of this psychosocial stage, which comes after the move from foreclosure/diffusion to moratorium (Kroger et al., 2010).

We raise four critiques of the status approach that we sought to address in the present studies. First, while the status approach does define the content of identity work (e.g., religion, dating), research on domain content has been relatively

descriptive, with little emphasis on how exploration and commitment might differ by domains (cf., Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2005; Frisé & Wängqvist, 2011; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998). Second, researchers have consistently defined domains for participants a priori (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995; Bennion & Adams, 1986; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Marcia, 1966), neglecting the personal relevance of domains (cf. Frisé & Wängqvist, 2011). For example, if someone scores low on exploration of religious beliefs, it is difficult to know whether that is an indicator of low relevance of, or low engagement with, religion. Third, little research has examined how identity exploration might occur as content domains intersect (see also Grotevant, 1987; van Hoof, 1999), such as how the exploration of religious beliefs may also be related to the exploration in romantic relationships. Finally, although Erikson emphasized psychobiography and qualitative approaches (e.g., 1950), current-status approaches are dominated by survey measures to assess indicators of exploration and commitment within domains (Balistreri et al., 1995; Bennion & Adams, 1986; Crocetti et al., 2008; cf. Kroger, 2002, 2007), or as general tendencies not tied to specific domains (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). Some have argued that this approach voids the context and the person from the rich study of identity (van Hoof, 1999; Josselson & Flum, forthcoming; Schwartz, 2005; Syed & Azmitia, 2008).

Narrative Approach

In contrast to the exploration of personal belief systems, Erikson argued that *ego identity* focuses on personal continuity and is found when one is able to integrate one's most important, basic, and internal understanding of the self to create a sense of personal sameness across time. We propose that this level is captured by theories that center on subjective processes of constructing a personal life story as the critical pathway to identity development (e.g., McAdams, 1993). Narrative approaches emphasize the management of inevitable personal changes that can be a threat to personal continuity (Pasupathi, Brubaker, & Mansour, 2007): If my beliefs or body or personality changes, am I still the same person? Forming a coherent *story* that explains how one has changed and remained the same can preserve a sense of personal continuity through time.

As with the status approaches, the primary flaws in the narrative approach are the lack of

attention to identity contents and their intersections, and how content relates to process. While it is surprising that little attention has been paid to the ways that individuals comingle identity contents from a perspective that centers on subjectivity, the subjectivity of the narrative approach offers the best mechanism for understanding the issues of content salience and intersectionality.

In sum, we propose that these two approaches take on different levels of Erikson's conceptualization of identity, and they both favor an examination of the processes in which individuals are engaging to construct an identity over an examination of the contents in which these processes occur. However, consistent with Erikson (1968), we contend that *it is imprudent to examine processes of identity development in contents that may be personally irrelevant to the individuals one is studying*. Thus, in this study, we examined (1) the frequencies of identity status domain contents as they naturally occurred in individuals' personally important narratives, (2) whether these domains emerged together, or whether they *co-occurred*, in individuals' narratives, and (3) how this co-occurrence was related to the processes of identity development.

THE PRESENT STUDIES: IDENTITY CONTENT, CO-OCCURRENCE, AND THE OVERLAP IN APPROACHES

The primary goal of these studies was to examine the links between approaches by addressing the lack of attention to identity content (cf., Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011; Grotevant, 1987; Syed & Azmitia, 2010). Erikson defined content as relationships, occupation, and ideology, the latter of which Marcia defined as politics and religion. Other domains have been added, with a current consensus on ideological (occupation, values, religion, politics) and interpersonal (family, friends, dating, sex roles, recreation) domains (Bennion & Adams, 1986; Grotevant, Thorbecke, & Meyer, 1982). Yet, Erikson emphasized the importance of *relevant* identity domains; thus, analysis of content should begin with contents that are salient to one's informants. The a priori definition of content neglects the local, subjective, and contextualized nature of contents (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). By taking a narrative approach to domain content, we return the issue of salience to our informants.

In terms of what might be salient to our U.S. samples, emerging adulthood is viewed as a stage of exploration of vocational and career options,

personal values, and relationships (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). So, regardless of approach, we would expect interpersonal and ideological concerns to be important (Bennion & Adams, 1986; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). However, within the narrative approach, there is another common issue that individuals find self-defining, which is a focus on concerns of mortality (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Thorne et al., 2004). Issues of mortality are existential questions that are at the heart of threat to personal continuity through time. Thus, we coded personal narratives for the frequencies of status domain contents to see whether they were indeed personally salient to our informants, as well as for existential concerns to understand the relative importance of various domains.

Once we established the relevant content, we then asked questions about how content domains might be differentially linked to identity processes, and if identity processes were heightened when content domains co-occur. Following Erikson's (1959/1980, 1968) proposal that the intersection of these contents may create conflict, we examined a narrative process that can aid in resolution of conflict: *meaning-making*. Meaning-making is defined as reflecting on past events to see how individuals have changed over time (McLean & Thorne, 2003), which is particularly likely when events are conflict-laden (Bruner, 1990; McLean & Thorne, 2003). McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) argued that meaning-making is a critical narrative process for developing a coherent identity by helping individuals to make sense of challenging events, which lead us to expect that meaning-making might be engaged to make sense of events where contents co-occur.

METHOD: STUDY 1

The data were collected as part of a study on the relation between the narration of different types of autobiographical events, abuse history, and well-being (Greenhoot & McLean, 2013).

Participants

We recruited 577 participants ($n = 1659$ narratives) through psychology subject pools at two large public universities in the Midwest ($n = 136$) and in the Northwest ($n = 441$) of the United States (mean age = 19.5 years, $SD = 2.51$; 68% females). The sample at the midwestern campus was prescreened for history of abuse; 211 participants, across both samples, reported past exposure to abuse, domestic

violence, or sexual trauma. Participants self-reported ethnicity was Caucasian (77%), followed by African American (4%), Asian American (6%), Latino/a (3%), American Indian (0.3%), Mixed (5%), Other (3%).

Measures

Narrative prompts. Individuals were randomly assigned to write three personal narratives in response to one of five types of prompts: trauma ($n = 117$), transgression ($n = 119$), low point ($n = 113$), self-defining ($n = 116$), and turning point ($n = 114$). These prompts are commonly used in studies of narrative identity. Traumas were defined as the most negative, stressful, or traumatic events of one's life (Greenhoot, Sun, Bunnell, & Lindboe, 2013). Transgressions were defined as the worst thing one had ever done, which may have resulted in physical or psychological harm to another, and guilt or shame (Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010). Low points were described as extremely negative events, which could include emotions such as despair, disillusionment, terror, guilt, or shame (McAdams, 2006). Self-defining memories are highly emotional, represent an enduring theme in one's life, and help to explain who one is (Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992). Turning points are episodes in which one underwent an important change in self-understanding (McAdams, 2006). For each prompt, participants were asked to provide details about where they were, whom they were with, what happened, and their reaction and others' (if relevant). Narratives were 187 words on average (range = 3–905; $SD = 111$). After writing narratives, participants also completed several assessments that we do not examine here: ratings of memory characteristics (Rubin, Schrauf, & Greenberg, 2003), survey items about memory telling, a memory about abuse, a memory of overcoming a struggle, and surveys assessing well-being, depression, health, abuse history, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Finally, participants completed a demographics form.

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants wrote their narratives on paper and then completed survey items on a computer program used for the remainder of the session (written with Media Lab v2008; Empirisoft, 2008). Once finished, participants were debriefed, given information about available counseling resources, and thanked.

Participants were given course credit for participation, which took an average of 1.5–2 hr.

Narrative Coding

Domain content. The coding system captures identity content domains that emerge in autobiographical narratives, and can be obtained from the first or second author. Following past research, we adopted a two-level system for organizing domains: broad (e.g., ideological and interpersonal) and specific (e.g., family, values). To avoid confusion, we refer to the broad domains as *domains* and the specific domains as *facets*. We began with the content domains and facets that status researchers have identified: occupation, religion, politics, and personal values in the ideological domain, and sex roles, family, friendship, dating, and recreation in the interpersonal domain. We use the term sex roles to be consistent with prior literature, but this term really captures issues of gender, and sexuality and sexual behaviors would be primarily captured under dating. Notably, we found no instances of politics or sex roles. Narratives that did not fit with these facets were coded as mortality, drugs/alcohol, mental health, and abuse. We labeled this collection of facets the *existential domain*. The rationale for this domain is that abuse and mental health share a similarity to mortality in that they are about personal threat and continuity through time, and the narratives about drugs and alcohol tended to be about fear-arousing experiences that included threat to physical well-being or, more rarely, about existential experiences (e.g., hallucinogens). Coders rated each facet as present or absent for each narrative. To be coded as present, the facet had to be related to some aspect of plot, as opposed to background information. For example, if the event happened at church, religion would not be coded as present unless religion had a part to play in the plot or emotion of the story. One way to determine presence of content was to ask whether or not exchanging potential content would change the story—for example, could church have been the workplace? If details could be exchanged, then they were not counted as identity facet content. If more than one facet emerged, coders decided on the dominant facet, by asking what the *main* identity issue at play was. The first author conducted reliability analyses with the third author, who completed all facet content coding for both studies. Reliability was acceptable for each facet and for dominant facet: values $\kappa = .86$; occupation $\kappa = .88$; religion $\kappa = 1.0$; family $\kappa = .81$; friends

kappa = .74; dating kappa = 1.00; other = .88; dominant facet kappa = .90.

Meaning-making. Each of the memory narratives was coded for sophistication of meaning on a 4-point scale (McLean & Pratt, 2006). A zero indicated no explanation of the meaning of the event. Narratives were scored as one if there was a specific lesson that the reporter learned from the event. A score of two was assigned to narratives that contained vague meaning; narratives of this sort describe some growth or change in the self, but the specifics of the change are not clear. Narratives were scored as three if there was evidence that the reporter gleaned specific insight from the event that applies to broader areas of the reporter's life. Three research assistants who had acceptable reliability with a trained graduate student coded meaning (intraclass range = .83–.89).

Reliability was completed on 10% of narratives (54 cases, 164 narratives). Coders were blind to condition, abuse status, and hypotheses. Once reliability was reached, coders discussed difficult cases as needed and checked 20% of their codes with each other to prevent coder drift.

RESULTS: STUDY 1

Analysis Plan

The analyses were carried out in two steps. First, we examined the frequencies with which the identity contents were present in the narratives, how the content co-occurred within narratives, and how contents varied by narrative prompt, gender, age, and abuse status. These analyses were conducted using chi-square statistics, relying on adjusted standardized residuals (ASRs) and Cramer's v . ASRs are a metric for evaluating the degree of discrepancy between observed and expected values for an individual cell within a contingency table. Whereas a statistically significant chi-square statistic indicates global nonindependence in the contingency table, the ASR allows researchers to locate the source of the nonindependence within individual cells. The ASR is a standardized metric, and therefore, can be interpreted like a z -score. Cramer's v is an effect size index that represents the strength of the association between two variables. In the second step, we used multilevel modeling (MLM) to examine how contents were related to meaning. MLM is a statistical technique that generalizes linear regression to situations in which data are nested, or hierarchically organized. We used MLM because each participant

provided up to three narratives, and thus, narratives are nested within persons. We provide more detail about these models below.

What Identity Content Domains and Facets Are Represented in Personal Narratives?

The domains and facets of the memories were considered in terms of their presence, and if they were the dominant theme if more than one domain/facet was coded as present (Table 1). Interpersonal domains were the most frequently occurring, followed by existential domains and ideological domains. The rank order for dominant theme was the same: interpersonal, existential, and ideological. Although the ideological domains were the least frequently occurring, when they were present with other contents they were most likely to be dominant.

Table 1 also illustrates the variability in facets within the three broad domains. The frequencies are notable for both what was, and was not, included. Within the interpersonal domain, the family facet accounted for the majority of narratives, followed by the friendship and dating facet. Recreation was infrequently occurring, and sex roles were not evident. For the ideological domain, the occupational facet was the most frequent, followed closely by values. Religion was quite rare, and politics was not evident. Finally, within the existential domain, mortality narratives were the most frequently occurring, followed by drugs, abuse, and mental health narratives.

How Does Content Facet Co-Occur?

Despite the large number of possible facets (11), there was relatively little co-occurrence of facets within the narratives. The majority of narratives (66%; $n = 914$) featured only one facet, with 31% ($n = 427$) including two facets, 3% ($n = 44$) including three facets, and only one narrative including four facets (none had more than four). For the purposes of subsequent analyses, we combined the narratives containing either three or four facets into a single category.

The number of facets present varied significantly by dominant domain, $\chi^2(4, N = 1386) = 37.38$, $p < .001$, $v = .12$. Each domain had a different distribution pattern. Interpersonal domains were least likely to include three or more facets ($ASR = -2.8$), but did not differ from expected on one or two facets. Ideological domains were most likely to be one facet ($ASR = 3.5$) and less likely to be two facets ($ASR = -3.9$), with no difference on three. Finally,

TABLE 1
Distribution of Content Domains

Domain	Study 1				Study 2			
	Present ^a		Dominant		Present ^a		Dominant	
	<i>n</i>	Percent (%)	<i>n</i>	Percent (%)	<i>n</i>	Percent (%)	<i>n</i>	Percent (%)
Interpersonal	999	74	743	53	329	76	262	59
Family	577	42	420	31	155	36	119	27
Friends	227	17	164	12	89	20	72	17
Dating	195	14	145	11	66	15	55	13
Recreation	14	1	14	1	19	4	16	4
Sex roles	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ideological	334	24	272	20	83	19	67	15
Values	145	11	108	8	21	5	18	4
Religion	25	2	18	1	3	1	2	0.5
Occupation	164	12	146	11	59	14	47	11
Politics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Existential	556	41	371	27	147	34	114	26
Mortality	307	22	206	15	103	24	78	18
Mental health	70	5	43	3	18	4	14	3
Abuse	82	6	63	5	4	1	4	1
Drugs	97	7	59	4	22	5	10	2
Total	1903		1386		559		435	

^aPercentages do not add to 100 because multiple domains could be present within each narrative.

existential domains were less likely to be one facet (-5.2) and more likely to be two ($ASR = 4.4$) or three ($ASR = 2.4$).

How Do Content Domains Vary by Memory Prompt?

Dominant domains varied by memory prompt, $\chi^2(8, N = 1386) = 61.17, p < .001, v = .15$. Interpersonal domains were less likely to be dominant with turning-point memories ($ASR = -2.0$), but were evenly distributed across the four other memory types. In contrast, ideological domains were more likely with turning-point memories ($ASR = 3.8$) and less likely with both low-point ($ASR = -2.9$) and traumatic ($ASR = -4.6$) memories. Existential domains were more likely with traumatic memories ($ASR = 5.2$) and less likely with transgression memories ($ASR = -3.3$).

Do Content Domains Vary by Gender, Age, or Abuse Status?

There were no gender or age differences in the distribution of the broad domains, facets memory prompt, or co-occurrence. Abuse status was not related to broad domain or co-occurrence, but was related to facets. Participants with a history of abuse more often had abuse stories ($ASR = 3.7$),

less often mortality stories ($ASR = -1.9$), with no differences on mental health or drug stories. Additionally, abuse status was significantly related to memory prompt, $\chi^2(4, N = 1386) = 16.88, p = .002, v = .11$. Participants with a history of abuse more often had low-point prompt ($ASR = 2.0$) or turning-point prompt ($ASR = 1.9$), less often transgression ($-ASR = 2.9$) and negative ($ASR = -1.9$) prompt (this occurred despite random assignment to conditions).

How Are Content Domains Related to Process?

We examined whether the three broad content domains were associated with variations in narrative meaning-making. Because participants each reported up to three narratives, the subsequent analyses were conducted using multilevel modeling (MLM) to account for the nesting of multiple stories within participants. There were two focal predictors as follows: identity domain, which was dummy-coded with the interpersonal domain specified as the reference category, and co-occurrence, which was treated as a continuous variable. Participant age, gender, and abuse status were included as Level 2 covariates, and word length was included as a Level 1 covariate. All models were specified using full-information maximum likelihood. In reporting the results, we included Cohen's

d for the pairwise comparisons of the dummy-coded content predictors and unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for the continuous predictors.

Meaning. Both identity domain and co-occurrence were significantly associated with meaning (Table 2). Narratives within the ideological domain included significantly more meaning than both the interpersonal ($d = .14, p < .05$) and existential domains ($d = .25, p < .001$), and the interpersonal domain had marginally greater meaning than the existential domain ($d = .09, p = .09$). Co-occurrence was positively associated with meaning ($b = .15, p < .05$). There were no significant interactions between identity domains and any other variables in the model.

In sum, across various types of memories, the domains and facets that are viewed as central to identity development from a status perspective do occur in personally important narratives, with some notable exceptions (i.e., sex roles, politics). We also saw that there is another domain that has not been captured in status approaches—existential concerns. The ideological domain was especially likely to have meaning, followed by interpersonal, and then existential. We also saw that co-occurrence, while relatively rare, was related to more meaning in the narratives.

STUDY 2

We aimed to replicate our initial findings, and to add several other factors, while simplifying our focus by concentrating on only one type of prompt to simplify our analyses, self-defining memories.

TABLE 2
Multilevel Models Predicting Meaning

	Study 1		Study 2	
	b	SE	b	SE
Intercept	.56***	.11	.82***	.10
Covariates				
Age	.04	.08	-.08	.06
Abused	.16	.12	—	—
Male	.13	.13	-.06	.13
Word count	.26***	.05	.11	.06
Predictors				
Ideological versus interpersonal	.26*	.11	-.03	.16
Existential versus interpersonal	-.17	.10	-.28*	.14
Co-occurrence	.15*	.08	.12	.11

Note. Coefficients for interaction terms not shown.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

For a direct test of the relation between different approaches to identity, we added a measure of identity statuses and ego development. We should not be entirely surprised to see a lack of substantial overlap in status and narrative processes, given our proposal of the different focus of personal and ego identity. Indeed, findings on the relations between narrative and status identity processes have been modest, with the most basic finding being that markers of autobiographical reasoning, including meaning-making, are associated with more mature identity status development, but with small effect sizes (Alisat & Pratt, 2012; Josselson, 1982; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Neimeyer & Rares-hide, 1991; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986; Pasupathi, Wainryb, & Twali, 2012; Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010). Thus, we expected identity achievement to be modestly associated with meaning because each of these constructs is viewed as a marker of processes of identity development. Novel to the current study, we also expected achievement to be related to co-occurrence of content domains. We conceptualized co-occurrence as representing Erikson's (1950, 1968) concept of identity synthesis—the beginning of the process of piecing one's identity together, which should be related to achieving a coherent sense of one's self.

Given its foundation in psychodynamic theories and the emphasis on the ego as the synthesizer of experiences, or identity contents (McAdams, 1998), we examined ego development in relation to processes of identity development. For example, Loevinger (1976) articulated the ego as a process of "selfing," existing to make meaning out of one's own experiences (McAdams, 1998). Because ego level is presumed to be a marker of increasing identity synthesis, we expected ego development to be associated with meaning-making and identity achievement. Indeed, those higher on ego development construct more integrative personal narratives (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; McLean & Fournier, 2008).

STUDY 2 METHOD

Data from this study were also reported in McLean (2005), which focused on an entirely different topic of the functions of memory telling.

Participants

The sample consisted of 185 participants ($n = 555$ narratives), collected from a participant pool at a public university in Northern California. Age ranged from 16 to 27 years (mean age = 18.75;

$SD = 1.19$; 47% male). Sixty-two percent of the participants described themselves as Caucasian, 17% Asian, 6% Latino, 1% African American, 14% mixed race, and 4% of the participants were categorized as other. Two percent of the participants did not report ethnicity.

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed a paper-based questionnaire in a room alone. The questionnaire included narrative prompts, and several surveys, of which relevant ones are described below. Participants were given 1 hr to complete the study.

Tasks and Measures

Self-defining memory questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire (adapted from Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992) elicited demographics (gender, age, ethnicity) and described features of a self-defining memory, defined nearly identically to Study 1. The survey also elicited information on whether and how the event had been told to others, which was not analyzed here (see McLean, 2005). Narratives were 104 words on average (range = 4–321; $SD = 48$).

Eo-MEIS-2. Participants completed the 64-item Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (Bennion & Adams, 1986). Each item is rated on a 6-point scale (*strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*) and focuses on exploration and commitment in various facets (occupation, religion, politics, sex roles, family, friends, dating, recreation). Continuous scores are calculated for each of the four identity statuses (achieved, moratorium, foreclosed, diffused). Alphas for the scale items are as follows, with comparisons to Bennion and Adams (1986) in parentheses: ideological diffusion = .55 (.62); ideological foreclosure = .79 (.75); ideological moratorium = .66 (.75); ideological achievement = .63 (.62); interpersonal diffusion = .63 (.64); interpersonal foreclosure = .82 (.80); interpersonal moratorium = .52 (.58); interpersonal achievement = .59 (.60).

Ego development. Participants completed the 36-item Washington University Sentence Completion Test (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). Participants are asked to complete sentence stems (e.g., “What gets me into trouble is...”). This well-validated assessment is a projective test designed to assess ego level (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). Participants’

responses are coded and computed to arrive at an ego level, with higher levels representing more complex thinking about self and others. The possible range is 2–9, and the range in this study was 3–7, with an average of Level 5, consistent with research on this age group (Loevinger et al., 1985). Ego level was rated based on the automatic ego rules described by Hy and Loevinger (1996). The first author and an undergraduate research assistant, who were blind to the study hypotheses, conducted reliability on 24 cases, after training with the ego development manual. Reliabilities were acceptable using a linear variable (interclass $r = .92$), or examining each level as a category (overall kappa = .86). The research assistant coded the rest of the cases.

Coding Self-Defining Memory Narratives

Content domain and facet coding were identical to Study 1 and were performed by the same coder. Coding for meaning-making was identical to Study 1. A research assistant, who was blind to the hypotheses, rated 30% of the narratives for reliability (intraclass $r = .87$). The first author coded all narratives for meaning-making.

STUDY 2 RESULTS

What Identity Content Domains Are Represented in Personal Narratives?

Domains were considered in terms of their presence in any of the narratives as well as whether they were dominant if more than one domain was coded. The distribution of frequencies was similar to Study 1 (Table 1). Interpersonal domains were the most frequent, followed by existential domains and ideological domains. The rank order for dominant theme was the same: interpersonal, existential, and ideological. The proportion of dominance relative to presence was similar across the three domains: Ideological was dominant in 81% of the narratives in which it was present, compared with 80% for interpersonal and 78% for existential domains.

How Do Content Domains and Facets Co-Occur?

Despite the large number of possible facets (11), there was relatively little co-occurrence of facets within the narratives. Similar to Study 1, the majority of narratives (73%; $n = 325$) featured only one facet, with 23% ($n = 100$) including two facets, 2%

($n = 9$) including three facets, and only two narratives including four facets (none had more than four).

The number of facets present (combining three and four) marginally varied significantly by the dominant domain, $\chi^2(4, N = 431) = 7.83, p = .09, \eta^2 = .10$. However, the effect size was the same magnitude as in Study 1, and the distributional pattern was similar: Interpersonal domains were least likely to include three or more facets (-2.3). The ideological and existential domains did not have any significant deviations, but all differences were in the same direction as Study 1.

There were no gender or age differences in the distribution of the broad domains, facets, or co-occurrence.

How Are Domains Related to Process?

The subsequent analyses are identical to those reported in Study 1. We used multilevel modeling (MLM) to account for the nesting of multiple stories within participants. There were two focal predictors: identity domain, which was dummy-coded with the interpersonal domain specified as the reference category, and co-occurrence, which was treated as a continuous variable. Participant age and gender were included as Level 2 covariates, and narrative length was included as a Level 1 covariate. All models were specified using full-information maximum likelihood. In reporting the results, we included Cohen's d for the pairwise comparisons of the dummy-coded content predictors and unstandardized regression coefficient (b) for the continuous predictors.

Meaning. Identity domain was significantly associated with meaning (Table 2). Narratives within the interpersonal domain included significantly more meaning than the existential domains ($d = .28, p < .05$). The difference between the ideological and existential domain was of similar magnitude to Study 1 ($d = .25$), but nonsignificant. Co-occurrence was not significantly associated with meaning, although the effect was of similar magnitude to Study 1 ($b = .12$). There were no significant interactions between domains and any other variables in the model.

Connections to Ego Development and Identity Status

Meaning. Ego development was positively associated with meaning ($b = .20, p < .05$). Addi-

tionally, there was a significant interaction between ego development and identity domain ($b = -.34, p < .05$). As shown in Figure 1, while ego development was associated with greater meaning within the interpersonal domains, the opposite pattern was observed for the ideological domain: Greater ego development was associated with *less* meaning. None of the measures of identity status, either ideological or interpersonal, significantly predicted meaning.

In sum, the distribution of domains and likelihood of co-occurrence were similar to Study 1. While the association between co-occurrence and meaning was not significant, the effect was of a similar magnitude to Study 1. Finally, meaning was associated with ego development, particularly in the interpersonal domain, and there were no relations between statuses and meaning.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study was motivated by the lack of attention to how the two most common approaches to identity development relate to each other, and by the neglect of content in both status and narrative approaches, even though content was central to Erikson's theorizing. When considering *personally relevant* content, there are three salient domains, and that while rare, co-occurrence of content was generally related to processes of identity development—meaning-making. Consistent with the existing literature, we saw relatively modest associations between narrative and status approaches, supporting our proposal that they may capture different levels of identity development—personal and ego identity. Finally, these results were relatively consistent across age, gender, people with and without histories of trauma, and memory prompt.

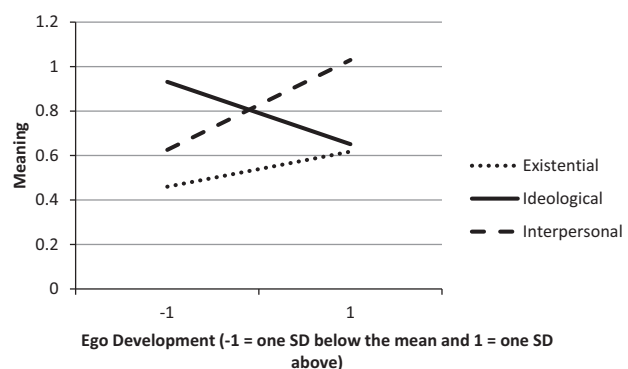


FIGURE 1 Interaction between identity domain and ego development for meaning in Study 2.

Content Matters

We propose that it does not matter only *that* individuals are exploring their identities, but *where* they are exploring these identities. Content tells us about the identities of our participants, as well as the context in which they are developing. Ideology—one of the first domains identified by Erikson—was the least common in both studies. Within the ideological domain, we saw no instances—in over 1800 narratives—of politics and only 28 narratives that included religion. While we collected data at liberal secular universities, the low base rate of religion is notable given that 80% of college students report being affiliated with a specific religion or denomination (Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), 2004). The low base rate of narratives about religion and politics may reflect a greater difficulty with recalling specific instances of such events, or a lesser concern with these issues at this life stage. For example, the lack of religion and politics, in favor of vocation, is consistent with work that has shown vocational concerns to be primary to other ideological contents (Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998). From a developmental perspective, it makes sense that occupation would be the most pressing concern for those in university. With more committed relationships, children, and the possibility of paying local taxes, religion and politics may become more salient concerns.

Across both studies, the interpersonal domain was the most common. As we would expect from research on the increasing importance of peer relationships over the course of adolescence and emerging adulthood (e.g., Youniss & Smollar, 1985), dating and friendships were present, but we saw no instance of sex roles. We have seen similar findings in a longitudinal study of college students (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008), such that gender was not a facet of identity that participants could easily discuss, whether asked directly about it or not. One possibility is that there is an emphasis on an “equality” master narrative in the United States, which might diminish experiences (literally or figuratively) in which gender is made salient.

The great majority of narratives in the interpersonal domain concerned family, consistent with theorizing within the narrative field, as well as in developmental psychology more broadly. For example, family stories are an important content of adolescent and emerging adult identity (e.g., Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008; Pratt & Fiese, 2004). Fivush et al. (2008) have argued that family stories provide opportunities for enriching one’s own

understanding of events by considering others’ perspectives, and they also provide powerful structures within which to locate oneself. Emerging adulthood also generally marks the beginning of the end of cohabitation with the family (Arnett, 2000; Goldscheider, Goldscheider, Clair, & Hodges, 1999), an important transition in Western culture marked by an improvement in the parent–child relationship (Lahelma & Gordon, 2003). This transition may also come with a renegotiation of roles, making these family stories especially salient during this developmental stage.

These findings are especially important because family is not particularly emphasized at the theoretical level and is narrowly operationalized, from the status perspective (see Crocetti et al., 2008; Meus, 2011). For example, status assessments focus on family in reference to other domains (e.g., one’s agreement with parental religious beliefs; Bennion & Adams, 1986), or on how much someone has considered the importance of family or one’s role in the family (Balistreri et al., 1995). These ratings may not induce much variability, particularly for importance, and are also rather vague; that is, the *degree* to which one has considered one’s role in the family does not tell us much about what that consideration actually entails. However, reflecting on family stories to find connection to and distinction between oneself and one’s family is an identity process in which we see individual variation, and which can be more fully described via narrative assessments (McLean, 2013; Zaman & Fivush, 2011).

The original domains accounted for 60% of the content of personal narratives in both studies. That the existential domain is missing in the status approach may be a similar issue to the lack of attention given to the family domain—it is difficult to imagine what it looks like to explore and commit to an existential identity. These data lead us to the interpretation that the status approach examines identity from an agentic perspective with a focus on options one can actively explore (e.g., type of religion; see Waterman[forthcoming] for a different approach to identity that considers issues of eudaimonia and existentialism). Existential concerns may be concerns that one has to wrestle *to understand*, not to choose between. This focus on agentic exploration may leave out other arenas that one considers identity-relevant, and which are managed via different processes, such as meaning-making. Existential concerns also tended to be more likely to co-occur with other identity contents (Study 1), suggesting that one way to manage

existential concerns is to understand them as connected to, and in the context of, other identity concerns (see LaVoie & Vries, 2003), consistent with findings on co-occurrence.

Identity Integration: Co-Occurrence Matters

Using Erikson's terminology, we see co-occurrence as representing identity synthesis—the beginning of the process of piecing one's identity together. When an individual sees facets as related to each other, co-occurrence, and is able to make meaning of events in which these facets are both relevant, this may be what Erikson referred to as identity integration. While somewhat rare, when we did see co-occurrence in Study 1 (and in similar magnitude in Study 2), we saw evidence of identity integration—meaning-making—supporting our idea that when identity contents come in contact with each other it may prompt individuals to engage identity processes, as in the following narrative from a 19-year-old female:

November 4th of my freshman year in high school, my friend's older brother, who was the same class as my sister, was killed in a freak accident. He was in his truck while he was camping and the bank collapsed, killing him. Before this in my life, both of my grandpas had passed away and of course it is so sad, but before X [died], I never realized or thought about how easy life can be taken away. He was 23, on his way to be a fire fighter, and seemed like he had such a happy life. *It made me realize that life is so fragile and we can never count on tomorrow. X's death occurred when my sister was abroad, studying in India. So many people who I loved were hurting so suddenly, and so deeply. It taught me the importance of reminding your parents you love them, or anyone for that matter. I have been fortunate enough not to have had anything absolutely traumatic or horrible happen, for that I am thankful. His death taught me how important it is to love the people you care about and always remind them.*

In this narrative, the experience of death is narrated as inextricably related to her relationships and her newly clarified values about relationships. To disentangle these contents disentangles her identity, which is beginning to cohere around these themes via her meaning-making processes (italicized). That is, her emerging conception of her

values is only understood as those values are linked to experiences with mortality and her relationships, and her identity is represented by the integration of relationships, values, and mortality—this is the story that she is building that makes her make sense to herself and to others. This is the re-configuration of relatively naïve childhood identifications into the reality of adult life that Erikson emphasized.

When we examined the narratives of those who reported co-occurrence without meaning, we generally saw narratives that were more like “event descriptions.” Some of the same topics that we saw above—mortality and relationships—were also present but were listed almost as a chronology. Thus, they were not necessarily incoherent; that is, they were temporally coherent, and sometimes even evaluatively coherent, but they lacked a kind of causal coherence, or meaning-making, which provides a sense of personal integration. For example, another 19-year-old female reported the following self-defining memory:

I had known that X was going to move away for a while, but the day had come. I went over to his house to play, & his dad answered, “He's at his grandma's; he's gone.” I turned and ran down the hill to my house. Once inside, I went into the tent of blankets that we had made in my basement, and remained there for I don't know how long. Later that week, my grandpa died, so my mom was preoccupied with her loss. When I told her that I was sad that I lost my best friend, she got very angry because I wasn't sad about her father.

Here we see the contents of friendships, mortality, and family. There is a clear temporal order here, but there is no explanation of how this person thinks these events are connected. The story makes basic sense, but it does not (yet) make sense as something that is self-defining. Given adult age-related increases in meaning-making (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006), if this event continues to be self-defining for this person, she will have to construct a thread that explains the connections between these losses and what they mean to herself.

Consistent with other studies on the intersectionality, co-occurrence was rare in this age group (Azmitia et al., 2008; Syed, 2010). We suspect that across young adulthood, as roles increasingly consolidate (Diehl & Hay, 2011), co-occurrence will become increasingly common (Syed, 2010). Emerging adults are likely just

beginning to see the intersection of their identity content domains and then only just likely to be able to make sense of them via meaning-making processes. This is likely due to cognitive abilities, which are still developing during emerging adulthood, as well as the social and cultural presses to provide a more coherent story about the connections between the various identity contents that become salient during this period. Our results point to the importance of considering the complexity of the processes used to integrate various content domains at a time when the demands for, and the abilities to do so, both increase.

Issues of Measurement and Theory: Convergence and Divergence

In using both of the contemporary approaches to identity, we saw some overlap in identity content and, consistent with previous studies, little overlap with identity processes. Unexpectedly, we did not see an association between status achievement and meaning. There are at least two explanations for this. First, this may be methodological. The EO-MEIS assessment has low reliabilities (Bennion & Adams, 1986), which may compromise our abilities to pick up these relationships, although other studies with the same measure have seen modest relations (Alisat & Pratt, 2012; McLean & Pratt, 2006). Part of the explanation for low reliability is that process scores are averaged across content domains. Second, as we have argued, we contend that these approaches are really targeting different levels of Erikson's conceptualization of identity, personal and ego.

In contrast to the status findings, ego development was positively associated with meaning-making, which was consistent with our expectations in which we conceptualized ego development as synthesizing one's experiences, an aspect of ego identity. This appears to be particularly likely when reflecting on relationships, which makes sense because those with higher levels of ego development have a more mature and richer understanding of themselves *and* others. For example, the movement from the conscientious level (where most adult development occurs) through the higher stages of ego development involves concerns shifting from a self-focus, particularly concerning differentiation from others, to an understanding of the self in a social context, and from dependence as a problem to an understanding of the importance of interdependence (Loevinger, 1976). In terms of the ideological domain, those with higher ego

development reported less meaning. This is interesting because wrestling with values and roles and the contradictions within those are a part of higher ego development (Loevinger, 1976). This finding might represent people who are still wrestling and have not yet made meaning of these issues. It may also be that these issues are not of concern to those at higher levels of ego development at this developmental stage. As we have noted, the ideological domain was less frequently reported, and those who are wrestling with identity issues at higher levels of ego development may be putting their attention elsewhere.

At a larger theoretical level, we have made a claim that received some empirical support, which is that these approaches target different levels of identity work. This claim and these data should provide a more inclusive and coherent framework for the study of identity development. For example, differentiating levels in terms of personal beliefs and roles (personal identity) and continuity through time (ego identity), as well as the degree of agency that one has in exploring various aspects of the self, provides a clearer map for interpreting the meaning of various identity processes. Further, the emphasis on personally salient content reveals the contextual nature of identity development. The study of content not only brings our participants' identities into relief, but also tells us about the context and culture in which they are developing. These claims return us to the heart of Erikson's theory: The study of identity development should be multidimensional and contextually and culturally sensitive.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We raise two main limitations of the current study. First, we had relatively homogenous samples in regard to ethnicity, and completely homogenous samples with regard to educational status. Ethnic identity is a central domain of identity development (Phinney, 1990) and is also one that intersects with other identities (Azmitia et al., 2008), so examining ethnic identity aids in understanding the intersectionality of identity contents. In terms of education, while the majority of emerging adults report attending some form of higher education (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgcec.nr0.htm>), and our samples were drawn from large public universities and classes that fulfill general education requirements, we did not sample a fully generalizable group of emerging adults. We suspect that identity facets

may vary more than identity processes in samples with different educational backgrounds, but only future studies will answer that. Finally, we had limited variability in age to determine whether some findings, notably co-occurrence, show age-related increases across emerging adulthood.

Second, we have raised the issue of the measurement of identity statuses, and we hope that researchers will use more reliable assessments of identity statuses in the future. We also note that in asking people for momentous events, existential issues may be particularly salient because of the emotion and disruption they entail. Issues that are still "in progress" may also be less amenable to requests for important past events. Researchers may want to use different techniques, such as asking directly for narrative accounts of facets and then assessing narrative quality. If individuals are still unable to come up with narratives about politics and religion, for example, or if those narratives are less elaborated than other facets, then we can be more confident that these are less salient.

In attempting to bring attention to the importance of identity domain content, we have made the argument that narrative is a more useful approach than are contemporary status approaches. First, we make this argument because of the subjectivity of narrative, which allows an assessment of personal salience. Second, McLean and Pasupathi (2012) argued that an elaborated story can help to maintain, and perhaps strengthen, the commitments one has made, from a status perspective. For example, Cox and McAdams (2010) found that students who told stories about experiences of self-transformation after a volunteer trip to work with impoverished Nicaraguans were more likely to volunteer after the trip, controlling for previous volunteer experience. Third, there is a substantial literature on narrative development (e.g., Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; McLean et al., 2007), which provides a theoretical foundation for the study of how identity *develops* in these cultural valued settings. For example, future studies may examine the degree to which conflict between domain contents or facets is related to meaning-making, a hypothesis supported by Erikson's original writings. Finally, narration is something that people actually *do* in their everyday lives (e.g., Fivush et al., 2006; McLean et al., 2007; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000). The act of narrating is a culturally valued and common activity, which brings the study of important psychosocial issues into the contexts in which they actually happen.

This is not to say that status approaches cannot adequately target content, but we argue that current approaches that rely on survey-rating assessments do not allow for the person to voice what is most important to him or herself (see also Josselson & Flum, forthcoming). The initial identity status interview (Marcia, 1966), on which many current surveys are based, was a rich source of information that could be used to better understand salient identity contents, especially if informants are able to bring up issues that they find personally important as opposed to only asking questions about predefined contents (see Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011). In sum, following Erikson and others (e.g., Josselson & Flum, forthcoming; McAdams, 1993; Thorne, 2000), we call for a refocusing on the subjective voice of the person who can best tell us about the salient identity contents and how they employ various processes to engage those contents.

In conclusion, we reiterate Erikson's emphasis on the importance of paying attention to content and how it interacts with process, a distinction that identity researchers, on the whole, have largely neglected. We also conclude that current perspectives on identity target different aspects of this developmental process and that they are both important to consider in understanding this complex phenomenon. We hope that researchers will begin to acknowledge the variety of approaches one might take to investigating identity development, and to continue to investigate the similarities and differences in these approaches (Syed, 2012). Understanding the issues of identity content, especially in reference to identity processes, is critical in gaining a fuller understanding of this complex developmental task.

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