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# Narrative Identity In Online Spaces: Selves In 280 Characters Or Less

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NARRATIVE IDENTITY IN ONLINE SPACES: SELVES IN 280 CHARACTERS OR LESS

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ABSTRACT

The internet age has allowed individuals a degree of self-expression that is more expansive than

any other period in history.  Through the emergence of social networking sites (henceforth SNS),

individuals can tell their stories to their entire social network with unparalleled ease.  It is

difficult to overstate how far-reaching the implications of this form of widespread

communication are with respect to interpersonal communication.  Despite this, little work has

been done considering how we should think about self-presentation on SNS.  The goal of this

paper is two-fold: (1) I will defend the position that our narrative identities are constituted by a

set of, so called, essential features.  (2) I will argue that SNS profiles ought to be understood as

expressions of an individual's narrative identity in terms of these essential features.  If I am

correct, then there are implications both for our understanding of identity and for researchers

who employ information from SNS.

Table of Contents

The internet age has allowed individuals a degree of self-expression that is more expansive than any other period in history. Through the emergence of social networking sites (henceforth SNS), individuals can tell their stories to their entire social network with unparalleled ease. It is difficult to overstate how far-reaching the implications of this form of widespread communication are with respect to interpersonal communication. Despite this, little work has been done considering how we should think about self-presentation on SNS. The goal of this paper is two-fold: (1) I will defend the position that our narrative identities are constituted by a set of, so called, *essential features*. (2) I will argue that SNS profiles ought to be understood as expressions of an individual's narrative identity in terms of these *essential features*. If I am correct, then there are implications both for our understanding of identity and for researchers who employ information from SNS.

As SNS have grown in popularity, academics interested in studying human behavior have increasingly advocated studying SNS usage to understand both online and offline behavior (e.g. Fox et al., 2014, Nabi et al., 2013)[1] [2] However, many studies have focused on analyzing individual posts or harvesting large quantities of data for easy analysis. While these methods have benefits, studies such as Fox et al. show some of the issues that may arise by looking only

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[1] Fox, Jesse, Osborn, Jeremy L. Warber, Katie M. (2014) "Relational dialectics and social networking sites: The role of Facebook in romantic relationship escalation, maintenance, conflict, and dissolution." Computers in Human Behavior. Volume 35. 527-534. ISSN 0747-5632. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.02.031.

[2] Nabi, R.L., Prestin, A., So, J. (2013) "Facebook friends with (health) benefits? Exploring social network site use and perceptions of social support, stress, and well-being." Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking. 16. 721-727.

to surface-level analyses.  In their paper, they found that individuals' posted content on Facebook did not consistently match their affective state at the time of posting as well as a tendency to downplay the influence Facebook had on their lives away from their computers.[3]  Utilizing 'big data' collection techniques or direct survey methods will fail to capture the nuance of individual's SNS usage by flattening the individual contexts.

I will argue that researchers should be cautious when considering data gathered from SNS to not view individual data in isolation.  Researchers must consider how any individual post on a SNS factors into the larger narrative identity on display, or else they risk failing to capture how that post fits into the larger context of the poster's identity.  To show this, I will be considering Marya Schechtman's "Narrative Self-Constitution View" (henceforth NSCV), its history, and how her criteria for an identity-constituting narrative are complicated by analyzing SNS.  Specifically, I will argue that considering SNS narratives reveals trouble in the relationship held between narratives and the truth criterion, or the requirement that narratives be truthful, at least as far as expressing one's narrative to others is concerned.

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[3] Fox, Jesse, Osborn, Jeremy L. Warber, Katie M. "Relational dialectics and social networking sites" 173-174.

## 2. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUITY VIEW

Marya Schechtman defines identity as "narrative in structure, and the individuation of persons is indexed to the unity of single ongoing narratives."[4]  Call such a view a *Narrative Identity view*. A narrative identity view claims that what makes an individual one and the same individual through time is that they have a single, unified narrative that connects the disparate experiences and actions of their life into a coherent story.  Of course, views of this nature do differ tremendously, and so in this paper I shall confine my considerations to one particular narrative view, namely, Schechtman's Narrative Self-Constitution View.

Schectman's NSCV view can be traced to John Locke's arguments for a psychological continuity theory.  Schechtman argues Locke captured a powerful intuition that "personal identity consists, not in the Identity of Substance, but… in the Identity of consciousness."[5] Locke's intuition was that when people ask questions about personhood they are interested in tracking that individual's psychological continuity, not their bodily continuity. Often, this has been taken to indicate that a lay-person's interest in personal identity is in tracking questions about our ability to *reidentify* one and the same person later in time as someone who is accountable for prior actions.  However, Schechtman argues, this is not the lesson we should take from Locke's intuition.

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[4] Schechtman, Marya (2012) "The Story of my (Second) Life: Virtual Worlds and Narrative Identity," *Philos. Technol*, 25, 329–343. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-012-0062-y, 333.
[5] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* ed. P. Nidditch, Oxford Clarendon Press, *reprinted 1979*. 342.

According to Schechtman, there are four features that we are looking to identify when we are asking questions about personal identity. First, we are looking for moral responsibility[6]; the ability to hold an individual accountable for actions that they are rightly responsible for. Second, we are interested in establishing that they have a self-interested concern that is only held towards one's own states. Third, we are concerned that an individual will be compensated properly for their actions. And fourth, that the person that exists in one period will persist into the future.[7] Schechtman calls these four features 'moral accountability,' 'self-interested concern,' 'compensation,' and 'survival.'[8] She argues it is in search of answers to questions about these four features that questions of personal identity are asked.

Consider the following case: let us consider the various agents involved with a criminal trial and what questions we may ask about their identities. If we were to wonder whether the person on trial is one and the same person as the one that committed the crime, we are concerned with whether they can rightly be held accountable for the criminal acts. We may wonder whether the person on trial is concerned with the outcome of the trial because we are wondering whether the person standing in the courtroom will be the same that will languish in prison if found guilty. If it is the same person, then we assume he will be concerned with that outcome of the trial in a way no other person will be, since it will alter the course of his life. We may worry about who to pay legal fees to because we believe that it is the attorney and her associates that have acted in such a way as to deserve compensation for their acts. At the most basic level, we may also be concerned with each individual's continued existence as an individual in a life they

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[6] I use the term 'moral responsibility' here to remain consistent with Dr. Schechtman's writing. As it is used here, moral is interchangeable with the word ethical, indicating that the kind of responsibility in question is one where the person is taken to have acted with choice and intention.

[7] Schechtman, Marya. (1996) *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 78.

[8] *Ibed*, 73.

recognize, and this sort of concern can extend to any one of our hypothetical agents as well as our own lives.

It is in the course of attempting to answer questions about these four features that many theorists have been led to ask what Schechtman calls 'the reidentification question." As she says, "Their question is metaphysical, not epistemological; they want to tell us not just how we *know* when we have one and the same person at two different times, but what *makes* someone the same person at those two times."[9] Most reidentification theorists, as Schechtman calls them, have followed Locke in taking his intuition to indicate that what made an individual the same is a matter of psychological continuity through time. Unfortunately, both the psychological continuity view and the reidentification question pose deep issues for answering questions about the four features.

Notably, there is what she calls the "Transitivity Problem," which is the fact that psychological continuity seems to be intransitive.[10] This issue was first raised by Thomas Reid in his "Brave Officer" objection to Locke. Put plainly, there is no certainty that a single individual will remember all of the psychological events of their (supposed) lives. In brief, the concern is that if psychological continuity is what matters to being the same person, then some periods of an individual's may be identical with one point in time and *not* one another. To make this explicit, if at time B (in their twenties) an individual can remember time A (a point in childhood), but by time C (in their sixties) they are unable to remember time A while remembering time B, it seems that at time C they are simultaneously the same person as B but *not* the same as A, while the person at time B is the same as both A and C.

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[9] Schechtman, Marya, *The Constitution of Selves,* 8.
[10] Schechtman, Marya, *The Constitution of Selves,* 27.

Similarly, questions of fission where one individual enters a cloning machine, or two individuals are hypothetically fused into one have raised serious doubts as to the efficacy of this view.[11] In both cases it is difficult to account for how many people exist on the psychological continuity thesis. Schechtman argues that

> The identity-defining relation should be defined not in terms of psychological continuity but instead in terms of narrative unity. We constitute ourselves as persons, I argue, by coming to understand our lives as narratives with the form of the story of a person's life. The notion of personhood at work here is the Lockean notion which views a person as a self-conscious being with the capacity for moral responsibility and prudential self-interest.[12]

The core of her suggestion is that Locke misinterpreted his intuition. She argues that questions of personhood are not interested in tracking psychological continuity, but in being able to answer questions about the four features. To this end, she takes the reidentification to be the wrong way of conceptualizing questions of personal identity. Instead of asking about identity across time, Schechtman suggests that we ask how characteristics at a given time relate to the individual. She refers to these types of questions as falling under the banner of 'the Characterization question.'

The question we should ask is not whether a given individual at a moment in time, or a person 'time-slice,' is the same person as another individual time-slice, but whether the actions at a given time are properly attributable to the same person as actions at another time. Under this interpretation, whether the individual remembers the action throughout their life is not relevant-

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[11] In both cases, the work of Derik Parfit was critical in developing these objections to the psychological continuity thesis. For a longer exploration of these issues, an excellent starting place is Parfit, D. (1971) "Personal Identity." *Philosophical Review*, 80: 3–27.

[12] Schechtman, Marya, "Story of my (Second) Life," 335.

sustained memory need not play a part in whether the events may be rightly attributed to the same individual.  This perspective avoids the aforementioned concerns with psychological continuity theory while still holding on to what is compelling about Locke's intuition.  By way of foreshadowing, in our discussion of the types of information shared on SNS mark the kinds of questions that are answered on these sites.  Overwhelmingly, they are characterization questions, not reidentification questions.[13]

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[13] One may object that this is because of the nature of SNS as we know, they may argue, that a single profile is tracking only one individual. However, I don't believe we can be certain that a profile is tracking only the input of a single individual- imagine a meddling parent who has access to their child's page, or a partner.  Later in this paper I hope to show why we should take SNS narratives to be representative of offline narratives, and as such, representative of the kinds of questions answered by such narratives.

3. THE NARRATIVE SELF-CONSTITUTION VIEW

On Schechtman's view identity is a product of narrative unity. That is, it is the process of constructing a narrative out of individual life-events that makes an individual one and the same person through time. "The basic claim of NSCV is that in order to live a life of this kind we need to have a conception of ourselves as beings who live such lives."[14] The critically important thing to understand about the view is that identity is something that is developed over time by having experiences, and that one's identity and personhood are necessarily connected to one's ability to create such a narrative. If an individual is unable to develop such a narrative, they are not a person, according to this view. At the most minimal level, all that is needed to constitute personhood is the capacity to think of oneself "…as persisting through time and of the different temporal parts of one's existence as being mutually influential…"[15]

The goal of narrative identity theory is not to rigidly structure the manner in which the narrative from of identity must be crafted. To constitute a true narrative identity, any given narrative must be able to answer questions related to the four features. The nature of the relationship between the narrative and these features, and even the fundamental structure of narrative order, may differ wildly between narratives. What is of concern is only that these deep questions of identity are answered in a way that is coherent to the individual that is crafting the narrative.

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[14] Schechtman, Marya, "Story of my (Second) Life," 335.
[15] Schechtman, Marya, *The Constitution of Selves,* 102.

However, despite this radical openness in narrative form it must be noted that narratives are not allowed to take *any* possible form. Schechtman believes there are two primary constraints that must be met by any narrative that is to be considered identity-constituting. The first of these is what she calls the "Articulation constraint," which states that an individual must be able to communicate parts of their narrative, at least locally, when it is appropriate.[16] In lay terms, what is required by this constraint is that the individual is capable of putting their narrative into words, be it to others or to themselves. To be clear, this does not mean that the whole of the narrative must actually be articulated, merely that it would be possible for the individual to do so if required. For example, an individual must be able to produce some response to questions like 'what town were you raised in?' or 'what classes did you take in high school?'. Which questions are relevant will be a product both of the narrative in question as well as the context in which the question is asked. Being asked about a night out will be a very different question if asked by a police officer rather than a coworker. The questions may be relatively innocuous, as the above examples are, or be far more central to the narrative. In essence, this constraint requires that a narrative really is being developed out of the events of an individual's lives and how they fit together.

The other constraint placed on narratives is what Schechtman calls the "Reality constraint." This constraint states that narratives must conform "to fundamental and largely uncontroversial everyday facts about the nature of the world we live in (e.g., humans do not usually live more than 300 years…)"[17] The goal of this constraint can be viewed in two ways: first, that narratives are not violating what is possible in physical reality. Second, that

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[16] Schechtman, Marya, "Story of my (Second) Life," 336.
[17] Schechtman, Marya, "Story of my (Second) Life," 336.

individuals are, to the best of their ability, accurately representing the experiences that they are crafting their narratives from. This does not mean that they have no inaccuracies, but rather that they are more often than not accurate and are not willfully misrepresenting the events of their lives.

With both the articulation constraint and the reality constraint what is required is that narratives conform consistently to these constraints and strive to be both articulable and accurate. We are not searching for perfect unity with reality, or for narratives to always be articulable. The more important test of conformity, as Schechtman notes, is that we expect individuals to adjust their narratives when narrative incongruities are discovered, or to explain why the incongruities are not really anomalous. It is only when they fail to do so that we mark a narrative as problematic.[18]

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[18] Schechtman, Marya, "Story of my (Second) Life,"336-337.

## 4. ESSENTIAL FEATURES: NARRATIVE PRESENCE

Essential features are those features that are absolutely critical to understanding an individual. Essential features are the minimal method of accurately describing an individual. They serve as the broadest level of abstraction that can be used to form individual narratives, and as such, when taken together essential features form the skeletal characteristics of an individual's narrative. A comprehensive list of every feature that can rightly be considered an essential feature is impractical, but a few necessary characteristics can be established in order to understand the nature of any given essential feature. I identify three broad categories that help reveal which features are properly constituted as essential features, namely, that the feature must be present in an individual's narrative, must be robustly present within the events of that individual's life, and finally must have an 'organizing' capacity on the other features of the narrative.

I am far from the first to attempt to analyze the elements from which identity is constituted. Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe developed their analysis of collective identities by gathering each individual-level element that they believed went into establishing the shared identity of groups. Of course, as they point out, personal identity and collective identity are not identical, but their list of features serves as a useful starting place for what is critically important for an individual's narrative.[19] Because their project is one of developing a framework

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[19] Ashmore, Richard D., Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe. (2004) *"An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity: Articulation and Significance of Multidimensionality."* *Psychological Bulletin* 130 (1): doi:10.1037/0033-2909.130.1.80. 82.

for use by psychologists produced from the extant categories that psychologists already used, I believe they list more individual-level constructs than are actually necessary.[20] Namely, narrative is listed as its own individual feature, whereas a narrative theorist would understand narrative to be the context in which other features will be found. Similarly, their project is not one of looking at individuals, so some categories are rendered irrelevant to the present analysis, such as 'Attachment.'[21] Despite this, I will be using their terminology where relevant, albeit with altered definitions to fit the wholly personal context.

In considering their initial analyses three major categories of criteria for essential features appear. The first is the category I refer to as 'Narrative Presence,' which combines their categories of 'self-categorization' and 'importance.'[22] To facilitate this analysis, let us consider a potential candidate for an essential feature, namely, gender identity. The category of narrative presence tracks degree to which the feature actually appears within an individual's self-narrative, as well as how important the category is to that narrative.

The first sub-section, 'self-categorization,' tracks whether individuals do utilize the essential feature to categorize themselves. Ashmore et. al split this category into three sub-sections consisting of 'placing self in category, 'goodness of fit,' and 'perceived certainty of self-identification.'[23] The first of these sub-sections is fairly self-explanatory. If an individual does not identify with the feature, it is impossible for that feature to be an important pillar of their narrative. Indeed, Ashmore et. al refer to this category as "… essentially the precondition for all

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[20] Ashmore, Richard D., Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe. 2004. "*An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity*." 83.

[21] *Ibid,* 83.

[22] *Ibid,* 83.

[23] Ashmore, Richard D., Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe. 2004. "*An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity*." 84-86.

other dimensions of collective identity."[24]  Indeed, if an individual does not identify, and has

never identified, as female, then being female will hold very little sway in their narrative.[25]

The second sub-section, goodness of fit, tracks how well an individual believes they are a

prototypical example of the particular feature.[26]  Our example of gender identity is particularly

useful in representing this distinction.  An individual may identify as a woman, but believe they

lack multiple features that the prototypical woman may have.  Nevertheless, they would still

identify, and be identified as, a woman.  Goodness of fit shows one of the difficulties of

constructing a narrative out of essential features.  Because they can be broken down into

innumerable minor features, they lose exactness for the sake of being far more accessible to

others.  When an individual differs so substantially from the conventional definition of a given

feature it can no longer approximate the nuance of a more fully articulated narrative expression

as well as no longer serving as a useful shorthand for informing others.

The final sub-section of self-categorization is 'perceived certainty of self-identification.'

Where goodness of fit tracks how well the category affixes to the individual, perceived certainty

tracks how confident an individual is in their decision to endorse a categorization.  Once more,

our potential feature of 'female' serves well in this regard.  One individual may be extremely

sure that they are rightly identified as a female while others are extremely uncertain- perhaps

deciding that the feature ultimately does not represent their narrative accurately.  Together, self-

categorization's three sub-features bring together important considerations that need to be

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[24] *Ibid,* 84.

[25] There is an important caveat to this position, namely, that of negative exclusion. It is entirely possible that an individual identifies as a former alcoholic. In this case, the feature 'alcoholic' still features in her narrative, but importantly, it was present both at an earlier period in the narrative *and* the feature now present of 'former alcoholic' can be identified as its own feature, albeit one with a special relationship to the initial feature.

[26] Ashmore, Richard D., Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe. 2004. "*An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity*." 83.

recognized before claiming a feature is an essential feature. The feature in question must appear in the narrative as well as being a feature the individual is highly confident accurately represents them.

In addition to self-categorizing, the category of narrative presence also tracks how important the category is to the narrative in question. This appears primarily in what Ashmore et. al call explicit importance, or how important the individual believes the category is to their narrative.[27] The application of this sub-section is rather straightforward. If a feature is to be an *essential* feature, it is important that the narrative author considers the feature to be one that is essential to their narrative. This does not mean that they identify the feature as the central feature of their narrative, only that it has a high degree of importance to the overall narrative. This measure of importance is irrelevant to whether the narrative author has a positive or negative evaluation of the feature. Gender identity has this kind of influence as it alters how almost every element of an individual's narrative is perceived. With the inclusion of importance, we have catalogued the nature of the first of the three guiding principles for identifying an essential feature and can now move on to the second: robustness.

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[27] Ashmore, Richard D., Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe. 2004. "*An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity*." 83. Ashmore et. al refer to two kinds of importance, explicit as I describe above, and implicit, which tracks "The placement of a particular group membership in the person's hierarchically organized self-system…" However, this type of implicit importance seems to me to collapse into their later categories 'social embeddedness' and 'behavioral involvement,' as it seems to be tracking how much the category is factored into implicit decision-making and poorly fits the narrative analysis of this paper.

## 5. ESSENTIAL FEATURES: ROBUSTNESS

The second major category we can use to analyze essential features is what I refer to as the "Robustness" criterion. By robustness, we are interested in the constancy of the particular feature's appearance in the actual events of an individual's life. uIf a feature does not appear consistently throughout an individual's life, it would be difficult to argue that the feature is essential. There are two sub-categories of robustness, 'social embeddedness' and 'behavioral involvement,' borrowing once more from Ashmore et al.'s constructs.[28] Despite using their names, both terms differ in an important way from their original usage.

Let us consider social embeddedness first. Ashmore et al. defined this category in their own work as "The degree to which a particular collective identity is embedded in the person's everyday ongoing social relationships"[29] However, this language complicates the picture when we are trying to consider essential features of a narrative identity. As it is originally described, the identity seems to be something external from the individual. Instead, I have defined social embeddedness as 'the degree to which a particular feature is implicated in the person's everyday ongoing social relationships.' While it is a minor linguistic change, I believe it makes a dramatic difference to the analysis. As I define the term, what we are tracking is how often the feature is relevant to an individual's relationship to others, how often it influences or impacts an individual's social relations.

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[28] Ashmore, Richard D., Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe. 2004. "*An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity*." 83.
[29] *Ibed,* 83.

Behavioral involvement is a similar story to social embeddedness. It tracks the degree to which an individual's actions are influenced by the particular feature. The story is much the same as before, except we are now concerned with whether the feature is implicated in their actions. For example, someone who identifies as female might be more likely to engage or seek out traditionally 'female' activities than someone who does not, by dint of their identifying with the feature. The difference between these sub-categories is primarily a practical distinction for researchers- in examining an individual's narrative, it will undoubtedly prove beneficial to split social relations and distinct behaviors from one another. Another way to consider this category is to consider it as the method by which we are ensuring that an essential feature is meeting the reality constraint, as it is ensuring that the feature truly is descriptive of the individual whose narrative is being expressed. With the inclusion of robustness, we have established the second of the primary categories that can be used to determine essential features.

The final feature by which to pick out essential features could plausibly be included as a sub-category of the feature's robustness. However, I believe it is both important enough to distinguish and better served by doing so. The final feature of essential features is that they must be 'organizing' in some regard. That is to say, the feature must be able to change or orchestrate the way other features of the individual's narrative are considered. In this way, the feature must be functional- its presence affects the way in which an individual is perceived and how other features, essential or otherwise, are understood. Sharon Anderson excellently captures this feature in her article on the development of professional ethics.

> It is more than an 'integration' (as described in the ethical acculturation model); there is a
>
> reorganization and incorporation of the personal and the professional, and there is a

transformation. In short, the new self-narrative changes how one "goes about doing" moral sensitivity.[30]

An essential feature should have a sense of gravity- where it is present it shapes the rest of the narrative to account for its influence. Anderson captures this quite well in her paper. She discusses her process of becoming an adoptive mother, noting that her "…identity began to change/reorganize…"[31] around around being a mother. Her daily routine and even social relationships altered because of becoming a mother- exactly what is meant by a feature 'organizing' the rest of the narrative.

I believe I have thoroughly examined the nature of essential features. Anderson captures much of what I believe an essential feature is, writing

> [Augusto] Blasi suggests that identity is "rooted in the very core of one's being," as an "organization of self-related information."[32] This organization of self-related information is central to the core self, so much so, that without it, the person would see him or herself as extremely different and the loss of it would be "considered and felt as irreparable."[33] [34]

Indeed, immediately following this passage she invokes the very term, stating "The example above highlights the loss of an essential feature of one's identity."[35] I differ from her, and by extension Blasi, in suggesting that there a distinct kind of feature that serves this functional role

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[30] Anderson, Sharon K. (2015). "Morally Sensitive Professionals." *Developing Moral Sensitivity*. Edited by Deborah S. Mower, Phyllis Vandenberg, and Wade L. Robison. Vol. 31. New York: Routledge. 200.

[31] Anderson, Sharon. "Morally Sensitive Professionals." 195.

[32] Blasi, Augusto. (1984). "Moral Identity: Its Role in Moral Functioning," *Morality*, Moral Behavior, and Moral Development: 128–139, 130-131

[33] Blasi, "Moral Identity," 131.

[34] Anderson, Sharon. "Morally Sensitive Professionals." 195.

[35] Anderson, Sharon. "Morally Sensitive Professionals" 195.

in narrative construction.  I have laid out several features I think are necessary for a feature to be an essential feature.  First, the feature must be present in the narrative.  Second, the feature must be robustly featured in the events that constitute that narrative.  Third, the features must 'organize' the other features of the narrative.  Now, I wish to turn to one place where they are on display: online narratives.

6. ONLINE NARRATIVES

SNS like Facebook have grown substantially over the last decade. According to the Pew Research Center, 69% of U.S. adults surveyed in 2019 used Facebook, and of users, 74% said they used Facebook at least once a day.[36]  It is indisputable that SNS have become a mainstay in the lives of most adults, at least in the U.S.  SNS provide users with a platform where they are able not only to communicate with the members of their social networks but also articulate the stories of their lives to others.  On their website, Facebook states that their mission is to "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together," which includes giving every person a voice on their platform.[37]  Both users and the companies behind SNS recognize the potential they have for allowing individuals to tell their stories.  Let us confine our considerations primarily to Facebook for the purposes of deeper consideration.

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[36] Pew Research Center, "Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is mostly unchanged since 2018," April 10, 2019 (Accessed 3/13/2020), https://pewrsr.ch/2VxJuJ3.
[37] Facebook, "Facebook Company Info," (Accessed 3/17/2020), https://about.fb.com/company-info/.

If given the Facebook profile of an individual who is an active user of the website, it would be a safe assumption that you would be able to gather an incredible amount of information about that individual. From innocuous things like favorite restaurants and hobbies to far more important information about an individual like political and philosophical opinions, Facebook is often an aggregate for at least surface level information about the majority of an individual's public (and all too often private) lives. Facebook is designed in such a way as to facilitate the sharing of this information. A separate "About You" tab allows for central demographic data to displayed, and then each post or shared piece of content is collected together onto their profile for as long as they are not deleted. Each of these posts indicate something about the opinions and beliefs of the poster.

For example, if a user is telling a story about their charity work, then that story is revelatory of their beliefs about charity. If they are sharing numerous posts about golf, that reveals their passion for golf. Because of the brief nature of most SNS posts, each one is often centered around a single feature that the user finds important enough to share. These features are, or are representative of something within the constellation of, essential features. Taken together, the whole of a user's postings on a SNS like Facebook will reveal in broad strokes the ideas, values, and actions that a user takes to be important enough for them to express to others.

SNS narratives do place a heavy burden on readers in their interpretive efforts of individual posts. A story from a charity golf tournament may reveal a love of golf, charity, or both; but it is incumbent upon the reader to interpret the expressions provided by a user. Even innocuous or casual acts like sharing internet memes reveal endorsement or disapproval of the content within, given the nature of users' own additions to the posts. The content of a shared meme may be entirely false, describing an impossible or patently ridiculous circumstance, but it

is still revelatory about the views of the poster.  The truth of the actual 'story' is secondary to the underlying values that it is trying to promote.

Despite this wealth of information, it may seem unconvincing that an individual's full narrative identity is presented on Facebook.  In some regards, this is certainly true.  Certain private elements of an individual's narrative such as sexual preferences or certain 'taboo' opinions may not appear.  Of course, this is neither universally the case nor any different than any other articulation of an individual's narrative intended for public consumption.  Additionally, there is reason to be suspicious of SNS self-presentations.  Just as we may expect certain elements of an individual's life to not be present, some degree of deception on SNS is to be expected.  After all, individuals have a vested interest in presenting themselves in a positive light on SNS, for numerous reasons.  Frequently, SNS are used by employers as one tool in many for vetting potential job applicants.  Likewise, both potential romantic partners as well as respected others such as parents are on individuals' SNS pages, contributing to a desire to present only a positive presentation.

However, I do not believe that this should be a limiting factor in utilizing SNS for research purposes.  Indeed, I believe the wide variety of SNS available provide a rich opportunity for examining how people elect to articulate their narratives given different expected audiences.  Some SNS are treated more casually, such as Twitter or Snapchat, and as such users may be far more casual with what they are willing to share on these platforms. Others are either explicitly professional, as in the case of LinkedIn, or have become many people's unofficial 'presentable' SNS, as some people treat Facebook.  The wide variety of potential SNS means that researchers who are interested in studying people on SNS must approach each site with a consideration towards the audience a user expects for their posts.  In this way, SNS may provide

insight into how individuals segregate their social networks as well as how they choose to articulate their narratives to those separated groups.

However, it may be argued that the fact that the *degree* of deception on SNS disqualifies them as useful sources of information about users. Many users are accused of presenting totally false images of themselves on SNS. In fact, this objection would continue, the self-presentations given on SNS are not intended by posters to be truthful representations, but rather ones that convince others of a wholly artificial identity.

My response to this objection is twofold: first, that cases of total deception are actually few in number; and second, that deception can still be useful in understanding the individual who is crafting the false narrative. Let me begin with the first response; that these cases are rare. I concede that lying is considerably easier to do in online spaces. Indeed, Naquin, Kurtzberg, and Belkin found that individuals were more likely to engage in self-interested deception via email than in pen-and-paper scenarios, indicating a higher willingness to lie via the internet.[38] There are multiple reasons why this might be the case, but as Naquin et. al suggest in their paper this may be because individuals view written documents as more permanent than online documents, in particular e-mails. Similarly, they suggest that the ability to easily delete content on the computer may also contribute to lower sense of attachment to the words that are written by computer.[39] While I believe that these findings hold for email, I am not convinced that they will hold on SNS.

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[38] Naquin, C. E., Kurtzberg, T. R., & Belkin, L. Y. (2010) "The finer points of lying online: E-mail versus pen and paper." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *95*(2), 387–394. https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/a0018627.
[39] Naquin, C. E., Kurtzberg, T. R., & Belkin, L. Y. "The finer points of lying online." 387.

SNS have been a mainstay of Western culture for over a decade now, and not merely as an amusement. SNS played a major role in the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, and 'fake news' remains a hot-button issue in U.S. politics after the 2016 presidential election. For many young people, the celebrities they are familiar built their platforms on SNS like YouTube and Instagram. There is a popular adage that 'once something is on the internet, it's there for good.' It is an open empirical question whether individuals will consider SNS posts to be in the same category as an e-mail. Indeed, it seems plausible that there may even be a reversal for some, considering their posts on SNS as being far more permanent than other forms of communication. Without further testing, it is unclear whether Naquin et. al's findings apply to SNS.

My second response to the objection of deception on SNS is to note that even in such cases where there is substantial deception I believe there is still useful information that can be gathered. The most common kind of lying that one might expect to run into is in no way unique to SNS, that is, exaggerations about an individual's quality of life. This type of boisterous lying is something that most people experience every day. Given this, it is incumbent upon individuals to become skilled at detecting such deceptions. Should they become skilled, then it can be extremely informative to consider the content of SNS narrative lies. If people are lying about their job, for example, it may reveal some level of dissatisfaction with their actual work. If it is assumed that people are lying to cover up perceived inadequacies, then detecting deception on a SNS will reveal information about how an individual perceives their own lives. Ironically, by trying to be deceptive on SNS individuals may be providing a better, more accurate view of their own self-concepts to any who are able to detect such lies.

The idea that lying may help reveal more about individual's narratives has interesting consequences for a larger concern with narrative identity theory. A major concern a skeptic may

have with the narrative view is that there is little reason to believe people are accurate judges of their own behavior.  Self-deception is a well-documented phenomenon in both philosophy and psychology, as Gur and Sackheim's 1979 meta-analysis shows.[40]  Since their writing, even more evidence has arisen showing that individuals engage in self-deceiving behaviors, and that the phenomena is as complex as any other philosophical consideration.[41]  Similarly, there is strong evidence that people's memories are far less certain than we take them to be, both frequently misremembering events as well as constructing wholly false memories.[42]  I will return to how SNS may be a better source of information because of this later finding, but first I wish to respond to the trouble raised by self-deception.

For the purposes of this paper, both issues do raise concerns in the validity of the truth criterion: if people are so capable of systematically deceiving themselves, should we believe that the truth criterion holds at all?  I believe the answer is yes, though it requires some modification.  Let us recall that the purpose of the truth criterion is that there is not willful deception, along with agreement with constraints applied by physical reality.  Importantly, as Schechtman rightly identified, what we are interested in is not that the narrative is free from error, but that an effort is made for it to be so and errors are fixed when they are discovered.  There are certain types of mistakes that we may be far more tolerable towards, specifically those that do not call into question the essential features of their narrative.

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[40] Gur, R. C., & Sackeim, H. A. (1979) "Self-deception: A concept in search of a phenomenon." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37*(2), 147–169. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.2.147.

[41] For an overview of one modern view, see Funkhouser, E., & Barrett, D. (2016). "Robust, unconscious self-deception: Strategic and flexible." *Philosophical Psychology*, *29*(5), 682–696. https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/09515089.2015.1134769.

[42] For an overview of this phenomena, I suggest Brainerd, C. J., & Reyna, V. F. (2005) "*The science of false memory*." New York, NY: Oxford University Press.http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195154054.001.0001.

So, if an individual seems to profess a passion for playing guitar, and yet little evidence of them playing seems to exist we are likely to dismiss this as simply 'an odd thing to lie about.' Instead, I believe that we are far more concerned with deception that violates essential features. If instead of professing a passion, that guitar-enamored individual claimed to be a professional musician we may be far more likely to question the deception, because they are making claims about their essential features that seem to not be supported by the details of their narrative.

SNS narratives can provide a useful space for discovering such self-deception. Since the content is curated by individuals, we will be able to examine how those same individuals are thinking about themselves, including both their accurate assessments and self-deceptions. SNS offer the chance to see in a naturalistic setting how users choose to present themselves to their social networks, and combined with other tools, can compare individuals' self-constituting narratives to the stories others may tell about them to see if they are being accurately represented. This avoids the trouble of the artificiality of bringing participants into the lab but the difficulty of following individuals through their day to day lives. With permission to look at individual's SNS, there is a tremendous potential for rich detail on how the person interacts with their social network.

This is the great benefit of examining SNS narratives in a robust way- they present individuals' self-narratives as they are presented by those individuals to others. Being given access to a Facebook feed can provide nearly a decade's worth of data both on the various events of an individual's lives but also how they have chosen to present and interpret these events to others. Indeed, I believe this is another benefit of SNS even *over* other more direct self-report methods. As I noted, there is increasing evidence that the quality of our memories is far from

what we believe it to be.  SNS, especially those that have markers to track how and when an individual post may be edited do not have the same memory concerns.  Left unedited, a longtime user of a SNS has years of pictures, videos, and writing preserved exactly as they were when they were posted.  In some ways, SNS are every individual's autobiography, captured in more detail than even the most exacting of authors could ever hope to accomplish.  SNS are, so long as they are approached with caution by researchers, potentially able to reveal how users think about themselves on a scale no other study has been capable of.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have examined a number of related topics. I began with a discussion of the nature of narrative identity as defined by Schechtman's Narrative Self-Constitution View. In doing so, I elaborated on what I take to be a central tool by which individuals structure their narrative identities: essential features. These are, as I have argued, the skeletal structure from which narrative identities are constituted. These features are particularly useful for articulating narrative identities to other, as they operate on a level of generality that is easily digestible and are often the kinds of concepts that are accessible to others. I have defined these features as needing to be 'organizing' of other features in the narrative, as well as requiring a high degree of narrative presence as well as a robust presence in an individual's actual life.

After this, I have turned to a discussion of what I take to be a uniquely modern expression of narrative identity, and one that is particularly potent for researchers and theorists. I believe that the whole of an individual's SNS presence should be conceived of as an articulated form of their narrative identities, expressed using essential features. The segmented nature of posting on SNS often means it can be difficult to pick apart what is meaningful in any given post. Of course, this is a considerable interpretive project for those who are examining these posts. Along the way, I have discussed several pitfalls and possibilities I believe SNS offer to researchers. Ultimately, I believe that researchers have much to be optimistic about with SNS, and for a reason other than the ability to study thousands of individuals at once. Indeed, I believe SNS offer a chance to examine individuals with a breadth that was previously unimaginable. While it

will be a project of considerable effort, SNS will allow researchers to truly explore the whole of

an individual's narrative identity across time.

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VITA

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