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The "Stuff" of Narrative Identity: Touring Big and Small Stories in Emerging Adults' Dorm Rooms

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The purpose of this research was to explore emerging adults' conceptions of self and identity using a new narrative interview methodology that elicited stories about personal belongings and cherished objects through tours of physical and virtual spaces. This research was also driven by methodological goals to explore the usefulness of a newly developed "tour" methodology, designed as an adaptation to the life story interview approach that is prominent in narrative identity research. Twenty-six emerging adults (Ages 18 to 20) were interviewed in their dorm rooms in a midsized university in Ontario, Canada, using a modified life story interview protocol (McAdams, 2008). The interview focused on personal artifacts (e.g., books, music, photos, heirlooms) and included "tours" of the belongings and artifacts contained in participants' dorm rooms and preferred virtual spaces (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, music collections). Findings suggest that both physical and virtual spaces provide visual clues and support for conceptualizing and communicating identity contents as well as support for identity processes related to continuity and change. The combined tour and life story method provided access to both "big stories" of significant events in the life story and "small stories" (Bamberg, 2004; Freeman, 2011) of everyday experiences that are relevant to the development of self and identity. We conclude by examining the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of this research.

Keywords: narrative, self, identity, emerging adulthood, tour methodology

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From beloved teddy bears to old love letters and family photographs, the objects and belongings we carry with us in our physical and virtual spaces can be deeply meaningful to us. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James (1890) suggested that our possessions and belongings may in fact be considered to be part of our "selves":

> In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. (p. 291)

Although few of us can relate to owning yachts (and counting one's wife and children as belongings is generally recognized as unacceptable), the basic idea that our "stuff" may be part of our selves resonates with much contemporary psychological research. There has been a robust literature in psychology examining the meaning that objects and the spaces in which they exist hold in relation to ourselves. For example, Gosling's work on personal possessions has emphasized that our "stuff" provides clues to our personality traits (Gosling, 2008; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002), and individuals construct their physical, virtual (e.g., Back et al., 2010), and aural (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) environments in ways that reflect personality, values, preferences, and goals. Other researchers have emphasized that objects may signify key

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elements of personal biographies, including people, places, and events (Silver, 1996); serve as physical expressions of the self; act as a historical record of the self; reference one's cultural interests, including music, TV, and art preferences (Lincoln, 2004); and promote one's identity (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kamptner, 1995; Lincoln, 2004; Silver, 1996).

There has also been extensive study of the spaces in which personally salient objects are kept and/or displayed. Research following McRobbie's early work on "bedroom culture" (McRobbie, 1978; McRobbie & Garber 1976). Brown, Dykers, Steele, and White (1994) suggested that teen bedrooms serve as "mediators" of identity, as objects in the bedroom may represent the present self and also provide evidence of possible trajectories for the future (Brown et al., 1994; Steele & Brown, 1995). More recent research by Lincoln (2004) has suggested that the bedroom can tell the story of one's biography, with content signifying personal identity within the context of one's cultural identity.

Biographical spaces such as bedrooms change as we do; we add, move, and remove objects as our interests and personal projects shift (Fidzani & Read, 2014). As such, these spaces may be especially subject to change during times of transition. This idea is suggested in research with older adults living in retirement facilities. Kroger and Adair (2008) demonstrated the importance of cherished personal possessions for providing connections to one's past experiences and relationships. There are similar findings in research with emerging adults: Silver (1996) demonstrated that university students regard objects as connected to their experiences, relationships, and personal histories, and as such, tangible objects can support identity processes during times of transition.

Silver's (1996) research with university students was conducted more than 20 years ago, and there have been some important changes during this time. In contemporary society, cherished objects exist online and offline and, increasingly, there is overlap. Photos and personal diaries may be found in the drawer of a bedside table and they may also be found on the Internet. Love letters can be handwritten and mailed or typed and sent via e-mail or text. Prized music collections can exist as records or on Spotify accounts. We live in a world in which both our physical and virtual "stuff" may be relevant to or, as James (1890) suggested, part of our identity. In this article, we examine the meaning that emerging adults make of their "stuff," including physical objects located in dorm rooms and in bedrooms left behind in the transition to university as well as virtual "stuff" that exists on digital devices. Our goals in this study include extending prior scholarship on personal belongings in relation to the self by examining the personal meaning of dorm rooms, rooms left behind at home, and virtual "stuff." We also have methodological goals: We wanted to explore whether the "tour" methodology might be a useful adaptation to the life story interview approach (McAdams, 1993) that is prominent in narrative identity research. Although the life story interview is typically completed in lab settings, we were interested in situating interviews in the context of participants' personal spaces, as these can provide scaffolding for identity stories (e.g., Kroger & Adair, 2008). Following McAdams's (1993) approach, we elicited specific memories of salient life events, including high points and turning points. We combined this with a tour approach, whereby participants would be able to show us and tell us about the objects and personal artifacts that they deemed to be meaningful in relation to self and identity. We expected that the approach of combining life story interviews with a tour of participants' personally salient items in physical and virtual spaces would be useful for eliciting different kinds of narratives that may not be as readily accessible in a lab. In particular, we were interested in whether this approach could elicit both "big stories" of major life events (e.g., falling in love, moving to a new city, losing a loved one) and the "small stories" that comprise our everyday experience (Bamberg, 2004; Freeman, 2011).

Defining Self and Identity

Narrative identity theory emphasizes that identity provides a sense of continuity across time (e.g., McAdams, 1993). We construct a sense of who we are and a connection between past, present, and future selves through interaction with a layered world of personal, family, and cultural stories that comprise one's narrative ecology (Breen, McLean, Cairney, & McAdams, 2017; McLean, 2015; McLean & Breen, 2015). In the present study, we were interested in

both self and identity. Although these are overlapping constructs, they are not the same. Our conceptualization of their differentiation draws on McAdams’s (2013; McAdams & Cox, 2010) tripartite framework for conceptualizing the self, which delineates the self according to three metaphors—the *actor*, the *agent*, and the *author*—and includes identity processes as well as social roles and domains of identity. According to this framework, the self is first a social *actor* that is oriented to the present and comprises those facets of the self that are associated with action in the social world, such as roles, skills, and traits. Around middle childhood, the *agent* self emerges. The metaphor of the *agent* highlights an emerging future orientation in the domain of goals, hopes, values, and other facets of the self that relate to furthering one’s life projects and purpose. The third metaphorical self in McAdams’s framework, *the author*, typically emerges in adolescence to synthesize the past, present, and future into a coherent overarching life story. It is the task of *the author* to construct identity, which is conceptualized as a sense of the self as coherent across time. Although the development of self and identity are lifelong tasks, they are especially prominent in adolescence and emerging adulthood (McLean & Breen, 2015) when new social roles (Arnett, 2000) and maturing cognitive capacities allow for the emergence and consolidation of a coherent sense of self-identity that bridges together past, present, and future selves (e.g., Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean & Breen, 2015; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007).

Our approach to self and identity also includes a strong orientation to relationship. Dialogical theory emphasizes that the self develops through interaction with an “extended society” of “selves,” including others with whom one interacts and the various “I positions” that exist within one’s self system (see Hermans & Gieser, 2012, for a review). This emphasis on development of the self through interaction provides a recognition of the role of relationships in the development of the self as well as an appreciation for the possibilities of ongoing influence by the variations on one’s own self that exist across time and roles. A similar orientation to relationship is found in Galliher, McLean, and Syed’s (2017) approach to identity, in which they emphasized the importance of relationships as well as societal structures to both identity *process* (how identity develops) and identity *content* (what the identity is). The focus on identity contents includes attention to historical, cultural, and political contexts; social roles; domains of identity (e.g., self as student, self as worker); and everyday interactions that are found in the contents of our responses to the question “Who am I?”

Within the field of narrative identity, there has been significant debate about the kinds of narratives that should be the focus of inquiry and how different kinds of stories may operate in the construction of selves. This debate has centered on “big stories” versus “small stories.” Big stories require reflection; they ask us to “take a step back” and examine our experiences in relation to the development of our selves (Freeman, 2007). In contrast, “small stories” is an “umbrella term” (Georgakopoulou, 2007) that is used to describe narrative activities that reflect “fleeting, contingent, fragmented and, multiple selves” (p. 151), which have not (yet) been reflected upon and reworked into coherent stories about the self. Small stories focus on interactions: “how selves and identities are *done* in interactions” (Bamberg, 2007 p. 173). In this research, we used the life story interview approach (McAdams, 1993), which emphasizes “big stories,” such as high points, turning points, and memories that the participant deems to be especially significant to self and identity. We also used a tour approach, which we hoped would elicit small stories that exist in interactions, experiences, and relationships represented by the objects in one’s dorm room. We were interested in experiences that have acquired the necessary temporal and psychological distance to allow for abstraction and selves as becoming—as well as experiences and relationships in the making: fragments of emerging selves that may be suggested by one’s “stuff.”

Drawing on these theories, our approach to self and identity can be summarized as including the following components: (a) recognition that selves are developed through interaction with various representations of selves both within and outside of the self system (Hermans, 2001); (b) a conception of identity as including processes of constructing a sense of the self as coherent across time as well as the cultural context, roles, and relationships that define our identity contents (Galliher et al., 2017); and (c) developmental delineation of self and identity

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along the lines of actor (roles, skills and traits emerging early in development), agent (hopes, goals, projects that begin to emerge in childhood), and author (construction of coherent overarching identity that begins to emerge in adolescence; McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Cox, 2010). Although this multifaceted approach to self and identity is broad, we felt that such an expansive approach provides appropriate framing for this exploratory investigation of the role of objects and personal spaces in relation to self and identity. We wanted to begin with an open exploration of how the "stuff" of dorm rooms, home bedrooms, and social media sites relates to different aspects of self and identity, including self representations across time, identity contents, and the associations with actor, agent, and author levels of selves. In casting a wide net in our exploration of stuff in relation to self and identity, we aimed to allow for the emergence of both big and small stories (Bamberg, 2004; Freeman, 2011), and hoped to generate new insights about how the emerging adults in our sample viewed their stuff in relation to various aspects of the self. This approach was also useful in relation to our exploratory methodological goals to develop and try out a new approach to investigating self and identity that combines an adapted life story interview and tour approach, which involved asking participants to describe the "stuff" of their physical and virtual spaces and describe the meaning that these hold in relation to the self.

Method

Participants

Twenty-six emerging adults (Ages 18–20) were recruited from a midsized Canadian university via listservs and posters advertising "The Bedroom Study." Twenty-three of the participants were female and three were male. It is important to note that males were significantly underrepresented in the data because of lack of male response during recruitment, and we did not have any participants identify as gender nonbinary. We considered omitting data from the male participants from this study; however, when we began reading the transcripts, it became evident that data from the male participants offered some important contributions to our emerging understanding of the relationship between emerging adults' "stuff" and identity. Thus, we elected to include the three male participants in the study, given the exploratory nature of our study and our methodological goals, though we did not explore gender differences.

We did not ask participants to categorize themselves according to racialized identity, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, or other categories of social identity; rather, we intended that the methods we used would allow participants themselves to identity those aspects of social identity that were most salient to them. Although reporting race is particularly expected in psychological studies and widely considered a sign of methodological rigor (O'Hare, 2014), there is also increasing criticism of the tendency to use race as a variable without carefully considering why and how it is being used (O'Hare, 2014; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). There is increasing recognition that *race* is a social construction, and the meaning of race cannot be separated from the particular sociocultural context in which racialized and White identities are embedded (e.g., Litchmore, Safdar, & O'Doherty, 2016; Myrie, 2017). In this study, we were not planning to conduct analyses according to categories of social identity, and we felt that by not asking about predetermined social categories, participants could position themselves in ways that were meaningful to them. However, we also recognize that there are limitations in our approach. Notably, by not asking about race, ethnicity, or other aspects of social identity, there may be an implicit assumption of Whiteness, heteronormativity, ableism, and other congruencies with dominant social identities. Indeed, a relatively small number of participants spoke explicitly about race, class, religion, mental health status, or sexual identity. A few participants spoke about religious identity (one spoke about her Hindu religion; four spoke about being Christian), one participant spoke about her Chinese identity, one participant spoke about living with mental illness, and one participant spoke about her identity as a lesbian. As we ourselves are White, heterosexual, cisgender researchers, it is also important to recognize that our own social identities may have influenced participants' decisions about whether or not to foreground particular social identities in the interview. From a narrative and dialogical perspective, all stories are, at least to some extent, performances for a particular listener

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(or groups of listeners; e.g., Breen (in press); McLean & Breen, 2015), and so we expect that the interviewer’s own social identity influenced participants decisions about which stories to tell and how to tell them. By not asking specifically about participants’ positioning in relation to social identities such as race, class, and sexual orientation, it is possible that we did not create space for participants to bring these aspects of self and identity forward in the interview. We acknowledge in advance that this may be a limitation in this study.

In order to be eligible for this study, individuals were required to be in their first year of university study, between the ages of 17 and 20, and living in an on-campus residence. Of the 26 participants, nine shared their residence room with a roommate; all participants identified which area of the space was considered to be their own.

Procedure

Following approval from the institution’s Research Ethics Board, all participants were interviewed in their dorm rooms by the second author using a semistructured interview protocol. We began to develop the protocol through a pilot study that was conducted with 12 adolescents (Ages 12–18; Breen, Scott, & McLean, 2014). In the pilot phase, we invited participants to describe the contents of their bedroom and relations to their understanding of self and identity, and participants also took the interviewers on “tours” of their social media pages. This phase demonstrated that we were heading in a promising direction: Participants provided rich descriptions of their personal belongings and the relationship between personally salient objects and spaces and their developing selves. We concluded that an actual tour approach that involved visiting participants in their personal spaces would likely elicit especially rich data. Moreover, we were interested in the opportunity provided by an actual physical tour to “bump into” objects (and the selves they might be associated with) that may not emerge in an interview occurring outside of the participants’ personal space. The initial protocol was then revised to include physical tours of bedrooms (or, as is the case here, dorm rooms) as well as preferred digital spaces (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). For the present study, the interview involved tours of the objects in participants’ dorm rooms, their preferred virtual platform, and questions about objects and spaces left behind in the family home. Participants were asked to describe the personal meaning and salience of the objects in their dorm rooms, including objects that were visible and those contained in closets and drawers as well as virtual objects contained on virtual platforms. We should note that none of the participants from the pilot phase participated in the research reported here. Participants were also asked a series of questions adapted from McAdams’s (1993, 2008) life story interview, including questions about objects’ connections to high points and turning points in their life stories as well as connections between objects and salient memories about childhood, adolescence, and relationship memories. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by the second author. Examples of the interview questions are provided in Table 1.

Analyses

We used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis to analyze the data. There were two phases to data analyses: The first involved open coding, and results were described in the second authors’ master’s thesis (Scott, 2016). For her thesis, the second author focused on slightly different research questions from those investigated here. She was particularly interested in examining female students’ experiences of transitioning to university and the ways in which objects and personal spaces provide support for this transition. Although the study was designed with the methodological goal of exploring the tour methodology in mind, this was not the focus of the second authors’ research. In this first phase, the second author read through all of the transcripts from interviews with female participants in their entirety, noting initial thoughts and possible codes. After familiarizing herself with the data, the second author generated initial codes using the qualitative software MAXQDA. Initial coding was expansive, with 1,490 segments coded. The first author also read all of the transcripts and made independent notes of ideas and themes expressed. Overarching themes were identified by the first and second authors through discussions.

For the current analysis, we completed a second stage of analysis using the entire data set.

Table 1
Examples of Interview Questions

Focus	Interview question
Dorm room	"For many people bedrooms and other private spaces are filled with objects or artifacts that give clues to others about who they are or what their interests might be. This could be anything from photographs, posters of favorite bands or movies, or music, books, games, quotes on the wall, clothes, bedding, gifts, knick-knacks or virtually any other item in the space. If someone who didn't know you were to enter your room and snoop around what do you think they would say about you?"
	"Would you mind giving me a tour of your room and telling me about the items you have in here?" *Prompts:* "Why do you have this?"; "Where did it come from?"; "When/how did you get this?"; "Was this a gift or was someone else involved?"
	"Are there any items you keep in a drawer, on a computer, or are currently less visible that are important to you? This could be any item; a photograph, a diary, something on your phone or computer?"
Room in family home	"Did you have your own bedroom at home or one that you shared with other people?"
	"What objects did you leave behind? Are any of them important to you? Why did you choose to leave them behind?"
Connections to the life story	"Is there anything in your room here or at home that especially reminds you of your childhood? Being as specific as you can, could you tell me about this object and how it got its meaning? When/where did you get it? Who was involved?"
	"Are there any objects in your room here or at home that you associate with a high point in your life? What is it? Could you tell me about what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling during this high point? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good and what the scene may say about who you are as a person."
	"In looking back over your life, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points—episodes that marked an important change in you or your life story. Are there any objects in your room here or at home that you associate with a turning point in your life? What is it? Could you tell me about what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling during this turning point? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was important and what the scene may say about who you are as a person or about your life."
Future self	"Now I'd like you to imagine the future, about 5 years from now, the room you might have and the objects you would have in it. Can you tell me a bit about what you think you would have?" "What do you think your future room would say about the person you might be in the future?"
Social media	"Some students use forms of media that may be important to them such as music playlists, phone applications, gaming software, YouTube, or social media such as Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram or Journal sites. Do you use any forms of media like those? Which ones do you use? Which one is the most important to your sense of who you are? Why? How long have you used it?"
	"Is there anything on (application) that especially reminds you of your high school years? Being as specific as you can, could you tell me about this object and how it got its meaning?"
	"Is there any content on (application) that you associate with a turning point in your life? What is it? Could you tell me about what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling during this turning point? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good and what the scene may say about who you are as a person or about your life."
Comparisons of dorm room and virtual spaces	"Do you think that the way you portray yourself (online) is similar, different, or the same as the way people see you in the real world? How?"
	"Which one do you think is most important to your sense of who you are? Why?"

Both the first and second authors returned to the full data set (inclusive of all male and female participants) and reanalyzed the data with a more explicit orientation to narrative and dialogical theory and, specifically, to addressing the methodological aim of exploring the potential for the tour approach to provide insights into narrative identity. Although this had been an aim of the overarching study from its inception, we did not focus explicitly on examining the

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tour approach as a method until the second author completed her independent thesis work. Themes and their corresponding codes were reviewed and subsequently named, defined, and refined. An overarching conceptualization of the data was then created through ongoing discussions between the first and second authors. Themes and categories continued to be refined during the writing process in order to ensure that the language used to describe themes clearly expressed ideas that were communicated in the interviews. Themes are reported in the following section with supporting and illustrative excerpts from the interviews.

Results

As will be elaborated in this section, our analyses resulted in the following themes: variations in the placement of objects and their meanings (including variations in physical spaces and physical vs. virtual contexts for personalization), continuity and change in the self, other selves represented in our stuff, constructing the future self, and authoring the self for an audience. We begin reporting the results with a longer excerpt from one of the participant interviews in order to provide a sense of what both the dorm rooms and our interview data "looked like." Although the subsequent thematic analysis will give the reader an understanding of the themes that emerged across participants, this longer excerpt provides a sense of the ways in which the tour methodology provides a fleshed-out account of participants' selves—including values, beliefs, significant relationships with people and places, and personal projects.

When Participant 1 was asked to show the interviewer around her dorm room and describe the meaning the various objects hold for her, she responded as follows:

> Okay, so, well for starters . . . all of these posters, you'd think that I really like animals and stuff, which I do, but they're actually my sister's fiancé's posters. So I guess kind of shows how close I am with them. They also help me set this all up and everything. So that was nice. He also took this picture that was one of the best days I ever had at my cottage, so it means a lot to me. I really like music; I've got speakers everywhere. Yeah, all these shells are from North Carolina, which is, like, my favorite place in the world; we go there every year—except for now when I'm in university and cannot miss a week of school. Um . . . oh dear. A lot of things in here are actually used because I'm cheap. My favorite color's green; a lot of things in here are green. And the Mac, that there's, like, a basket over there with a flower on it; it's this diary thing that my sister made me. But it's just like, you only write one line for every day of the year, so it's like, you're still keeping a diary, but it's really quick, which is good for me because I never have the patience or the time to make a diary. Yeah, my exercise ball, I hate sitting on chairs; it bothers me, and my ball, just I'm really antsy when I'm working and everything, so I can balance on it I can pretty much do whatever . . . I've got lots of pictures on my door of all my friends, important days, important moments of my life. I like looking at those. I keep all my laundry on top of my wardrobe so it's out of the way and I don't like when people see it. Generally, my clothes are pretty cleaned up. On my desk I will clear every single day. I've got four pictures of my big group of friends, that plate that my keys are on—I actually made that . . . I really like doing stuff like that, just painting and everything. That plant I actually got on my last day of work, so some of my friends from work got it for me to keep in my room here, because I wanted a plant, but I was too cheap to buy it. Yeah—I've got more posters and these lights I got from my aunt for Christmas one year, I think. I like having them up. I've got this pillow from my sister for Christmas one year. I'm really close with my sister; I like having it around and it's a whale—I like whale stuff. My bed sheets my mom bought for me when I was in Grade 7 or something. I one day came home, was like, "okay, mom, I'm redoing my room right now," and I walked into my room and stripped off all of my wallpaper, and she was like, "okay." So she helped me do that; it took, like, 3 months. We painted my room all different colors and everything, but I like to sleep and I have a giant blanket and I cannot sleep without it, so if I go home, I bring it with me, but I have to have it here because these beds suck. I climb; I have all my climbing stuff in the corner there.

In this excerpt, the participant described a number of objects, including posters, bedsheets, photos, souvenirs, climbing equipment, and a diary, and she begins to talk about some of the relationships (with people and places) that are especially salient to her sense of self. Although at this point in the interview she has not yet delved deeply into the meaning of these objects, this initial tour gives a sense that each of these objects holds memories and stories that may connect to the contents of her life story. This initial excerpt also gives a sense of the range of belongings—and stories—that exist in personal spaces. It includes both "big stories" of major life events ("important days, important moments of my life") and "small stories" of everyday experiences, such as getting a plant, making a plate, or going rock climbing (Bamberg, 2004).

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Variations in Placement in Physical Spaces

As expected, given Gosling's research on personal belongings (e.g., Gosling, 2008), there were individual differences in the ways and the extent to which participants personalized their spaces—dorm rooms, bedroom in the family home, and virtual spaces—with cherished objects. Some rooms were relatively empty and/or uncluttered; others, such as the room described by Participant 1, were visibly full of participants' stuff. The objects and artifacts that were present in the rooms included clothes, books, photographs, stuffed animals, jewelry, letters, and knickknacks. Some participants had posters on the walls (e.g., inspirational quotes, art, photos of celebrities, animals), and some did not. In some rooms, the most cherished possessions were openly displayed, whereas in others they were hidden away in drawers or closets. In some cases, the objects that were hidden away were not the most meaningful objects. For example, in the following excerpt, Participant 1 described keeping a photo of her ex-boyfriend hidden in a drawer:

> There's a picture . . . I guess it's not really important to me. Well, I had a picture of my boyfriend and I put it up when we were still dating. We broke up, like, a couple months ago or whatever, but I just kind of threw it under that drawer. I didn't want to throw it out; I thought that was harsh.

This excerpt suggests that the placement of objects, what is shown and what is concealed, can be meaningful. For this participant, this placement may suggest a meaning in transition. Although the photo would likely have been placed on display a couple of months prior when she and her boyfriend were together, the relational transition has resulted in a change in the meaning of this particular possession.

The concealment of objects or keeping things out of the relatively "public" space of the dorm room (as a room that other students in residence might visit) was important for many participants. Several participants reported leaving most of their personal possessions in the family home because of space constraints, concerns about the safety of treasured possessions in a dorm room, or the temporary nature of dorm life. This was the case for Participant 6, who stated, "I would choose to keep my more important things at home because I feel it's more of a permanent place than here." The most cherished objects may be kept in a place in which the participant will return throughout and following the transitional phase that they are currently in. In contrast, other participants moved their most cherished possessions with them to university. For some, such as Participant 19, it was important that cherished objects stay close:

> Um, anything that's, like, super important to me is going to be right by my bed or underneath my bed, or it's going to be on a bookshelf, on display, if it's something that I think needs to be shown and it's beautiful. Or it's on walls, whatever. But, yeah, usually somewhere very close to me or wherever it is that I usually sit or sleep in the room.

As suggested by these excerpts, there was wide variation in participants' inclusion of their most salient and cherished objects in the dorm. Some participants, such as Participant 19, kept salient objects close to them and on display, whereas others left them at home, where they would have a more permanent or safe place. The placement of objects may be relevant to processes of transition; participants make choices based on the relative impermanence of dorm life. This may be because of practical concerns given that participants only live in dorms from September through April and will need to pack up and move objects again soon. It also might be related to changing meanings of objects in relation to the self.

As suggested by the excerpt from the interview with Participant 1, the meaning of one's "stuff" changes alongside changes in relationship, and their placement in one's personal space may be related to the meaning that they hold. As relationships and selves change, objects that were once openly displayed and salient to the self may be moved into drawers and, we expect, perhaps eventually thrown out altogether. This suggests that dorm rooms and other personalized spaces may provide important insights into continuity and change in the self over time. This is in keeping with prior research (e.g., Fidzani & Read, 2014; Silver, 1996) suggesting that personalized spaces change and develop with the individual and that objects can be used to support a coherent and continuous sense of identity even during times of profound change (Silver, 1996).

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Physical Versus Virtual Contexts for Personalization

There was variation in participants' preferences of the dorm room versus virtual spaces as contexts for personalization. Some participants reported that virtual spaces were better contexts for personalization than dorm rooms:

> There's, like, a limit on how much you can just show and, like, in terms of items in your room, but on Facebook, it's electronic, so you can you have no limits; you can photoshop things to, like, show what you want to show—you can post pictures of anything and videos and, like, multimedia; it's a lot of different ways of expressing what you think. (Participant 24)

Participant 24 described a preference for personalization on Facebook versus the dorm room because social media allows freedom to manipulate images to “show what you want to show.” This excerpt highlights the possibilities available on social media to manipulate and express “idealized” versions of the self (Manago, 2014).

Some participants described limitations of virtual environments for personalization. For Participant 19, Facebook was perceived as unable to contain the tangible items that were most significant to her sense of self:

> Like Facebook, yeah, it has all my photos, but it doesn't have all the stuff that I have from my grandmother or it doesn't have all my crazy books or my journal or my—the coat that reminds me of my dad. Like, it doesn't have all these other things that I cannot really put on Facebook, because that's just a medium that doesn't allow for many things other than photos and words.

For this participant, physical “stuff” seems to be more personally meaningful than objects that exist in the virtual world. This participant noted that Facebook allows only for visual experience of “photos and words.” Indeed, the “stuff” that exists in the virtual environment can be seen and, in the case of music, heard, but we cannot experience virtual objects through touch and smell. The limitations of virtual environments for sensory experience may constrain the possibilities for these environments in relation to memory and construction of the self.

Continuity and Change in the Self

Some participants described using different kinds of spaces to construct and reflect different “selves” that have existed across time. This idea is especially striking in the interview with Participant 11, who described her dorm room and Facebook as representing different parts of her self: “[residence room] is my future, [Facebook] is my past. I would say together they make who I am.” A similar idea was expressed by Participant 13, who described her dorm room as reflective of her present and her music playlist as reflecting her past:

> My residence reflects more of who I am, my personality, whereas my music just reflects more just my past and, like, I know I've changed throughout my past, like, throughout my life. This is when I was much younger, so now this is more recent things, so this is who I am now.

Although she identified the residence as containing “more recent things” and a space reflecting her present self, her music playlist reflected the past and provided clues to the experiences and changes that have led to who she is now.

In addition to representations of the self at different times, other participants articulated a view that different spaces portray *the same self, expressed in different ways.* In other words, there are within-person variations across time as well as variations across context. In the following quote, Participant 6 described both her iTunes and residence room as important to her sense of self:

> I think they're, like, equally important. Just I think they also portray sort of the same thing but just different ways of just portraying it. So, I think they're just equally important. Because I don't know. Like, they're saying the same thing about me. So I don't think I'd be able to choose, just like a different way of saying it, so yeah.

She elaborated further when asked to identify how the spaces might be different:

> Um . . . different? My iTunes? Um . . . I do not really—I do not know. I don't really think they're different. I don't know. Because they're like me, you know, they're both, like, part of me, so I don't know.

These excerpts suggest that one's belongings and personal spaces may function as contexts for ongoing dialogue between one's various selves (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Gieser, 2012) across temporal and relational contexts. The objects and belongings we keep may represent and make tangible the various selves that we are and have been across roles and time, thereby supporting change and continuity of the self. From a methodological standpoint, this may be significant: In a life story interview,

there is a pull toward telling a story that emphasizes coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). As this excerpt suggests, the tour approach allows for fragmentary, disrupted, and even contradictory selves to emerge in the interview.

Other Selves Represented in Stuff

Recent narrative research has highlighted that narrative identity is not only comprised of the individual self—identity narratives are populated with other characters that are central to the life story (e.g., Breen et al., 2017; McLean, 2015). When participants in this study were asked to describe objects that were important to their sense of self, they typically focused on objects that represented memories and stories about relationships and their connections to loved ones. This is seen in the opening excerpt from Participant 1, who described her connections to others (e.g., mom, sister, friends) while describing her personal belongings. As suggested in the following two excerpts, connections to relationship were described via both physical objects and artifacts that exist in virtual environments:

> The first day living here, like, I felt not alone, but they weren't with me. Even though they were, on Facebook, on Twitter, it's just like, I don't see them every day anymore. So then I bring [physical] pictures of my life to remember that they're still with me. (Participant 16)

> He sent me this [necklace], as sort of just like a thing, it was sort of like his heart for safekeeping sort of thing while he was in the army. And yeah, I don't know. It's sort of been like always having his heart nearby even though he's really far away. (Participant 8)

While one may be living away from friends and family, photographs, gifts, and other artifacts that are imbued with relational meaning provide a sense of connectedness. We may live away from those we love but retain a sense of their presence in the objects that remind us of them. From a dialogical perspective (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Gieser, 2012), these objects may be important for identity processes in part because they serve as representations of others who have dialogic importance for one's ongoing construction of self and identity.

Constructing the Future Self

Participants in our study also described a future orientation to the "stuff" they chose to surround themselves with. According to McAdams's (2013; McAdams & Cox, 2010) tripartite approach to the self, the *agent* self bridges present and future selves and is concerned with furthering one's life projects and purpose. Many artifacts in participants' physical and virtual environments referenced future selves that they hoped to become. This was the case with Participant 11:

> Over there, I, like, post the goals that I have in life, right? And I kinda just, like, see them every day, and I think that is a positive thing to do to have your goals in mind. So when you work toward them, you know what you're working toward, I guess, so yeah . . . I could see them every time and kind of remind myself of why I'm here, what I'm doing in my life, just like temporary goals, just to keep me going.

Participant 12 also described an orientation to becoming in his description of a photo he kept of him and his cousin on his dresser:

> My cousin passed away 3 years ago? Yeah, 3 years ago. And he was, like, probably the biggest inspiration that I've had in my life. Like, he spawned my interest in almost everything I'm interested in. So he was a really big, like, he was the only role model I've ever actually—like, the only person I've ever been like, "I want to be like you."

This photograph seemed to provide continuing inspiration for the kind of person this participant wanted to be as well as a connection to the past. This photo provided an entry point to a story about this participant's "biggest inspiration" in life. Although many of the objects that we encountered held memories of everyday events and experiences, this excerpt is an example of the kind of "big stories" (Bamberg, 2004) we also encountered in dorm rooms—the kinds of stories that are the focus of life story interview methodology (e.g., McAdams, 1993).

Authoring the Self for an Audience

The presentation of objects in certain spaces depended on the meaning and salience of the object for the participant's self and identity and also on the object's value in communicating a desired identity to others. According to McAdams's (2013; McAdams & Cox, 2010) approach to the self, the third component of the self is *author*, the storyteller who constructs an overarching life story that weaves together the past, present, and future into a coherent identity. It was clear in the interviews that some participants took an active approach to constructing and curating

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both their physical and virtual spaces with aims to communicate a story of the self to an audience. Participant 13 provided the following description of decorating her new dormitory room:

> When I was choosing these things, I really wanted to choose things that would really represent me, because coming to university, you know, when you're meeting new people, I kind of want my room, like when people come into my room, I want them to, like, see, like, oh, this is so [participant's name], or yeah, and so I try and base things on personally what I like, like my interests and everything.

A similar idea was expressed by Participant 20 when she described deciding not to post certain things on Twitter: "I wouldn't want to post it on my profile because I don't want people thinking that's who I am I guess." These excerpts suggest that the objects that are displayed in one's physical and virtual spaces may be carefully curated to construct and express specific identity contents and that there are enormous individual differences in how various spaces and platforms are used in the construction of the self. Decisions about what to display in one's new university dorm room and online involve reflecting on the self—who one wants to become—as well as one's intended audience and intentionally including objects that advance a particular view of the self (e.g., Manago, 2014; Silver, 1996). As such, creating and editing our personalized spaces may be understood as an act of authorship for intended audiences and an important part of the ongoing process of constructing identity.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the use of what we refer to as the "tour methodology" for eliciting identity narratives. The tour methodology includes an adapted life story interview (McAdams, 1993) conducted in the context of participants' personal spaces along with questions designed to elicit participants' conceptions of the meaning of objects and spaces in relation to the self. Overall, we found that the combined tour and life story interview methodology produced rich data. Entering participants' dorm rooms and their virtual spaces provided access to memories and stories that would unlikely be revealed in a traditional lab-based interview format. Consistent with previous literature on the personal meaning of objects in relation to identity during times of transition (Kroger & Adair, 2008; Silver, 1996), participants in the current study identified a variety of artifacts that provide support for self contents and identity processes. There was support for both continuity—connections to past selves, relationships, and experiences—and evidence of change over time as well as projections into the future with objects providing orientation to the self that one hopes to become. Participants identified both physical and virtual objects associated with previous selves and experiences, relationship with others (both past and present), present roles, and goals and expectations for the future. Our findings suggest that there are individual differences relating to preferences for situating the self: Whereas some participants used their dorm rooms as primary sites for the construction of self-identity, other participants expressed preference for social media platforms as primary sites for the self. There were also differences in the meaning of the personal space left behind in the transition to university. Some participants left treasured possessions behind in the family home, whereas others brought them to university where they could be readily accessible.

From a methodological standpoint, we found the tour method to be a useful approach to examining self and identity as objects and spaces provided tangible support for participants' memories and narratives. The tour method provided access to participants' memories and stories about their selves across roles and time as well as their relationships with other people who are important to their development of self and identity. Situating the interviews in the naturalistic environment of participants' personal spaces and in the context of personal belongings seemed to provide scaffolding for eliciting memories of key events and relationships in the life story. It may also have allowed us to access different "I positions" (Hermans, 2001) and identity contents (Galliher et al., 2017). The various expressions and representations of identity that exist in participants' personal belongings and spaces may provide insights into fragmented selves that are not part of an overarching life story narrative: the "small stories" (Bamberg, 2004) that exist in everyday encounters with others. The adapted life story narrative interview (McAdams, 1993, 2008) also allows for elicitation of overarching narratives that are fashioned by the author self to

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provide a sense of coherence and continuity across time (e.g., McAdams, 2013). Freeman (2011) argued that narrative identity theorists need to "make use of big stories, small stories, and everything-in-between" (p. 116). We suggest that the combined tour methodology and life story interview approach (McAdams, 1993, 2008) may be especially useful for accessing *both* the fragmentary selves that relate to the *actor* and *agent* and the overarching life story narrative of the *author self*.

There are several important limitations to note in this study. The sample is relatively small, predominantly female, and all participants are from one university. It is also important to note the relative privilege of our sample. All participants had left behind a family home in which they had a personal space in a bedroom and had the financial means to live away from home in a dormitory. Future research should explore the meaning and salience of cherished objects and (physical or virtual) spaces for those who are less privileged. We wonder, for example, about the meaning of objects for youth who are homeless or in state care and whether maintaining tangible connections to past selves and relationships through real and/or virtual objects might be beneficial for processes of well-being and resilience. We also wonder about cultural differences in the meaning of our "stuff" and how the stuff we care most about provides connections to and represents culture—including the places, people, values, beliefs, and practices that comprise the cultural context. Future research using the tour methodology might also explicitly ask participants to consider what parts of the self are not on display and not present. As participants enter the specific cultural context of a university dorm room, their choices about what to display and conceal may be informed by attempts to fit in with the dominant culture or, alternatively, to actively resist social identities with which they do not wish to identify. As mentioned in the Method section, we did not specifically ask participants about social identities and demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, social class, religion, or mental health status. In the future, research employing the tour method might invite participants to talk specifically about their perceptions of their own social identities, sense of belonging, and/or resistance to dominant identities. Finally, we are interested in exploring the idea of transitions and the changing meaning of objects and their curation in personal spaces across time. Longitudinal data examining objects and the development of self and identity across time would likely be fruitful.

There may be implications of this research for applied work. Although we did not conceive of this research as an intervention, we wonder if the tour methodology may be of some benefit to participants. In retrospect, we believe that we may have missed an opportunity to provide a light "intervention" for participants in this study. Research by Syed, Juan, and Juang (2011) suggested that participating in identity research may influence ethnic identity development in emerging adults. We suspect that following up with participants by conducting member checks of our interpretations may have had some benefit to participants in providing them an opportunity to further reflect on and develop a sense of narrative identity. There may be additional applications of this research methodology for contributing to participants' mental health and well-being. Research on suicide (Chandler, Sokol, Lalonde, & Hallet, 2003) and nonsuicidal self-injury (Breen, Lewis, & Sutherland, 2013) suggests that individuals may be especially vulnerable when they are not able to establish a sense of the self as continuous across time. Given findings that personal objects provide tangible connections to past, present, and future selves (see also Kroger & Adair, 2008; Silver, 1996), we wonder whether it might be possible for therapists, educators, youth workers in child welfare organizations, and others to help young people use personal objects and possessions intentionally to weave together a sense of psychological coherence that can bolster resilience. The possibilities for the tour methodology used here—including both a life story interview (McAdams, 1993) and a tour of personally salient spaces and belongings—to serve as an intervention may be an important area for future research.

Overall, this methodology and its grounding in narrative identity theory suggest a promising direction for future research. The methodological approach of combined tours and life story interview (McAdams, 1993, 2008) allows for the emergence of both big and small stories. Our research suggests that qualitative interviewing in participants' personal spaces allows for elicitation of stories through structured interview questions while also providing opportunity to "bump into" new stories that may provide different insights into the experi-

ences, relationships, and stories that comprise participants' actor, agent, and author selves (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Cox, 2010). As such, the tour approach is a useful part of the "toolkit" for researchers interested in narrative approaches to self and identity.

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