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Repeated Narration within the Occupational Domain: Changing Characters in Identity-Defining Narratives

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Abstract. The aim was to explore how young adults changed narration of characters in identity-defining repeated narratives. Repeated narratives from identity status interviews within the occupational domain were coded at age 25, 29 and 33, $N = 46$. A narrative thematic analysis generated six main themes with subthemes: (1) Adding characters to the story, (2) Removing characters from the story, (3) Alternating characters' relevance over time, (4) Change of the way oneself is narrated as a character in the story, (5) Changing the same characters' role over time, (6) Changing *I* and *we* interchangeably over time. These changes in the repeated narratives seemed highly important for the occupational identity to evolve.

Imagine hanging out with a friend. Your friend takes a walk down memory lane and tells you a series of stories about memories from early days and suddenly you realize that some of the stories keep coming back over time. This is not the first time you have heard about your friend's first kiss, first apartment, graduation, or the divorce of the parents. One way people often say that they know a person is that they know the 'same old stories' this person will tell. Repetition of stories is seen as a potential mechanism for demonstrating continuity within an individual's self-understanding, as well as the understanding of that individual by others (Singer, 2019). Even if you recognize your friend's stories and conclude it is the same ones told over and over again at different times, it is possible that certain elements have changed over time (Josselson, 2009). One such element might be the characters involved in these stories. Perhaps your friend has changed in some way since last time you met and therefore tell the stories from a different angle, or the stories have shifted due to what current relationships look like at each time of telling. Stories within certain areas in life are especially central to who one defines oneself to be (McAdams, 2018), and one such area central to the formation of identity is the choice of occupational path (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). Stories within this area of life can be seen as identity-defining for people. This study is a first attempt to identify *how* people change their identity-defining repeated stories about occupation by focusing on the element of characters and what change involving characters might mean for identity formation in young adulthood.

Narrative Identity

Narrative identity refers to the life story of how one came to be the person one is becoming (McAdams, 2018). When people tell narratives about themselves, they reconstruct autobiographical memories and reproduce chaotic life-experiences as stories, often containing order and logic. With and through stories people are able to develop an understanding of themselves through time, an identity. The formation of one's identity therefore rely on the ability to create a coherent integration of experiences to make sense of the past, shape the perception of the present, and imagine a future. Engagement in one's narrative identity is considered to provide life with a sense of unity, purpose and meaning (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

As experiences are expanded through life, so is the availability of memories during recollection. This means that story construction is dependent on the developmental period in which the individual aims to make sense of the past, which is referred to as autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Certain memories are particularly salient since individuals selectively draw from memory to recall and reflect on experiences that explain parts of the self as understood in the present (Fivush, Booker & Graci, 2017). Moreover, individuals may go beyond the plots and details of events to express what they believe their stories say about who they are, which may help trigger new developmental skills. Such narrative meaning-making is defined as the degree to which a narrator learns something from an event and explicitly express it through narration. The degree of meaning-making ranges from learning a concrete lesson to gaining deep insight about life (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Parts of the life story need to be modified through the life course since same experiences might possess different meanings at different times (Josselson, 2009). The performance of narrative identity may function, therefore, to refine meanings and thereby help achieve an evolving, yet congruent, understanding of self over time (McAdams, 2018).

As the narrative identity is shaped by stories, for an event to be viewed a story it should possess a certain structure. The terms *story* and *narrative* function as synonyms and will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. According to Labov and Waletzky (1967), who developed a framework to identify narratives, a narrative constitutes five components; *orientation*, *complication*, *evaluation*, *resolution*, and *coda*. A personal narrative typically begins with orienting information that introduces the person (i.e. including other characters) and locates the event in time and place, sometimes preceded by an abstract presenting what the story is about. The orientation is followed by a complicating action that provides the sequence of what happened. The evaluation appears throughout the event by interpretation expressed as thoughts, feelings or meaning-making made by the storyteller. A resolution marks what finally happened, the result of the complication, and is sometimes followed by a coda that signals the end by returning to the present or emphasize a lesson learned. *Characters* are sometimes considered a category on its own (McAdams, 1993), highlighting its essentiality and complement to the person tied to the *orientation* part of a narrative formulated by Labov and Waletzky (1967).

Narratives are often told without all components being present. At least it needs to exist an orientation and complication (i.e. an event in time that is to be told) whereas evaluations can shift over time, and resolution and coda remain absent. Furthermore, since there is always a storyteller there is always a character present. When people tell personal stories, these stories are thought to illuminate the complex dynamism of identity. Yet, identity is not exclusively an intraindividual process. Rather, since people define themselves in relation to others, identity is constructed through collaboration, or as McLean (2015) entitled a co-authored self. Characters more than oneself could be viewed as always present in the co-construction of identity. For instance, previous research suggests that autobiographical reasoning in both childhood and adulthood is socialized and shaped by people with whom one might share stories with (Pasupathi, 2001; McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Moreover, people may turn to different audiences with their stories, changing the stories in a pursuit to make them fit different occasions, or to be consistent with *master narratives* shaped within a culture on expectations how to live one's life and how to narrate experiences in line with them (McLean & Syed, 2016). In turn, social support and reinforcement is likely to affect self-views and the life story over time.

Despite being the main author of one's narrative identity, influence from others are inevitable, even if a story is told or kept internally. Prior to stories being internalized they are processed in different ways. They can be either adopted, seen as appropriate, or create resistance within oneself. How one approach, interprets and relates to stories influence how others help

create and understand oneself, which in turn influence how the stories are told (McLean, 2015). When it comes to how the self affects the creation of narratives, people bring enduring characteristics of themselves into narration (McLean et al., 2007). Motivations such as *agency* (e.g. autonomy, mastery, achievement, individuation) and *communion* (e.g. intimacy, affiliation, nurturance, relationship) are fairly stable across adulthood and may serve as important mechanisms for reinforcement of continuity within the self. With the tendency to incorporate current motivations in stories (McAdams, 1993; McLean, Syed, Haraldsson & Lowe, in press), it may seem reasonable to suggest that characters within them are portrayed in accordance with these motivations. However, a focus on how characters are expressed through narratives seems to be quite limited within the literature.

Repeated Narration

As an individual tells a story over and over again to different listeners, it is gradually shaped into a part of the self (McLean et al., 2007). In research, repeated narration emerges when people repeat similar content during different interview sessions several years apart (Adler, 2019). That repeated content of a story can be viewed a form of narrative identity stability has received more attention, compared with a general persistent view of narrative identity as a fundamental shifting aspect of personality (McLean et al., in press), and ongoing project under constant change (McLean, 2017). Moreover, the field has primarily been considering processes such as autobiographical reasoning and meaning-making, whereas a focus on the content of the identity is expanding and achieved through stories constructed about the self and the environment (Gyberg, 2019). An explanation why repeated content is important to consider is that, for instance, how an event is expressed at one time and what meaning-making processes mean for the development within an individual does not explicate narrative identity change in relation to its stability, in this case changes within repeated narration at longer time intervals.

To achieve further understanding, researchers are trying to address questions about stability and change and its expressions within identity by examining repeated narration (Adler, 2019). It has been studied by, for example, applying diverse qualitative investigations on the same set of life stories (Adler, 2019; Dunlop, 2019; Fivush, Habermas, & Reese, 2019; McAdams, 2019; McLean, Köber & Haralssson, 2019; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2019; Singer, 2019), and on a personal memory and its changed meaning through different stages of the life span (Josselson, 2009). Stories that retain markers of stability might generate the life story to become more solidified, as well as integrate other aspects of personality for greater stability over time (McLean, 2017) to accomplish a sense of continuity within the self (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This might be why people hold on to certain stories. But it might also be the case that repeated narration constrain personal development. The longer a story has been around, the harder it might be to change it. McLean (2017) points to a human condition where predictability reduces uncertainty and anxiety, which serves as a motivational drive to maintain one's homeostasis. Repetitions can be both beneficial and harmful, depending on if the story still fits or constrain personal growth and development.

By adopting a repeated narrative framework, it is possible to assess the extent to which a story, thereby the self, changes or remains the same from one telling to the next, and therefore how the storyteller has grown in a psychologically significant way (McAdams, 2019; McLean, Köber et al., 2019). It is established *that* significant others such as family and friends are involved in the process of narrative identity formation (McLean, 2015). However, in the present study focus on characters evident in repeated narration attempt to extend the field and grasp *how* characters' explicit involvement in stories changes over time. Moreover, the extant

literature is scarce when it comes to repeated narratives several years apart concerning specific contexts that are salient to the identity, such as occupation (Hoare, 2011).

The Occupational Identity Domain

Identity is defined as a psychosocial concept of one's idea of who one is (Erikson, 1968). In practice, identity is often studied within various life domains. Information generated in separate domain areas (e.g. occupational career, intimate relationships, political identity, religious beliefs) is often combined to form an overall identity status for each individual (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2016). The construct of identity status is based on Erikson's (1968) life span theory of development, which rests on the notion that identity is acquired through a crisis stemming from identity versus identity confusion during adolescence and early adulthood. During this phase the challenge is to reassemble various identifications one brings from childhood into a more complete identity. In the original identity status paradigm, Marcia (1966) expanded Erikson's notions and described two major components; exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to a period of struggling and actively questioning identity-defining alternatives with the aim to reach decisions about goals, values and beliefs. Commitment concerns strongly held ideas and sense of direction while making decisions concerning identity-defining issues (Marcia, 1993).

In line with Erikson's theoretical propositions, the occupational domain is of primary importance for identity development. To get a job and become a citizen, people need to balance a reciprocal relationship with society and at the same time maintain a feeling of continuity within the self (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Empirical findings confirm the occupational path as a core element of identity. Its concrete requirements and everyday actions make this part of oneself especially salient (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2005), and the complimentary effect of development and learning due to work have shown that gains in one area often lead to gains in the other (Hoare, 2011). Moreover, occupational identity has frequently been conceptualized as a major component of people's overall sense of identity (Kroger, Martinussen & Marcia, 2010; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998; 2011). Although there is no universal agreement with regard to the domains of identity that are most relevant, the domain of occupation appears to be of central importance (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). From this perspective, it operates not only as a determinant of occupational choice and attainment, but also as a major factor in the emergence of meaning and structure in people's lives (Erikson, 1968).

In young adulthood, most individuals face new life experiences, such as getting established in the labor market (Syed & McLean, 2016). A primary task during these years is proposed to refer to role immersion (Arnett, 2012), which entails settling into adult roles such as a stable occupational path. The identity decisions made earlier in life are implemented and the individual experiences the rewards and costs of the commitments that have been made, or the lack of them (Arnett, 2012; Waterman, 1993). Theoretically, the occupational identity gives meaning and direction by increasing coping abilities under stress and challenges and allowing an individual to find work that reflects personal strengths, interests, and goals (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Once people find a job they want to keep, which in a northern European context generally happens in the 30's (Arnett, 2012), role requirements are likely to increase together with a pursuit to keep developing a long-term occupational path. As adults, self-definitions are repeatedly tested and few, if any, of the elements comprising a previously established sense of identity are likely to remain unmodified (Waterman & Archer, 1993).

By studying a specific identity-salient context such as occupation, differences in processes may be identified that otherwise might be overlooked when studying overall identity status (Gyberg, 2019). How people create their narrative occupational identities and especially

incorporating the content of stories within them may capture otherwise obscured contextual conditions. The actual voice of individuals about what experiences are seen as most important can be taken into account (McLean, Syed, Yoder & Greenhoot, 2016), and in this case how characters are involved within them.

The Present Study

Within the narrative identity framework, it is established *that* significant others such as family and friends are involved in the process of narrative identity formation (McLean, 2015). However, little is known about *how* others are involved in the identity formation process. Even less is known about how individuals change their narration of the characters involved in their identity-defining repeated narratives over time. The present study focuses on repeated narratives in the occupational identity domain across young adulthood. The aim of the study is to explore the following research question: How do young adults change narration of characters in identity-defining repeated narratives in the occupational domain over time?

Method

Participants

The present study was part of the Gothenburg study of Longitudinal Development (GoLD), conducted at the University of Gothenburg. GoLD begun in 1982, with a community sample of 144 children aged one or two years old (Lamb et al., 1988). The participants were recruited from waiting lists for public childcare in different regions of Gothenburg. Approximately 75% of the families who were contacted gave their consent to participate. These families had a variety of backgrounds and were seen as representative of families in Gothenburg (Broberg, 1989). To date, ten waves of data collection have been conducted.

This study concerned the eighth-, ninth-, and tenth wave of the GoLD study. In the eighth wave, 136 participants (68 women, 68 men; 94% of the original sample) aged 25 years ($M = 24.9$, $SD = 0.7$) participated. In the ninth wave, 124 participants (63 women, 61 men; 86% of the original sample) aged 29 years ($M = 29.3$, $SD = 0.6$) participated. In the tenth wave, 124 participants (62 women, 62 men; 86% of the original sample) aged 33 years ($M = 33.3$, $SD = 0.5$) participated. For the present study, participants were randomly selected from a pool that included those participants who participated in all three of the most recent waves, as the analysis required data from all three time points. The present material contained 46 young adults (20 women, 26 men) who were interviewed at age 25, 29 and 33.

Procedure

Prior to each data collection, participants were informed by letter about the upcoming wave of the GoLD study. Thereafter, they were contacted by telephone and an interview was scheduled. Most participants were interviewed at the Department of Psychology at the University of Gothenburg. If the participants lived abroad or in another area of Sweden, a meeting with them were arranged online via video or at a suitable place on their behalf. The Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg approved all data collections.

Interview

The semi-structured Identity Status Interview (Marcia et al., 1993) was performed in Swedish with the participants at all three waves of data collection. The interview has previously been translated to Swedish and adapted to Swedish conditions (Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011). Questions concerned identity-defining past, present, and future occupational decisions, such as: *Was there ever a time when you were trying to decide between two very different directions for your life – the work you wished to pursue? How did you come to choose to do (the type of work described)? Do you think your parents may have had a preference for one field over another?* and *How willing do you think you'd be to change your plans if something better came along?* All interviews were audio recorded and performed by trained interviewers. Only material from the occupational identity domain was explored in this study, and this part of the interview took between 6 and 23 minutes. Interviews with 36 participants were transcribed in advance within the GoLD study, and interviews with 10 participants were added and transcribed verbatim in the present study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in three steps; (1) the interviews were coded for stories, (2) the stories were coded for repeated narratives by indicating if the same event was repeated over time, (3) a narrative thematic analysis was applied to the repeated narratives in order to analyze how participants changed narration of characters in their repeated narratives. The coding procedures in step one and step two concerning 36 participants were completed in advance within the GoLD study, and interviews with 10 participants were added and coded accordingly in the present study ($N = 46$). The three steps are outlined in more detail below.

Coding for stories. In order to code for stories in the interviews criteria for what constitutes a story built on the definition by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and McAdams (1993). To code for a story *orientation*, *complication* and *evaluation* had to be present. *Orientation* refers to the setting regarding time and place, in which a time-limited period had to be possible to identify. The *complication* refers to the sequence of episodes, in which it had to contain something that happens or had happened. The *evaluation* refers to interpretation of meaning, in which the story had to involve thoughts, feelings or reasoning of the experience. The omission of the remaining components as required criteria was due to *resolution* sometimes being the same thing as *evaluation* or an outcome of the sequence of episodes not always apparent in a story. *Coda* is not always included since all stories do not return to the present, and the storyteller with explicit evaluations about the experience fulfil the presence of *character*. Within the interview material, 502 stories were identified. All participants told at least one story, constituting an *orientation*-, *complication*-, and *evaluation* component, in at least one of the three interview occasions, varying between one and ten stories per interview ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 2.0$). The 502 stories were then analyzed in the next step.

Coding for repeated narratives. To code for repeated narratives, a second coding procedure was conducted. For a story to be repeated it had to contain similar content concerning *orientation* and *complication*. That is, the story included a similar setting regarding time and place, and a similar sequence of episodes. The *evaluation* did not have to be repeated since an individual may change evaluation of an event over time. Thus, focus in this coding procedure was on the repetition of each narrative involving at least the same *orientation* and *complication* over two or all three interview occasions. This coding procedure resulted in 119 repeated narratives in total. All participants repeated at least one narrative across at least two interview occasions, varying between one and six repeated narratives for each participant ($M = 2.6$, $SD =$

1.2). The most common pattern was to repeat a narrative across all three interview occasions (48 repeated narratives). Thereafter, the number of repetitions across two of the interview occasions were rather similar; at age 25 and 33 (25 repeated narratives), at age 29 and 33 (24 repeated narratives), and at age 25 and 29 (22 repeated narratives). The 119 repeated narratives were then analyzed in the next step.

Narrative thematic analysis. Since the objective of this inquiry was to identify how participants changed narration of characters in their repeated narratives, a narrative thematic analysis was applied. Thus, the emphasis was on the stories as they were told by the participants across interview occasions with the aim to reflect patterns in the narrative data (Georgakopoulou & Anna, 2015), which were formed into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis was performed in three steps outlined below.

The repeated narratives were analyzed with a case-centered approach (Riessman, 2008) by examining each set of repeated narratives separately for each participant. An inductive approach was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore changed narration of characters as the unit of analysis (Riessman, 2008). Repeated narratives that did not contain any changed narration of characters were discarded from further analysis. Out of the total 119 repeated narratives, 80 contained changed narration of characters told by 39 participants. The 39 participants changed narration of characters in at least one repeated narrative between different time points, ranging from one to five repeated narratives for each participant (M = 2.1, SD = 1.1). The most common pattern was to change narration of characters across all interview occasions (33 repeated narratives). Thereafter, the number of repeated narratives with changed narration of characters across two of the interview occasions were rather similar; at age 25 and 33 (18 repeated narratives), at age 29 and 33 (16 repeated narratives), and at age 25 and 29 (13 repeated narratives). Manifest elements of changed narration of characters in each repeated narrative were assigned initial codes.

From the initial codes, next step was to generate initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019) that described patterns of different ways participants changed narration of characters in their repeated narratives. This was made by iteratively working with three parts of the material; the repeated narratives that contained changed narration of characters, the initial codes, and participants' interview transcripts to preserve particularities of meaning in context for each participant (Riessman, 2008).

The final step was to develop a thematic structure, define and refine themes to identify the essence of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The repeated narratives were re-coded based on the initial themes, and the initial themes were re-evaluated throughout the coding process. Extensions as well as modification of initial themes were made. Simultaneously, main- and subthemes were re-named during the writing of the results to clarify the scope of each theme. This procedure generated a thematic structure of six main themes and associated subthemes. The repeated narratives were coded to a range of one to four of the main themes and to one or two of the subthemes (see Table 1 below).

Results

The results from the narrative thematic analysis concerning how young adults changed narration of characters in their occupational identity-defining repeated narratives is described in six main themes with associated subthemes. See Table 1 and a more detailed description after the table. The participants are referred to by pseudonyms, and the characters within the interview excerpts are presented in bold to highlight changed narration of characters across interview occasions.

Table 1

Main themes and subthemes with the number of narratives that were coded to each theme, and the number of participants who changed narration of characters in accordance with the theme in at least one repeated narrative.

Main themes	Subthemes	Narratives (*n*)	Participants (*n*)
1. Adding characters to the story		41	26
	1.1. Anchoring occupational paths in others by adding them to the story	15	12
	1.2. Adding characters to the story to explain one's actions	16	13
	1.3. Accentuating oneself by adding characters to the story	10	8
2. Removing characters from the story		35	26
	2.1. Removing characters who become unnecessary for the narration of the experience	22	19
	2.2. Removing characters when there no longer is a need for social support	13	11
3. Alternating characters' relevance over time		7	5
4. Change of the way oneself is narrated as a character in the story		49	33
	4.1. Changing the view of one's own role in the story	36	25
	4.2. Changing one's role as an agent in the story	13	12
5. Changing the same characters' role over time		15	11
	5.1. Changing characters' relationship-status over time	10	8
	5.2. Deepening the understanding of close relationships over time	5	3
6. Changing *I* and *we* interchangeably over time		12	10

Note. The table refers to the 80 repeated narratives told by 39 participants that contained changed narration of characters. One repeated narrative can be found in several of the main- and subthemes due to various aspects of the narrative fitting with different themes.

1. Adding Characters to the Story

This main theme demonstrates how participants tended to add characters in their repeated narratives either at age 29, 33, or at both ages, that were not present at age 25. New characters became evident as the story evolved, and the following subthemes *Anchoring occupational paths in others by adding them to the story*, *Adding characters to the story to explain one's actions*, and *Accentuating oneself by adding characters to the* story, depict different aspects within this process.

1.1. Anchoring occupational paths in others by adding them to the story. This subtheme encompasses the repeated narratives in which an anchoring in others evolved in the story over time. First, there were a few occasions where friends were added and followed by motivation to act, such as *"If my friend managed to do it at least I had to try"*. Second, several of the participants only referred to themselves at age 25 but added new characters both at age 29 and 33 together with insights about the growth of personal interests and why certain occupational paths had been chosen. It was primarily family members or other relatives that were added as if the participants themselves had to explain details in the events with the help of others. Expressions such as *"Then my mother told me…"* were added later on to anchor the decision-making in relation to others. People serving key positions combined with an increased knowledge and insight about the choices made seemed to contribute to the anchoring of occupational paths in others over time.

In the following example Daniel added characters at age 29, and 33, about how he, when he was in his early twenties, decided to continue his career within the university. The narrative of this experience developed at each age, and by adding characters the perception of the impact they had seems to have become clearer for him over time.

> **Age 25.** *"…During upper secondary school **I** was quite sure **I** was going to be an actor, or writer, or director so **I** was very into arty stuff back then /…/ it was especially when **I** took a class /…/ it was on [a theatre] /…/ it was horrible like then **I** really felt, **I** don't want to take part in this. But then it was also a lot of other things going on like, but **you** might say **I** changed direction at that time when **I** was 22 21 22 then **I** realized no **I** want to work with something that is more direct like academic."*
> **Age 29.** *"After upper secondary school **I** was going to be a writer /…/ **I** went one semester and studied script production and **I** felt like **I'm** interested in things on another level too that **I** didn't feel **I** got to express in those environments and with **those people I** met. At the same time **I** had **friends** that were very intellectual. So there were some kind of doubt back then /…/ **I** started to study, and **people** said that, to study is always a good option so **I** took a class in literature science /…/ to make a career at the university felt completely impossible. But it was somewhere at that time that **I** spoke to **someone**, **I** think **I** spoke to **a doctoral student** and /…/ then **I** just got the idea, maybe **one** should try and doctorate."*
> **Age 33.** *"Then **I** was a little bit seeking those years after upper secondary school, **I** guess **many** are /…/ it was film direction and **I** also wrote on a novel /…/ then **I** realized, **one** may actually do research and doctorate, it was completely new for **me** /…/ that it would be an option for **me** was totally, it didn't exist, until **I** spoke to **someone** /…/ **I** think **I** spoke to **someone who was a doctoral student** and then **I** realized **I** was like oh **you** could apply for a job and work with that /…/ it was during an afternoon **I** just decided of course **I** should to that /…/ it was like so right for **me** and when **I** spoke to **people I knew they** said 'of course **you** should do that, it's like, it can't be more suitable for **you**' and it felt like oh, what a relief. Because during that time after upper secondary school, it was all so confusing like, like shaping **one's** identity…"*

In the narrative from age 25 it was only Daniel himself who was present in the event apart from a generic *you*. At age 29 he added people he used to meet, friends who were sharing the same intellectual interest as him, and a doctoral student who seems to have inspired him to try out a new way of thinking. At age 33 he also added *many* who were as confused as himself during this time in life, and interestingly people he knew who encouraged the idea of him advancing within the academy as if they confirmed his self-perception and facilitated the decision-making process. Adding characters seem to have made it easier for Daniel to describe the person he was during the event and the situation he was in at the moment of his decision. In this repeated event his changed narration reflect how he had increased his knowledge and perception of others' impact on his occupational path.

1.2. Adding characters to the story to explain one's actions. This subtheme describes how participants added characters in conjunction with developing explanations for their actions. For instance, added characters could be *friends*, *most people* or *they* (i.e. referring to people in their surroundings) who were used to explain decisions not made by participants themselves, leading to undesired actions. Adding characters in this way made it seem as if these characters were the answer to why participants acted as they did, and participants appeared passive in their own stories. For some, narratives mirrored a tendency to not follow their own personal compasses in their decision making, and perhaps regretting their decisions to a greater extent at age 29 and/or 33 compared to at age 25. Expressions such as *"I applied for social sciences because my friends did"* were added, which might illustrate external pressure that led to participants' decisions. In his repeated narrative below, Andreas illustrated how adding characters to the story explained his choice of program in upper secondary school.

> **Age 25.** *"During **my** time in upper secondary school **I** had no idea what **I** wanted to do, **I** read science technology **I** had major issues with chemistry and physics, math **I** didn't have any problem with, and it was something weird about that because physics are math but in another shape and form and **I** couldn't handle the transformation from math to physics, and then **I** felt that **my** plan to study at Lund university was ruled out kind of and that was, **I** thought **I** was going to study at Lund university when **I** started secondary school."*
> **Age 29.** *"When **I** applied for upper secondary school, in high school **they** said that **the smart ones** have to choose science as a subject and **the ones that don't have grades as high** choose social sciences. **I** had high grades and then it just went that way. In hindsight, **I** never wanted to do that, **I** should have chosen social sciences. And it was the same thing when **I** applied for the university, what do **most people** choose, there **you** have the greatest opportunity, **I** choose that."*
> **Age 33.** *"**I** had very high grades in secondary school. **I** had high grades through all of it, **I** guess it's more of a competitive spirit than true talent. Um, yeah **you** have [high grades] then **you** should study science technology. And **I** hate math, physics, chemistry and things like that."*

At age 25 Andreas was talking about his own skills and evaluating his challenges, while at age 29 and 33 he added where the motive to study science technology truly came from, that is, from other people and social expectations. Also, across age 29 and 33 he repeated a generic *you*, which points to what could be seen as the obvious choice for him to do at the time. His attitude at age 33 might illustrate either him regretting the decision to a greater extent, or that his interest had declined even more. Perhaps adding characters in this way made it easier to explain the indecisive choice he pursued.

1.3. Accentuating oneself by adding characters to the story. This subtheme presents the repeated narratives where characters were added to accentuate oneself in the story. For example, participants explained why they got certain job offers and the characters in these repeated narratives were added as either obstacles that had to be defeated to get a job, and

thereby involved a narrative of success, or to highlight that they were the ones chosen among other applicants. Characters as people working at companies or bosses were referred to as *they* in expressions such as *"They contacted me", "They needed someone that is forthcoming"*. Adding characters may have served a purpose of showing off one's talent and uniqueness by deviating from the crowd. A few participants also added and underlined certain characteristics others possessed as a contrast to their own character. Expressions such as *"I've never found that very appealing"* when narrating about family members' occupational choices in a negative light helped explain discrepancies between oneself and others. Thus, accentuating oneself by adding characters seemed to help explicating one's expanded place in relation to the surrounding, as Martin illustrated in his repeated narrative below. Note that the changed narration, the adding of characters, took place between age 29 and 33.

> **Age 25.** *"**I** have always read a lot when **I** was a kid and **I** liked to write. And then when **I** was ten, eleven **I** got a job as a youth reporter at [a magazine]."*
> **Age 29.** *"**I** have been writing and working as a youth reporter at [a magazine] once when **I** was very young, and then **I** applied for the university of journalism and was accepted and that is how it went down more or less."*
> **Age 33.** *"**I** loved to write and everything, **I** applied to become like a youth reporter at [a magazine] when **I** was eleven. Um and it was like **thousands who** applied. **I** really want to say it was like that but yeah [laughs] but maybe it was **eleven or twenty people who** got the job and **I** was **one of them** and ever since /…/ **I've** been wanting to be occupied with something creative and then it was perhaps more uncertain what it would lead up to but now it went this way and well, **I** guess that is alright."*

From only including himself at age 25 and 29, at age 33 Martin added thousands of others, although he conveyed that they were not in fact that many, perhaps to put emphasis on his own skills. He also mentioned himself in a group of twenty that overcame an obstacle by being the applicants of many, and that he at a very young age got validation for his talent by getting accepted.

2. Removing Characters from the Story

This main theme concerns how participants removed characters from their repeated narratives either at age 29, 33, or at both ages. The stories became more individualistic as characters were removed, and the following subthemes *Removing characters who become unnecessary for the narration of the experience* and *Removing characters when there no longer is a need for social support* make up two different aspects of removing characters that were identified in the material.

2.1. Removing characters who become unnecessary for the narration of the experience. This subtheme explains how participants initially engaged in involving characters in their stories but removed them later on as if they were not central to the experiences anymore. Expressions such as *"The guy who was a so called CEO had no leading skills what so ever"*, or *"The owners did not care about the employees at all so that was my focus when I looked for something else"* were removed and other evaluations formulated such as *"In hindsight I have realized it was a couple of years of struggle that have gotten me to where I am today"*, or *"I got a little bit tired of the company so I applied for a new one"* were used instead. Thus, as these expressions exemplifies participants seemed to have removed characters who became irrelevant in their stories when the participants either learned something that led to personal growth or had embraced a certain interest.

Some participants did not seem to have the same need to engage in lengthy and detailed narrations of the events at later interviews. Regarding closely related others, information about parents' or other relatives' working history were removed during later interviews when the reflection of them through oneself appeared to not be needed anymore to portray the events. The purpose with removing a key figure could be that the experience has been integrated into the self. To illustrate, in the repeated narrative below, Anna removed several characters in her story that was about her moving back to her hometown. The removal of characters between age 25 and 29 made them become unnecessary for her narration of this experience, as her decision to move did not seem to affect others as a key aspect of the event anymore.

> **Age 25.** *"**I** moved in with **my boyfriend** when **we** moved down south because **he** started to study in Copenhagen at the same time, and only that was a huge deal. Even if **I** had been abroad, **I** lived in Edinburgh for a year, so it was no separation anxiety or anything, but there was a lot of other stuff that **I** got caught up in and **I** sold my horse so it was everything at once and then **I** felt that it was very, extremely competitive first of all, and **I** experienced that as very difficult. Back then **I** was probably too young to handle all the stress surrounding grades that really got a hold on **you** from day one and **you** started to sort out **who you** thought of as **friends you** could study with. /.../ **I** wanted to work a little bit and being able to like feel that **I** could provide for **myself** and work for a couple of years /.../ **I** guess it was hard to tell **my friends** that **I** was moving again, of course **I** got **friends** when **I** came there. It was the only difficult part with the whole thing to move away from **my friends**..."*
> **Age 29.** *"**I** started to study right after upper secondary school and moved to Copenhagen. But **I** only did that for one semester then **I** got tired of it, **I** felt that it was too soon, **I** moved back home and started to work, bought a horse and things like that. So **I** did everything in kind of like reversed order."*
> **Age 33.** *"Right there and then **I** had finished one semester of law studies in Copenhagen right after upper secondary school and **I** just realized oh my god **I** cannot take it anymore… It doesn't work and it was such a stressful environment and **I** was like too young and wanted to do other things. **I** sold **my** horse and just wanted to move back home and buy a horse again. Um… So then **I** dropped out…"*

At age 29 and 33 the event was exclusively about Anna's own evaluation about how she was feeling in that situation, missing her horse because she had left such an important part of herself back where she came from. As with this repeated narrative, several participants removed characters and similar aspects came forth. Partners, friends and co-workers were removed together with impacts that occupational choices had on these relationships.

2.2. Removing characters when there no longer is a need for social support. Removing characters in the repeated narratives appeared for some to be tied to when there no longer was a need for social support to narrate their experiences. There were events where characters were portrayed as central to how participants adjusted to their surroundings, and that they seemed to be guided forward by these characters that later on were removed from the events. For instance, characters were used a few times as support at age 25, 29, or at both ages, in expressions such as *"That is probably the way for most people"*, or *"I really enjoyed working with people that were educated"*, in attempts to sort out current confusion on what working paths these participants were intended to follow. The decrease in need for social support was portrayed, for some, in what seemed to be an initial need to belong to different groups but later on appeared to not be needed anymore. Thus, characters were removed when the perception of challenging and difficult situations at work or past decisions regarding occupational paths had faded. Malin gave an example of this by removing her younger sister from the equation of the question if she were to study medicine or not.

> **Age 29.** *"In upper secondary school, **I** sensed if **I** was going to be a doctor or a nurse, **I** didn't have enough grades to become a doctor or enough interest but **I** think **I** have always been like, when **I** forced **my younger sister** to fill in all the right answers in my study book in math, **I** always like, held on to that and liked social interactions and the human contact and yeah no…"*
> **Age 33.** *"In fact **I** think it already was during upper secondary school **I** was thinking of becoming a nurse or a doctor or at least something in that direction but then **I** realized that **I** think it's kind of disgusting with blood and yeah, stuff like that."*

At age 29 Malin's younger sister was central in her narration about her medical interest, and her reasoning about her ability to proceed within that area of education. At age 33 she did not use her sister as support to explain her lack of skills in mathematics by her sister being forced to do her homework, and where the medical interest ended. Rather, she was the only character needed to share her personal take on this type of profession. Similarly, one participant made a comment at age 25 stating *"Then I realized, probably everybody around me had already realized, that it was not really my thing"* and at age 29 rephrased *"Me who love words and language should not deal with numbers and charts"*. These examples depict how interpretations of information one perceives others to have about oneself might be used to inform about one's personal compass, but when one has found this compass, they are not needed.

3. Alternating Characters' Relevance Over Time

This main theme shed light on the tendency to alternate characters' relevance by highlighting them at different points in time. For a few participants, one character was removed between age 25 and 29, and then added again at age 33 (i.e. excluded at age 29). Expressions at age 25 such as *"I don't think I decided, it was my grandmother who was working there"*, or *"I had an internship at my old teacher's workplace"*, were omitted at age 29 and recurred at age 33. This raises the question if it at certain time points, in this case at age 29, was more important to narrate oneself as a protagonist alone, and omit the relevance of others to put emphasis on independency. Furthermore, contexts in which some participants alternated relevance of characters surrounded conversations with people about occupational interests and choices, and that who these characters were changed over time. Narratives were influenced by different groups of people at different time points. In the repeated narrative below Andreas' interest in economy and law was associated with his old friends at first. Eight years later, his narrative was told in light of his reduced interest and he referred to students within law instead.

> **Age 25.** *"Then **I** was doing military service and got **my** eyes on economy, **I** met **many of my older friends who** studied and **I** thought this is broad /…/ when **you** think about what **you** are able to choose from it and law is quite narrow so to speak so then **I** started to rethink and then **I** was on the reserve list at international law school in German at Linköping university and **I** thought maybe that could be something instead and also **I** read a lot about law in the military, **I** was a military police and it was great fun and **I** really like law but **you** can still read law within the field of economy as well."*
> **Age 33.** *"**I** got accepted at the program of business law at the same time that **I** got accepted at the program of economy. And then **I** started to check it out and **I** was going to serve the military at first. And then **the people who studied law**. It still sticks with **me**, this thing, it's so far from what **I**, **I** like to work in teams /…/ the atmosphere that **no one** seemed happy when **you** met **them** at the program of business law because it was huge internal competition."*

At age 25 Andreas' interest was narrated as growing due to old friends engaging in the same interest, and subsequently another group of people were evident in the narrative at age 33 when the interest seemed to have cooled down. Explanations concerning an event thus was revealed with different characters included to make changes in meaning-making explicit.

4. Change of the Way Oneself is Narrated as a Character in the Story

This main theme reflects how most of the participants changed how they narrated themselves as a character in their repeated narratives. Over time, participants explicitly narrated changed self-views, or implicitly changed the degree of agency across two or three interview occasions. These changes are described in the following subthemes *Changing the view of one's own role in the story* and *Changing one's role as an agent in the story*.

4.1. Changing the view of one's own role in the story. A changed view of oneself related to realizations depicted by the participants, and the events were told from different angles over time. Expressions were often rephrased in a way that made participants appear as if they had learned more about themselves. For instance, at age 25 one participant expressed *"I was forced to work with this",* and then later on expressed it differently *"I did not understand what I had to do to get things done"*. Other participants did not verbalize any evaluation of events where the self was salient but to then at age 33 conclude *"I probably had not thought things through"*, *"I was so cut out for that"*, or *"I knew I wouldn't be doing this"*. Thus, it appeared that some participants repeated their narratives with increased insight over time, pointing to deeper meaning-making processes. Especially, over time some narrated themselves in a wider perspective with more profound interpretations on who they were at the time of the event and showed patterns of evolvement. At age 25, one participant articulated nothing about her lack of skills as a musician but then at age 29 and 33 expressed *"I knew that I was not that good at playing music"*, and *"I knew all along that I wouldn't work with music"*. Thus, the repeated narratives reflected how participants increased self-awareness and had created a clearer picture of themselves, both in positive and negative lights. Jenny narrated a changed, and in a lot of ways enriched, view of herself by storying her choice of art over an academic education.

> **Age 25.** *"**I** applied for school of public administration and **I** got in and **I** was super interested, but then **I** changed **my** mind and **I** wanted to give art another chance."*
> **Age 33.** *"Back then when **I** had ended **my** first year with studying art, **I** was hesitating a bit if **I** should continue one more year or if **I** should do something else. So **I** applied for school of public administration because then **I** was a little bit tuned in on choosing a socially oriented education as well. But then **I** finally decided to continue **my** craftmanship so then **I** moved on /.../ it was kind of difficult **I** had anxiety when **I** called and gave up **my** place in the program because it was still an education within the academy and it would've brought **me** lots of opportunities to get **me** a good job very quickly. At the same time, **I** knew that with art it's much riskier, so **I** was pretty conflicted, but then **I** came around and like followed **my** heart after all."*

In this repeated narrative Jenny's view of herself during her decision-making process changed to become a lot more insightful at age 33. At age 25 it could be that this choice was too close in time for her to obtain a distance to it, and therefore the explanation that she changed her mind could have been the best one at the time. However, at age 33 the experience seemed a lot more processed and by exploring and learning more about herself no difficulty in

describing the situation was evident. The changed view is clearly mirrored in the incremental satisfaction with her decision as she at age 33 realized she had followed her heart after all.

4.2. Changing one's role as an agent in the story. Another way of changing oneself as a character, a change in one's role as an agent, related to a more implicit way of changing the repeated narratives by subsequently representing oneself as more in charge of choices concerning one's occupational path. These narratives often contained an increased distance to other people, although they did not always have to be excluded. In a few narratives characters were involved in actually getting these participants a job in the first place, and at a later stage were not brought forth as if these participants had made the effort themselves to get there. Also, conversations with people that had taken place before important choices were described at age 25, but as they were downplayed later on it seemed like participants had grown into their professions during later recollections of these conversations. To illustrate, Sara could at age 25 see that a program at the university would probably fit her due to the fact that she had the same interest as her parents, but later on she depicted the interest as if it was coming from within.

> **Age 25.** *"Chalmers felt quite natural **my mother** is an electrical engineer and **my father** a technician, so it seemed interesting and it fit **me** and… **I** reflected a bit about different programs and was back and forth but decided to choose civil engineer, it felt… it seemed interesting and it was a broad education, so **I** was not forced to choose completely."*
> **Age 33.** *"…**I** studied at Chalmers /…/ there it was, **they** had some introductions like, **I** went there and listened and then **I** made **my** decision. **I** had different programs in mind. /…/ but **I** think, in the end **I** believe it was almost like 'eenie meenie miny mo' /…/ **I** felt it was the most interesting."*

Most apparent in the narrative is that at age 25 Sara's choice of education was more a question about what suited her as a person and her parents' choices of profession informed her about herself, while at age 33 Sara felt herself that civil engineer was the most interesting choice. Within the repeated narratives coded to this subtheme, the role as an agent changed to a stronger one as the ownership of the decision at hand increased.

5. Changing the Same Characters' Role Over Time

This main theme reveals how participants changed the role of the same characters who recurred in their repeated narratives. More specifically, the repetitions illustrated changed relationships across two or three occasions. These relationships changed in different ways, described in the following subthemes *Changing characters' relationship-status over time* and *Deepening the understanding of close relationships over time*.

5.1. Changing characters' relationship-status over time. This subtheme reflects the events in which relationships seemed to have either grown, faded or changed meaning. Some events evolved as if the characters that were in them developed a closer relationship and were described in a more intimate way. It could for instance refer to co-workers or other students that initially were called *some other people* at age 25, and *friends* at age 33. Conversely, there were also descriptions in the events when relationships seem to have faded. For example, recollection of *one motivating teacher* at age 25 became *good teachers* at age 33, portraying more specific others who later in life were recalled as a general group of people that had made an impact in the past. Relationship-status also appeared to change in a way that the most important aspects of their impact were different at different time points. For instance, when Therese and her friends were to apply to a program at the university, the nature of their relationship were narrated differently at age 29 compared to at age 33.

Age 25. *"From the beginning **I** wanted to become an architect and then it was kind of a hurry after graduating high school so **I** had to do something **I** couldn't just wander around at home but had to either start working or studying. /.../ **I** sat down looking through the catalogue and realized quite fast that what was most appealing to **me** was to construct, yes building engineer and architect."*
Age 29. *"...Above all **I** wanted to work in a field with a high social standing for some reason **I** don't know the answer to today, and it was a reason to why **I** somehow slipped into this as well because **I** wanted to become an engineer because it was something that was talked about among **my friends** and **all of us** have **parents** with a higher education so it was like important in some way."*
Age 33. *"...**my friends who I'm** still hanging out with, in fact the majority of **us** work in the construction business in some way. Um so **I** think it was, it was like a little bit, **I** was very fond of, when **I** was little **we** were building houses with LEGO and **we**, early on **I** had an idea **I** should become an architect."*

During the decision-making process at age 25, Therese did not express her friends' impact at all. At age 29 she did involve them and the parents as a source from which the importance of obtaining high professional status emerged, as they contributed to this reasoning. At age 33 she changed her friends' role and emphasized an important part of her childhood instead. By narrating her playing with them, the reason for her choice of education in adulthood were attached to her friends in a changed way, that is the importance they carried with her during childhood. Therefore, changing relationship-status in the narrative may reflect ways in which people assert different meaning to others, at different stages in life, when they reflect back on their important decisions in life such as occupational path.

5.2. Deepening the understanding of close relationships over time. This subtheme relates to a small number of narratives in which a few participants changed the role of others in their repeated narratives by deepening their understanding of family members and other relatives over time. Participants were able to see their parents in a new light and therefore also reflect upon their balance and positionings within these relationships. Martin illustrated this further by working through his family history to understand the role of his parents and why he had to continue to advance academically after upper secondary school.

Age 25. *"...there is like, perhaps even if it is not outspoken, there is like not a doubt about continuing **your** education after high school. It applies to, **I** think **everyone in my family** are included like **you** should become a lawyer or like a doctor or **you** should at least become something that has required **you** to continue to study, definitely. Then exactly what is not that important, but **you** have to proceed."*
Age 29. *"**They** wanted **us** to continue **our** education **all of us**, **I** think it was really important to **them** because **my mom**, **her father** died when **she** was very young, and **her mom** was a sewer and **my dad's parents** were carpenters. So like **they** were **the ones who** worked for better standards sort of and so perhaps it was important to know that **we** developed like **they** did and not like **their parents**. Um so there has always been a pressure from home that **we** have to continue **our** studies. Then **I** think that **they** don't care about where **we** choose to study only that **we** do it. Um, but that has been **their** only goal with **us I** think, so **I** think **they** are happy..."*
Age 33. *"...The thing that's had the most impact on **me**... **I** would probably say **my parents** background, **they** come from quite poor conditions and **they** have worked and gotten **themselves** an education so. **I** think that **they**, **I** was characterized a lot by getting an education and getting a job. It's more like that, it's not like this upper middleclass '**you** can become whatever **you** want', but more like, an education and a job like then what kind of job is really, **who** cares /.../ getting a degree and a job compared to like 'follow **your** dreams', it's not like that, **I** wouldn't say."*

To see family members in a new light may have facilitated Martin's understanding of his own background in relation to his parents and also deepening the understanding of others' actions. To become a parent also seemed to contribute to the developing elements in family relationships within these narratives. At age 29 one participant explained the role of her parents and stated *"For me it was obvious to continue my studies after high school, but that probably wouldn't have been the case if my parents didn't take it for granted"*, and after becoming a parent at age 33 repeated the event through a softened lens *"They wished for me that I would continue to study after high school. That I was always aware about. Um, but if it had turned out that I wasn't that good in school, I'm pretty sure they would've encouraged me to do something else"*. These participants portrayed relationships with their parents in changed lights, perhaps influenced by their own stage in life.

6. Changing *I* and *We* Interchangeably Over Time

This main theme comprises the narratives where participants changed perspective as storytellers by changing pronouns in their repeated narratives. What could be seen in the material was that some participants changed from referring to *I* to instead narrate the event as if there were several characters experiencing the same thing, *we*, or vice versa. Across interview occasions it might be that specific relationships with others evolved and led to these changes in the narratives, but in some cases, participants changed pronouns as if they wanted to identify with a certain group of people and then narrated from the perspective of themselves during a later interview. Some participants also used the pronouns *I* and *we* interchangeably within the same interview session, where groups or teams were highlighted and portrayed as successful. Erik told a repeated narrative from the perspective of him being part in the group of his co-workers at age 25, but from the perspective of himself alone at age 29 and 33.

> **Age 25.** *"Yes it's a drawback to be outside because it's raining and snowing a lot outside and every Christmas* ***everybody at the firm*** *are getting fired because of shortage of work. Because there is snow and like then* ***we*** *are not able to roof when there is snow. Because* ***we*** *heat up the roofs, so it has to be dry and stuff like that. So sometimes* ***we*** *have to wander around at home…"*
> **Age 29.** *"Then* ***I*** *worked as a roofer during a couple of years but then* ***I*** *thought it was too cold to work during the winters so* ***I*** *went back to plumber."*
> **Age 33.** *"****I*** *have been working within the construction business the last 14 years. Worked as a roofer as well but* ***I*** *quit because* ***one*** *was working outside all the time…"*

At age 25 Erik was consistent in expressing the winters at the job as a collective experience. Although he was currently working with these people at age 25, it may have helped him to narrate his perception of his work as if he belonged to them. Either in the form of appearing more anonymous within the experience itself, or perhaps to show his appreciation of them. To change the perspective to himself at age 29 and 33 might show that this tendency had faded, and the experience had become more distant and one of his own. Participants also changed perspective from *I* to both *I* and *We* over time. One participant narrated about the beginning of her interest in the climate area and both at age 25 and 33 pointed out *"When I was 14 I thought it was so utterly stupid to throw the garbage away* [instead of recycling]*"*, but at age 33 also underlined *"And then I realized and felt that what I do isn't enough, we need to get more people to do more"*. Some participants may have changed to become more a part of society through work and therefore narrated themselves as a part of the collective.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the following research question: How do young adults change narration of characters in identity-defining repeated narratives in the occupational domain over time? The main findings showed that changed narration of characters may have served important functions in how the participants developed their narrative identities within the occupational domain. By adding characters to the stories, participants seemed to anchor their occupational paths in others, explain their actions, and accentuate themselves by, for example, ascribing characters certain positionings in the stories to emphasize uniqueness of the self. By removing characters from the stories, participants seemed to have integrated the events into their perceptions of the past as other characters became unnecessary for the narration of their experiences, and there seemed to no longer be a need for social support over time. For some, characters in the repeated narratives were used as if they possessed alternating relevance in facilitating participants' narration of personal characteristics due to their changing presence in the narratives. Most of the participants depicted changed narration of themselves as characters, such as changing the views of themselves in both positive and negative lights and, for some, a more implicitly changed and forthcoming degree of agency seemed to have grown over time. The same characters that were evident in the stories over time provided examples of changed meaning ascribed to long-term relationships. Both on more of a surface level in changed narration of characters' relationship-statuses, as well as on more of a deeper level by understanding of closely related others. Changing *I* and *we* within and across interview occasions served as window into participants' narration of themselves as part of the collective. The results will further be discussed theme by theme about how young adults change narration of characters in their occupational identity-defining repeated narratives. After the discussion of the themes follows a methodological discussion, ethical considerations, and a final conclusion.

Discussion of Themes

The majority of participants engaged in changed narration of characters in their repeated narratives in line with the main theme *Adding characters to the story*. The subtheme *Anchoring occupational paths in others by adding them to the story* showed that some participants added characters as if they functioned as anchors to link participants' evolving professional selves. Influence these characters might have had in the events perhaps were understood by the participants when they were added to the story, as linchpins alike. In light of previous findings, the added anchoring in others might have contributed to create causal coherence in the narratives. That is, when an individual develops realizations of how the identity has transformed by linking episodes within a life phase to explain changes in one's personality over time (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Anchoring occupational paths in others by adding them could be seen not only as attempts to add linkages between episodes in the stories, such as why events unfolded a certain way, but to illustrate personal changes. Since these characters became salient over time, they seemed to carry meaningful contributions in important work-related events and thereby for participants' personal evolvement.

Characters were also added to describe occupational outcomes, coded to the subtheme *Adding characters to the story to explain one's actions*. In these repeated narratives, characters were added to the stories to illustrate decisions not made by participants themselves, leading to actions such as pursuing a non-enjoyable education. Taking sociocultural aspects into account these repeated narratives might mirror experienced difficulties of external pressure to align with the master narratives of the culture (McLean & Syed, 2016). For instance, some repeated narratives displayed challenges about what education to choose, such as a prestigious one when

receiving high grades. Interestingly, participants appeared to have developed explanations for their actions in alignment with external expectations by adding others as if these actions became increasingly inappropriate for them personally over time. Alignment with master narratives during the time of the decisions may have enabled avoidance of social sanctions (McLean et al., in press) since there is no guarantee that audiences will be receptive to an alternative story (Waterman, 2015). Over time, it might have been easier to add focus on someone else rather than oneself when narrating about difficult choices that did not turn out as desired (McLean & Syed, 2016). A need to relieve psychosocial tension, such as uncertainty and anxiety, when experiencing pressure to examine the constraints that the context imposes on how to tell a different story perhaps could clarify why some participants added explanations for actions in line with their friends.

Contrasting results were identified within repeated narratives described in the subtheme *Accentuating oneself by adding characters to the story*, constituting narratives of success. Previous research have shown that young adults are especially concerned with what others think, and susceptible to types of social pressures, but with age are less likely to change their stories to adjust in line with them (Arnett, 2000; Pasupathi, 2001). It could be that some participants had found their occupational path since they, instead of being affected by external pressures about what choices to make, added and highlighted characters who had validated their working skills in the events over time. These participants subsequently seemed to have grown into a more confident professional phase, and without any constraints accentuated themselves and their achievements as they added characters to illustrate their success.

While characters became evident in the stories over time, in other repetitions they were removed, described in the main theme *Removing characters from the story*. Participants engaged in changed narration in line with the subthemes *Removing characters who become unnecessary for the narration of the experience* and *Removing characters when there no longer is a need for social support*. First, participants seemed to remove characters from their narratives when they had either learned something or had embraced a certain occupational interest. Second, participants subsequently did not involve other characters' interpretations of themselves to inform about their personal compasses. Throughout young adulthood others might become more distant in the perception of oneself concerning occupational identity decision-making. New areas might be spreading that center around intimacy and newly found family roles (Arnett, 2012; Fivush et al., 2017). However, these repeated narratives might illuminate processes of becoming more of an independent main author of one's life (McLean, 2015), reflecting the removal of others. Removals also indicate how other people are critical in constructing personally coherent narratives (Syed & McLean, 2016). At the age of 25 and/or 29 some participants perhaps needed others while caught up in the task of role immersion of their occupational identities (Arnett, 2012), and in turn integrated others' perception of themselves as a means to the path of figuring out their own.

With the tendency to shape the picture of oneself as the center of the story, a parallel can be drawn to the main theme *Alternating characters' relevance over time*. A few participants alternated characters' presence across interview occasions, omitting them at age 29. Perhaps these narratives exemplify the importance of presenting oneself as independent, and during what time. Relatedly, different groups of people were changed to emphasize certain meaning ascribed to personal interests. These results might highlight engagement in changed narration of characters to facilitate descriptions of aspects of oneself. In this way, characters seemed to complement the function of the evaluative component in the definition of a narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). That is, to interpret and evaluate certain past decisions differently depending on the time point in question, in this case drawing from different professional groups. Importantly, identity is as much what one declares one is not (Josselson, 2009), and it appeared

as if characters belonging to particular professions were alternated to make comparisons with oneself possible and thus helped explicate personal qualities at each point in time.

Most participants changed narration of characters relating exclusively to themselves. The main theme *Change of the way oneself is narrated as a character in the story* and the associated subtheme *Changing the view of one's own role in the story* can be understood by the concept of autobiographical reasoning which partly involves the search for meaning and connections between events through meaning-making (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean, Syed et al., 2019). Participants were able to modify descriptions of the events and make them congruent with newly acquired experiences, hence the changed view of themselves. To manage to accommodate experiences, revision of identity-defining stories is required as new experiences emerge (McLean, Syed et al., 2019). In other words, to maintain a sense of continuity within the self, perhaps participants had to change the view of themselves with increased knowledge and insights in order to integrate new experiences. Theorists suggest that the primary identity task across adulthood is the construction of an integrated identity (Fivush et al., 2017; McLean, 2017), which builds upon explicit reflections on how subjective perspectives evolve over time. When participants changed the view of themselves they might have been expressing personal growth, which require change in perspective indicative of integrative meaning (Fivush et al., 2017). Thus, participants subsequently improved holding two different subjective perspectives, their past- and current selves, in mind and integrate them across time through meaning-making. Identity integration might be a matter of developing continuity within the self in order to live a healthy life (Syed & McLean, 2016; Waterman, 2015). Relatedly, recent results suggest a strong link between well-being and motivational themes (McLean, Syed et al., 2019), discussed in the following sections.

Results concerning the subtheme *Changing one's role as an agent in the story* comprised how participants' agency progressed with an increased ownership of occupational past decisions. Participants seemed to embrace their own accomplishments later on, confirming patterns of agency in the ability to affect change in one's own life through achievement and self-mastery (McAdams & McLean, 2013). They appeared to have grown into their professions as their occupational paths were generated from within themselves over time. In this regard, McAdams' (1993) writings are relevant to consider since he called the characters that dominate people's life stories *Imagoes*, existing as different idealized aspects of the self. In short, they can be seen as carriers of underlying motivations, such as agency, often embodied in external role models and significant persons in the adult's life. Characters in some participants' stories could be seen as used for expressing an evolving agency, both internally and externally, by pushing the narrative forward. According to McAdams (1993), seeking organization for the identity the individual in the early adult years pulls together social roles and other divergent aspects of the self, with imagoes providing a narrative mechanism for accommodating diversity. Changing one's role as an agent could be viewed a part of the occupational identity organization in participants' strive to separate from others to master the environment and expand the self, for instance by shifting focus from influence of the parents to an increased ownership of the occupational decisions in the events over time.

The main theme *Changing the same character's role over time* turns to another motivational theme, communion, that captures concerns with interpersonal connection such as love and intimacy (McLean, Syed et al., 2019). Motivations of communion are often considered as contrasts to the motivations of agency, generating a tension between the two during the young adult years (McAdams, 1993). Described in the subtheme *Changing characters' relationship-status over time*, characters in these repeated narratives were depicted in line with changing patterns of communion through love and friendship. The relationships were narrated as if they either had grown, faded or changed meaning over time. For example, results displaying a changed relationship-status of friendships from being highly status-oriented to become more

intimate might exemplify a shift from an agentic to a communion take on events later in life by a changed assertion of meaning to these relationships. Perhaps participants narrated relationship-statuses, at each time, to explain parts of the self as understood in the present (Fivush et al., 2017; Josselson, 2009), pointing to a potentially shifting nature of motivational themes in some young adults' occupational identity formation.

The importance of long-term relationships with others in occupational identity formation was also apparent in the subtheme *Deepening the understanding of close relationships over time*. A few participants narrated their parents in a changed light over time and also reflected upon their balance and positionings within these relationships. By deepening the understanding participants seemed to have attained insights concerning parents' influence on their evolved professional selves. Josselson (2009) concluded that it is the meanings that people assign their autobiographical past that shape the present self, and that these meanings change over time in the context of changing relationships with others. Results in the present study might widen the perspective of assigned meanings to *how* young adults explicitly express this process through characters in their repeated narratives. In a certain way, a few participants explicitly deepened the understanding of close relationships to illustrate their own evolvement and showed patterns of personal growth through others by changing their involvement in the stories. Understanding events by considering others' perspectives, especially within the family, provide structures to locate oneself in (McLean, 2015). The transition from emerging- to young adulthood is proposed to bring a change in roles in the parent-child relationship (Syed & McLean, 2016). In this case, participants appeared to modify their occupational identities in relation to their parents, why a change in roles might be a continuous process extended across young adulthood.

The main theme *Changing I and we interchangeably over time* demonstrated a particular way of how the occupational- and relational domain seemed intertwined. Some participants headed towards narrating from a collective point of view by changing the perspectives *I* and *we*. These results might signal an increased generativity, that is, the need of creating and nurturing of things to contribute and develop a sense of being involved in a bigger picture as one matures by guiding the next generation (Erikson, 1968). Changing *I* and *we* referring to colleagues and other networks such as students highlighted participants' need for a community to identify with to contribute on a broader societal level. The relational domain is especially salient during young adulthood and co-occurrences of domains have shown connections with identity development through meaning-making (McLean et al., 2016). In the repeated narratives participants were able to improve seeing facets within the occupational- and relational domain as related, and make meaning out of these events over time. For some, this might have prompted piecing the occupational identity together (McLean et al., 2016). The pervading changed narration of characters bring forth the relational focus within participants' occupational identity formation in this study. These changes could be seen as expressions of sorting out concerns about the relational self in order to sort out and manage concerns about the occupational self, and vice versa, to keep evolve.

Methodological Discussion

A central area in this longitudinal study is the concept of memory. One may argue that a limitation relates to the timeline, more specifically to how memory errors and characters with them might emerge. Importantly, narration still informs about the way someone recall an event and the way the story is told. Thus, narrative identity is not the same thing as memory, but the story told about memory (McAdams, 2018), and transcripts from each interview occasion generated insight into participants current occupational identities. With regard to how the interviews were conducted a few main questions varied between waves of data collection which

may have reduced repeated narration. However, semi-structured interviews are rewarding for exploratory approaches in letting participants narrate freely without restrictions about their own contextualized experiences. Although, the interviews were not consistent in terms of their length ranging between 6 and 23 minutes per interview. This might be due to whether and how the occupational identity domain was particularly salient for the participant in question, and the relatively big sample size compensated this potential limitation. The case-centered approach used is ideal for highlighting individual variation. When presenting the range and variation within the material in line with conducting a narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008), there might be a risk that narratives told by participants particularly articulate are seen as most representative in the writing of the results. These aspects were taken into account by presenting diversity within the sample concerning narration per se, gender and profession.

With respect to reflexivity and the author's role in knowledge production the analysis was conducted by a woman in her late twenties based in a Swedish context, that is, the same context as participants and the same age as participants during the second data collection (i.e. the ninth wave). This positioning was not attempted to be overlooked but to be acknowledged a part of the approach, valuing transparency as required when carrying out the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Levitt et al., 2018; Riessman, 2008). Reflecting upon the position as researcher and knowledge production as emerging from the context in which it is situated, changed narration of characters in young adults' occupational identities provided a foundation for knowledge, thereby recognizing a realist dimension (Riessman, 2008). Concerning the generalizability of the results, participants, a cohort born 1980 and 1981, and their families were seen as representative in a Swedish big city environment at time of recruitment. The path to a stable adulthood is longer nowadays than in the past by longer and more widespread education, later ages of marriage and parenthood, and young women obtain more education than young men compared to 50 years ago (Arnett, 2012). The results thus should be interpreted in tune with the spirit of these times. Not to mention the participants living in a modern western society.

Contextual matters provide directions for the future. Given that relational aspects of the occupational identity resided in a Swedish context, it would be interesting to further investigate the role of characters based in another culture. Researchers could use the element of characters further to examine how the occupational- and relational domain are interrelated with emphasis on identity integration as a suggested central developmental process in young adulthood (McLean, 2017). Further on, the fact that it was most common both to repeat the narratives and change narration of characters across all three interview occasions signal further assessment of the extent to which characters keep evolve in repeated narratives, at what ages beyond young adulthood this most commonly unfold, and the meaning of these changes. Since the thematization built upon three interview occasions it would be interesting to add more repetitions as repeated narratives were coded to a range of one to four of the main themes and to one or two of the subthemes. Perhaps added repetitions would extend elaboration concerning this network of simultaneously operating processes and their intensity over time. It might be fruitful to include participants that do not change narration of characters in their repeated narratives, as with seven participants within the current sample, to sort out remaining questions if this tendency reflects an achieved sense of continuity or a sign of stagnation (McAdams, 2019), and what meaning it brings for the individual.

Ethical Considerations

The Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg approved all data collections, and some ethical issues followed this study that merit further discussion. Given the extensive interpersonal contact with participants in longitudinal work continual ethical reconsiderations

may be required (Levitt et al., 2018). Since all three waves of data collection included questions about participants' lives, thoughts, and feelings, some discomfort might have been triggered for some of the participants. Additionally, given the incremental waves of data collection, potential experiences of being demanded to keep participating could not be ruled out. Therefore, prior to each wave of data collection the participants were carefully informed by letter of the aims of the GoLD study, how the data would be stored and archived, that the results intended to be communicated at group-level, before they gave their informed consent. Participation was voluntary, they had the right to not answer any uncomfortable question, and they could withdraw at any time. Using the semi-structured Identity Status Interview (Marcia et al., 1993) in which the interview protocol consisted of broad questions that could be answered in many different ways allowed the participants to tell their stories as they preferred. To minimize the risk of participants recognizing their own phrases, details in all interview excerpts such as names, cities, workplaces, and possible identifiable information were changed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Conclusion

This study was a first attempt to explore how narration of characters change in repeated narratives generating in-depth insights of the evolvement of occupational identity formation in young adulthood. Characters' presence changed in repeated narratives as they were added, removed, or brought forth at different time points. These changes depict whether and how important characters are involved as the meaning of experiences evolve over time. Changed narration of characters relating to the narration of oneself, the role of others and changing pronouns of *I* and *we* generated perspective on occupational identity formation in light of personal growth and changing relationships. Taken together, changed narration of characters in these ways seemed to be central in the formation of the occupational identity over time, as participants portrayed having arrived at a new place in life. This study lies its contributions to novel insights about how individuals create and change their narratives. What changes that can be expected in narrative identity formation in young adulthood, and different meaning changes possess for different people, are directions for the future to continue to assess. The characters involved in one's repeated narratives could be viewed as highly important and how they are presented in narratives are part of the fundamental need to rework one's identity through time.

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