

**Family Narrative Interaction  
and Children's Self-Understanding**

Jennifer G. Bohanek

Kelly A. Marin

Robyn Fivush

Marshall P. Duke

The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life  
Working Paper No. 34

2004

Abstract

Past research has shown that family interaction has a significant impact on child well-being. The purpose of the present study was to specifically examine family interaction style when talking about past events in relation to preadolescents' self-esteem and locus of control. Family narratives may be a particularly important site for children's emerging sense of self both as an individual and as a member of a unified family. Conversations that had a coordinated perspective and incorporated information from all family members, were associated with higher self-esteem, especially in girls. The conversations with an individual perspective, in which family members took turns telling their thoughts and feelings about the event without any integration across perspectives, were associated with an external locus of control, especially in boys. Surprisingly, conversations with an imposed perspective, in which one family member was in charge of the conversation or which included unpleasant exchanges between family members, were not associated with either self-esteem or locus of control in boys or girls. Implications of these narrative interaction styles for children's developing self-understanding are discussed.

### Family Narrative Interaction and Children's Self-Understanding

We experience many important and emotional events with our families, and reminiscing about these shared experiences defines who we are both within the family, and as an individual. When a family recounts the story of a shared past event, bits and pieces from each person's story are intertwined into the whole, with different family members playing different roles during the reminiscing. The ways in which these social dynamics combine to produce the one, shared story are complex, and provide a framework for each individual family member to understand and integrate shared events into their own individual life story. For adolescents, who are just developing the abilities to create coherent narratives of self (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; McAdams, 1985), the ways in which families co-construct shared experiences may play a critical role in self-understanding (Fivush, 2004; Fivush & Reese, 2000). More specifically, narratives are the way in which we make sense of our past, and provide evaluations and perspective on the self (Bruner, 1987; Fivush, 2001; Labov, 1982). Families that help their children to create mutually negotiated meaning and a validated shared perspective on past experiences may also be helping their children to develop a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. Therefore, the objectives of the present study are, first, to examine the ways in which families co-construct narratives of shared past events with their preadolescent children, and second, to determine how the process of co-constructing a narrative may influence children's emerging sense of self.

#### *Family reminiscing*

Much of the research on family reminiscing has focused on parent-child dyads with young, preschool children. Findings indicate that there are stable and consistent individual differences in parent-child reminiscing (see Nelson & Fivush, 2000, and 2004, for overviews). Parents who are highly elaborative talk more about the past overall, provide more detailed

information, ask more questions, and give more prompts and cues to engage their children in the conversation. Parents who are low-elaborative, or repetitive, tend to ask fewer questions about the past overall, and the questions are usually simple or redundant. Further, these high and low elaborative reminiscing styles are strikingly consistent across time (Reese, Haden & Fivush, 1993) and across same-sex siblings (Haden, 1998). Most important, longitudinal research has demonstrated that children of more highly elaborative parents come to tell more coherent and more detailed narratives of their own personal experience by the end of the preschool years (Farrant & Reese, 2000; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Reese et al, 1993)

Provocatively, gender differences have also been found in parent-child conversations about past events. Specifically, parents with daughters engage in more elaborative and more evaluative reminiscing than do parents with sons (Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Mennuti-Washburn & Cassidy, 2003; Reese & Fivush, 1993). As a result, daughters are more likely to be actively engaged in conversations about past events than are sons, and by middle childhood, girls are telling more detailed and more evaluative stories of their past than are boys (Buckner & Fivush, 2000). Parents also talk more about emotions, about social events, and about relationships with daughters than sons, and with development, girls come to include more of this kind of information in their own narratives than do boys (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Fivush & Buckner, 2003). The different family narrative interactions in which girls and boys engage allow for the direct socialization of gendered modes of self-understanding through reminiscing. By adolescence, girls report a more relationally oriented sense of self whereas boys report a more individuated sense of self (Gilligan, 1982; Harter, 1999).

Research on parent-child reminiscing indicates that young children are learning the structure and content of personal narratives through participating in parent-guided narrative

practices. But even more complex discussions arise when an entire family reminisces about a shared experience. How do family members decide who tells which part of the story, who is remembering the correct version of the event, for how long each family member can speak, and the order in which people contribute their respective parts?

Hirst and Manier (1996) examined how family members may assume different roles when sharing a story. They focused exclusively on one family of 4 who had recently immigrated from India. They identified three different roles that the members of the family might assume while recounting a narrative. They defined a “narrator” as the person who assumed responsibility for telling the majority of the story. The “monitor” was the family member who made sure that the events being told were true, and finally, the “mentor” gave guidance to others so that they could tell the story. When shared events were discussed, the roles assumed by the family members influenced how much each person was able to contribute of their unique perspective (e.g. narrators were able to introduce much of their information). Furthermore, each family member switched roles in different family narratives, and also varied in the strength of their role. Thus, it appears that the roles family members assume are not “fixed”, but perhaps they rely on default roles (e.g. father as mentor) (Hirst & Manier, 1996). Importantly, the roles that members assume can shape their individual identity within the family, the family stories, and thus family identity.

Moreover, through participating in family reminiscing, children learn not only how to become storytellers, but also theory-builders (Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992). In order to construct a coherent family story, each part of the story must be explained, and the members of the family may challenge what was told, they may add in different pieces, or critique and rework the current “theory” of what happened. Ochs, et al. (1992) videotaped 12 Caucasian

families (of varying socio-economic status) during dinnertime and in the evenings for about 2 weeks. Examination of the stories families told suggests that conversations of past events may serve as a model for learning to present, critique, and rebuild theories about what happened. Interestingly, these theory-building activities are influenced by how familiar the participants are with one another and/or the event being discussed. Children may feel more comfortable talking about or challenging another family member's view (as opposed to a friend's or acquaintance's view in another narrative setting) because they share much background knowledge, and are trusting and emotionally close to other family members. Further, the more familiar the family members are with the story (or the more involved they were with what happened) the more likely they are to participate in these theory-building and re-working activities. Thus, the give-and-take interactions present in family storytelling often encourage open communication, the sharing of personal perspectives, the perspective-taking of others, and critical thinking, leading to the development of coherent narratives of the past.

#### *Family narratives and resilience*

The ability to create coherent narratives of past experiences may play a pivotal role in children's resilience and well-being. Several theorists have proposed relations between narratives and well-being (e.g. Bruner, 1987; McAdams, 2001; Thorne & McLean, 2003), and much empirical research now supports the link between narrative characteristics, such as coherence and emotionality, and later well-being in adults. More specifically, researchers have found that an increase in narrative coherence over time, as well as a shift in focus to thoughts and feelings rather than concentrating on the facts, is associated with less distress and anxiety and also better physical health (Foa, Molnar & Cashman, 1995; Pennebaker, 1997). Baerger and McAdams (1999) have found that high levels of coherence in life story narratives are associated

with lower levels of depression, higher life satisfaction, and more happiness, and Fishbane (2001) discusses how shifting towards a more relational view of the self (through therapy grounded in relational narratives) can help with relationship satisfaction. Further, McAdams, et al. (2001) found that individuals whose narratives include redemption sequences, defined as events that started out in a negative manner but end positively, report high life satisfaction, high self-esteem, and low rates of depression, whereas those individuals whose narratives contain contamination sequences, defined as events that begin positively but end negatively, report exactly the opposite psychological outcomes. These studies reveal the importance of both narrative style and change over time with regard to mental and physical health.

For adolescents, who are just beginning to construct a coherent life narrative (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; McAdams, 1985), the way in which families guide them to create more coherent, and more integrated narratives may be an important factor in their developing well-being. Fiese and her colleagues (Fiese & Sameroff, 1999; Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999) have examined relations between family narratives, representations of narrative practices, and children's well-being. They found that family narratives could be characterized along the dimensions of coherence, interaction and relationship beliefs. Narrative coherence was defined as how well a story was constructed and organized and included four subcomponents including internal consistency and the congruence of affect and content. The narrative interaction component reflected the ways in which family members interacted while telling the story. The relationship beliefs component assessed how families portrayed social relationships, either as safe and reliable or as dangerous and overwhelming, as well as how willing the family was to share personal information with an interviewer. These 3 components are highly interrelated in family co-constructed narratives.

Extending these findings to child well-being, Fiese and Marjinsky (1999) found that, although the overall coherence of narrative interactions during mealtimes had little relation to children's well-being, parents' appropriate modulation of affect was linked to fewer child behavior problems. Further, style of parental interaction during reminiscing was similar to the ways in which family members interacted during mealtime (e.g. similar use of positive affect). Further, parents who reported positive relationship beliefs about their family reported that their children had fewer problems and also engaged in more positive interactions with their children at mealtimes. These results suggest that the emotional content of family narratives is linked to child well-being.

Related to this, Sales and Fivush (in press) found that mothers who used more explanations and more emotion talk when co-constructing a stressful experience with their preadolescent children had children with fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Thus there is emerging evidence that the ways in which parents discuss the past with their young adolescent children is related to child well-being. An important aspect of well-being is self-understanding, and more specifically, self-worth and self-efficacy. The way in which children understand and represent their past experiences will play an important role in their developing sense of self. Yet, to date, no one has examined relations between family narrative practices and children's self-understanding.

#### *Family communication and child self-understanding*

Although research has not examined family narratives and children's self-understanding, other specific parental patterns of communication have been linked to children's developing sense of self. In particular, open and supportive communication styles foster rich affective relationships between parents and children, which contribute to higher and more positive views

of the self (Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984; Ryan, 1993). Children who view their parents' communication as open and supportive have higher positive self-esteem than those children who perceived their parents' communication patterns as controlling and unsupportive (Blake & Slate, 1993; Enger, Howerton, & Cobbs, 2000; Kernis, Brown & Brody, 2000). In addition to open communication, family interactions that facilitate autonomy, while not sacrificing relatedness, will facilitate positive and healthy self-esteem development in preadolescents (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Conner, 1994).

Children's sense of autonomy may be related to self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, or locus of control, simply refers to whether people believe (or expect) that they have control over the events of their lives, or whether external factors (e.g. luck, fate) determine life events. Parents who are supportive, warm, and accepting facilitate an internal locus of control in their children (see Carton & Nowicki, 1994, for a review). In contrast, parental use of behavioral control is related to children's external locus of control. Children with an external locus of control report their parents to be more controlling, more likely to use physical punishment, more demanding, and more protective than children with an internal locus of control. Conversely, parents who promote independence through the use of values, rewards, and encouragement, and avoid controlling behaviors, have children with an internal locus of control. Controlling behavioral and communication patterns do not allow for children's opinions and perceptions to be acknowledged, thus causing children to question their value and worth as a person, as well as their ability to be effective agents in the world. Parental communication that is clearly validating, and that acknowledges perceptions and feelings of the child, allow for a sense of value and worth of the individual self, as well as feelings of autonomy and self-efficacy.

The issues of autonomy and relatedness may also be linked to gender. Male's sense of worth and value is closely connected to feelings of individuality and autonomy, while females emphasize relatedness and connection with others (Harter, 1999). Block and Robbins (1993) found that the ability to communicate and relate to others promotes positive self-esteem in females, whereas the lack of personal involvement and emotion was linked to higher self-esteem in males. Therefore, it seems likely that different patterns of familial communication, emphasizing and integrating family member's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives could relate to self-esteem differently for boys and girls.

In terms of family reminiscing, families that communicate openly, eliciting and acknowledging individual member's opinions, thoughts and perspectives will likely facilitate higher self-esteem, especially in girls, and a more internal locus of control. In contrast, family reminiscing in which the child's perspective is not valued and integrated into the whole, and in which family members do not share their past in openly communicative fashion, would lead to both lower self-esteem and more external locus of control in their children. Moreover these processes may be particularly critical in early adolescence when children are just beginning to construct coherent life narratives (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; McAdams, 1985), and are forming more mature and enduring concepts of self (Harter, 1999).

#### *Objectives of the present study*

In summary, research on family reminiscing indicates stable individual differences in the ways in which families co-construct narratives of their shared past. Narrative co-construction may be a particularly critical site for children's developing sense of self, both as an individual and as a member of the family. Narratives create meaning and provide perspective on our past and on our lives, and thus are clearly related to self-understanding. Yet, to date there is no

research examining family narrative co-construction and children's self-understanding. Thus the two major objectives of this research are, first, to explore and describe patterns of family narrative interaction, and, second, to relate these patterns to children's self-understanding as measured by self-esteem and locus of control. We predict that families who narrate past events in a collaborative, emotionally open, and connected manner will have children who show higher self-esteem and a more internal locus of control than families who discuss the past in more disconnected, emotionally unsupportive, and disconnected ways.

## Method

### *Participants*

The present study is part of a larger, longitudinal project on family narratives, family functioning, and child well-being. Forty two-parent middle-class families were recruited and visited in their homes. Families were recruited through a variety of methods, including a radio advertisement, a newspaper ad, and summer sports camps (e.g. tennis, baseball). Of the 40 families, 33 were identified as dual-earner and 7 as single-earner. All of the families had a child between the ages of 9-12, 20 with sons and 20 with daughters. Most families had additional children as well; the majority of families had a total of two children, with a range of 1 to 6 children. Twenty-nine of the families self-identified as Caucasian, 6 as African or African-American, and 5 self-identified as mixed-race. Thirty of the families were a traditional nuclear family, 8 were blended families, and 2 were extended families with at least one additional adult living with them. The family was compensated for their time with \$25 and the child was given two movie ticket vouchers. Only the procedures and measures relevant to this particular study will be discussed

### *Procedures*

One of 4 researchers (3 female and 1 male) visited each family in their home and asked them to discuss a positive and negative event that they had experienced together as a family. After the narratives were completed, the preadolescent target child also filled out questionnaires regarding self-understanding.

The families were asked to select one specific positive event and one specific negative event that had taken place in the past 2-3 years that everyone had experienced together. Once the families chose the events, they were asked to discuss the event in as natural a manner as possible, as though it had come up in conversation. The researcher then either left the room, or moved to an inconspicuous corner of the room, to minimize his or her influence on the conversation. The families were not given any time limits for the event conversations, and were asked to move to the next event when they had finished the first (event order was counterbalanced across families). Most families engaged in this reminiscing task for approximately 20 minutes, ranging from about 10 to 30 minutes. Conversations were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

### *Measures*

*The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)* (Rosenberg, 1965). The 10 item RSE scale is designed to measure feelings of self-worth. Items are answered on a four-point scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) with higher scores indicative of higher self-esteem. Sample items include, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”, and “I feel I do not have much to be proud of”. The scale generally has high reliability: test-retest correlations are typically in the range of .82 to .88 and Cronbach’s alpha for various samples are in the range of .77 to .88. The RSE is associated with many self-esteem related constructs, such as confidence and popularity. Furthermore, considerable discriminant validity has also been demonstrated for the RSE.

*Children's Nowicki Strickland Locus of Control Scale (Ages 9- 18)* (Nowicki & Duke, 1974). This 40 item scale was designed to assess a child's locus of control. Children with higher scores (indicative of an external locus of control) tend to believe that what happens to them is the results of luck, fate, or forces beyond their control. Conversely, those with lower scores (internal locus of control) tend to believe that they have some degree of control as to what happens to them. Items from the CNSIE include, "Are some kids just born lucky?", and "Do you often feel that whether you do your homework has much to do with the kind of grades you get?". Extensive research demonstrates high reliability and validity for the ANSIE and the CNSIE (see Duke & Nowicki, 1973; Nowicki & Duke, 1974; Nowicki & Strickland, 1973.)

#### *Coding family narratives*

We were particularly interested in the family style of interaction while co-constructing shared narratives. Based on previous research (Fiese et al. 1999) and inspection of the narratives, we developed 5 dimensions along which the narrative interactions varied: collaborative, child-centered, disconnected, facilitated-moderated, and disharmonious (see Table 1). Each narrative was coded on each of these dimensions on a 0-3 scale (0 = style was not present at all in the conversation, 3 = the interaction style was dominant in the story).

In collaborative interactions family members all added different pieces to the story and expanded on what others contributed, resulting in a more integrated, complex, and rich narrative than any of the individuals could have told alone. Narratives with child-centered interactions contained many prompts, cues, and questions directed towards the children. Importantly, the parents already knew the answers to the questions; they were trying to solicit responses from the children. Families that engaged in more disconnected interactions took turns telling their part of the story, and listened to what the other family members had to say before beginning to speak

their turn. They did not build upon or elaborate on what other members had said. Narratives dominated by facilitated-moderated interactions had one parent that directed the conversation. The parent chose the topics that were discussed, and asked other members of the family pointed, leading questions to draw out the desired information. Finally, disharmonious exchanges indicated that family members were disconnected from one another, or did not have a shared understanding of the event. This could be portrayed by not accepting assertions of emotions, name-calling, or lecturing to the children.

Two coders independently listened to each audiotaped conversation while simultaneously reading through the transcription, and scored each narrative on each dimension. Across the 5 dimensions, raters agreed 93% of the time for both positive and negative events (range from 88% to 98%). Disagreements were within one point an additional 6% of the time, with disagreements of 2 points or more occurring only 1% of the time. All disagreements were then resolved through discussion.

## Results

### *Narrative interaction style*

Our first set of analyses focused on describing the patterns of narrative interaction among families. In order to place these analyses in context, Table 2 describes the types of positive and negative events that the families chose to discuss. As can be seen, the overwhelming majority of positive events discussed were family vacations. Negative events were more variable, with most families discussing deaths or illnesses, but many families selecting conflicts or family moves.

All narratives were coded along the 5 dimensions described in the methods section; Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for each dimension for positive and negative event conversations. In general, families were highly child-centered but also disconnected.

Collaboration was moderate, and the facilitated-moderated and disharmonious dimensions were quite low. Moreover, families were consistent in their narrative interaction styles across the positive and negative events, as can be seen by the pattern of significant correlations displayed on Table 3.

In order to determine inter-relations among these dimensions, correlations were computed among the 5 interaction dimensions for the positive and negative events separately (see Table 4). The patterns of correlations suggested that some of the interaction dimensions were closely related and others were not. Therefore we conducted a cluster analysis to determine higher order levels of interactional style. Cluster analysis is a statistical technique that allows for the detection of higher levels of relationship among variables. More specifically, cluster analysis examines whether variability along one dimension is related to variability along other dimensions, and then combines these dimensions into a higher-level cluster. Thus it is similar to factor analysis, except that it makes no assumptions about number of cases or distribution of variability. Cluster analyses were initially computed for positive and negative events separately, but because the resulting clusters were identical, a final cluster analysis was conducted across positive and negative event discussions.

This analysis revealed three higher-order clusters (see Table 1). First, the disconnected and child-centered styles clustered to form an “individual perspective” style. In the disconnected exchanges, family members each take their turn expressing their views and emotions surrounding the events, but there is no integration of thoughts and feelings across family members. Similarly, in the child-centered conversations, parents ask the children for their thoughts and feelings surrounding the events, but there is very little discussion of how the parents felt about the events, and there is also very little integration of facts and emotions across

all members of the family. Thus, this cluster seems to describe families that focus on creating individual perspectives on the past event.

Second, the facilitated/moderated and disharmonious styles clustered to form an “imposed perspective” style. Clearly, in conversations exhibiting the facilitated/moderated style, one parent is imposing his or her perspective of the event onto the other members of the family by directing who should talk, and what they should talk about. Similarly, in the disharmonious exchanges, name-calling, negation of emotions, and lecturing serves to discount the perspective of one person and to impose the perspective of another.

The “collaborative” dimension was the only dimension that did not cluster with other dimensions, and was renamed “coordinated perspective”. These exchanges were different from all of the other types in that these conversations integrate the emotions, thoughts, and feelings of all the family members present, and all of the family members add to the story – making the story more complete and complex than if told by any one member alone. Families who engaged in these conversations accepted these co-constructions of past events as a shared perspective of what actually took place.

#### *Narrative interaction style and child self-understanding*

Children’s self-understanding was measured by self-esteem (the RSE) and locus of control (LOC). Means and standard deviations on these measures are shown in Table 5 by gender. Overall, children showed high levels of self-esteem and relatively external locus of control. However, these locus of control scores are in line with population norms on this scale for children this age (Nowicki & Duke, 1974). Independent *t*-tests confirmed no differences between boys and girls in either self-esteem or locus of control.

To determine relations between family interaction style and child self-understanding, Pearson correlations were computed between each interaction style and child RSE and LOC scores (see Table 6). There was a suggestion that more coordinated perspective narrative interactions were associated with higher levels of child self-esteem, and more individual perspective narrative interactions were significantly associated with a more external locus of control in children.

Because previous research suggests gender differences in self-understanding, we computed correlations between narrative interaction and self-understanding for boys and girls separately (see Table 6). Coordinated perspective narrative interactions were significantly related to higher self-esteem in girls, but not boys. In contrast, individual perspective narrative interactions were significantly associated with a more external locus of control in boys, but not girls.

### Discussion

The major objectives of this study were to examine differences in family narrative interaction styles during the co-construction of shared past events, and, further, to examine how these differences may relate to preadolescents' self understanding. During the co-construction of family narratives, children and adults create a shared meaning of an experience as well as a personal meaning. Through this meaning-making process, children learn their role in the family as well as who they are as an individual. Our results suggest that the type of interaction style a family engages in during the co-construction of family narratives relates to preadolescent's self-understanding. Specifically our results yielded three types of family narrative interaction styles: coordinated perspective, individual perspective, and imposed perspective, and these styles were consistent across family reminiscing about both highly positive and negative experiences. To

illustrate these differences, excerpts of these differing styles are presented in the appendix.

Moreover, families that engaged in a coordinated perspective style had children, especially girls, who had higher self-esteem, and families that engaged in an individual perspective style had children, especially boys, with a more external locus of control.

Turning first to the narrative interaction styles, some families engaged in creating a coordinated perspective on the past event. During these conversations, several perspectives are taken and, most importantly, these different perspectives are integrated for a more complex understanding of one's own perspective, the perspective of others, and the integration of the self with others. Families using a coordinated narrative interaction style teach their children that they are part of a unified, cohesive family that understands and works through positive and negative experiences together. This narrative interaction style is closely tied to the notion of story-telling as theory building, as described by Ochs and her colleagues (Ochs et al, 1992). Specifically, children's opinions are acknowledged by other family members and children's perspectives are integrated into the evolving theory of what occurred, which is recognized by the family as the shared family story. Through the process of integrating children's perspectives, families using a coordinated perspective style provide a safe and comfortable environment for children to tell their perspectives, thus creating interconnectedness as a whole family as well as recognizing the individual value of the child. Because children's perspectives are validated and integrated, their self-esteem is high.

Provocatively, coordinated perspective taking during family reminiscing is more highly related to self-esteem for girls than for boys. Previous literature suggests there are gender differences in what contributes to girls' and boys' self-understanding (Oppenshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984; Ryan, 1993). Specific to identity, girls value relatedness and connectedness,

whereas boys value autonomy and independence (Gilligan, 1982; Harter, 1999), and these differences may be particularly pronounced in early adolescence as children first begin to form a more enduring sense of self (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; McAdams, 1985). These emerging gender differences are at least partly the result of early socialization practices, including gender differences in parent-child reminiscing during the preschool years. Because parents emphasize emotions, relationships and social connectedness more when reminiscing with preschool daughters than with preschool sons (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1996; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996), girls may be learning to value these aspects of their experiences to a greater extent than boys. By early adolescence, families that emphasize relatedness through the construction of a shared perspective on the past seem to facilitate higher self-esteem in daughters to a greater extent than in sons. It is possible that self-esteem in preadolescent boys is tied more to domains outside of the family, such as academics and athletics (e.g., Harter, 1999).

The second narrative interaction style we identified is an individual perspective style. Families who predominately use this narrative interaction style attempt to elicit information from their children by the use of questions; most often, each family member takes a turn telling their own individual story and point of view. However, unlike the coordinated interaction style, these families do not integrate the individual perspectives into a unified theory of what occurred, or shared family story. Children of these families are not exposed to a cohesive, unitary collaborative narrative, but rather individual turn-taking. Although children have the opportunity to give their point of view, their perspective is not validated by other family members. In the absence of validation and shared meaning-making, these children may come to understand their perspective as one among many possible perspectives, but not necessarily as an appropriate or effective way of viewing the world. Thus, we see relations between the individual perspective

narrative interaction style and children's external locus of control. Again, this was related to gender, such that the individual perspective style was especially related to boys' external locus of control. It is not clear why this relation held for boys only.

Finally, the third narrative interaction style identified was an imposed perspective style. Families that use imposed perspective typically contain one parent who dominates family conversation, often to the point that the parent ignores other family members' opinions. In many cases these narratives resemble a parental lecture with complaints and put-downs offered by multiple family members. Families using this style appear to be both controlling and unsupportive; they do not acknowledge children's individual viewpoints, and they certainly do not strive to create shared meaning through a coordinated perspective. Surprisingly, this style is unrelated to both self-esteem and locus of control. Previous literature on parental communication would suggest that this type of controlling and unsupportive family interaction would relate to low self-esteem and high external locus of control (Carton & Nowicki, 1994; Openshaw et al, 1993). However, it should be noted that the imposed perspective was relatively rare in these families, and the lack of relations to children's self-understanding may be due to the low occurrence and little variability in this interaction style in our sample

In general, this study was limited by a small sample size and high homogeneity among the families. Our families were all middle class and well-adjusted, and variability was generally low across all measures. Future studies should examine a larger and more varied group of families. Specifically, it would be extremely interesting to examine family narrative interaction styles among families with at-risk adolescents. Still, even given the homogeneity of our sample, we found distinct patterns of family narrative interactions, such that some families engaged in more collaborative and coordinated perspective taking during reminiscing, whereas other

families engaged in more individuated or even imposed perspective taking during reminiscing. Further these styles were related to adolescents' sense of self. Our results point to the importance of family narratives as a critical site for meaning-making and self-understanding.

References

- Allen, J.P., Hauser, S.T., Bell, K.L., & O'Connor, T.G. (1994). Longitudinal assessment of autonomy and relatedness in adolescent-family interactions as predictors of adolescent ego development and self-esteem. *Child Development, 65*, 179-194.
- Baerger, D.R., & McAdams, D.P. (1999). Life story coherence and its relation to psychological well-being. *Narrative Inquiry, 9*, 69-96.
- Blake, P.C. & Slate, J.R. (1993). Parental verbal communication: Impact on adolescent self-esteem. *National Association for School Psychologists Communique, 22*, 21-22.
- Block, J.H., & Robbins, R.W. (1993). A longitudinal study of consistency and change in self-esteem from early adolescence to early adulthood. *Child Development, 64*, 909-923.
- Bluck, S. & Hamermas T. (2000). The Life Story Schema. *Motivation and Emotion, 24*, 121-147.
- Bruner, J. (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research, 54*, 11-32.
- Buckner, J., & Fivush, R. (2000). Gendered themes in family reminiscing. *Memory, 8*, 401-412.
- Carton, J.S., & Nowicki, S., Jr. (1994). Antecedents of individual differences in locus of control of reinforcement: A critical review. *Genetic, Social, & General Psychology Monographs, 120*. 31-81.
- Duke, M. P., & Nowicki, S., Jr., (1973). Personality correlates of the Nowicki-Strickland locus of control for adults. *Psychological Reports, 33*, 267-270.
- Enger, J.M., Howerton, D.L., & Cobbs, C.R. (2001). Internal/External locus of control, self-esteem, and parental verbal interaction of at-risk black male adolescents. *Journal of Social Psychology, 134*, 269-274.

- Farrant, K., & Reese, E. (2000). Maternal style and children's participation in reminiscing: Stepping stones in children's autobiographical memory development. *Journal of Cognition & Development, 1*, 192-225.
- Fiese, B., & Marjinsky, K. (1999). Dinnertime stories: Connecting family practices with relationship beliefs and child adjustment. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 64*(2, Pt. 3), 52-68.
- Fiese, B., & Sameroff, A. (1999). The family narrative consortium: A multidimensional approach to narratives. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 64*(2, Pt. 1), 1-36.
- Fishbane, M. (2001). Relational narratives of the self. *Family Process, 40*, 273-292.
- Fivush, R. (2001). Owning experience: The development of subjective perspective in autobiographical memory. In C. Moore & K. Lemmon (Eds.). *The self in time: Developmental perspective* (pp. 35-52). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fivush, R. (2004). Voice and silence: A feminist model of autobiographical memory. In J. Lucariello, J.A. Hudson, R. Fivush, & P.J. Bauer (Eds.). *The mediated mind: Sociocultural context and cognitive development* (pp. 79-100). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fivush, R., Berlin, L.J., Sales, J.M., Mennuti-Washburn, J., & Cassidy, J. (2003). Functions of parent-child reminiscing about emotionally negative events. *Memory*,
- Fivush, R., & Buckner, J.P. (2003). Creating gender and identity through autobiographical narratives. In R. Fivush & C. Haden (Eds.) *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self: Developmental and cultural perspectives* (pp. 149-169). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Foa, E.B., Molnar, C., & Cashman, L. (1995). Change in rape narratives during exposure therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 8*, 675-690.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and woman's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Haden, C. (1998). Reminiscing with different children: Relating maternal stylistic consistency and sibling similarity in talk about the past. *Developmental Psychology, 34*, 99-114.
- Harter, S. (1999). *The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Hirst, W., & Manier, D. (1996). Remembering as communication: A family recounts its past. In D. Rubin (Ed.), *Remembering our past: Studies in autobiographical memory* (pp. 271-290). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Kernis, M.H., Brown, A.C., & Brody, G.H. (2000). Fragile self-esteem in children and its associations with perceived patterns of parent-child communication. *Journal of Personality, 68*, 225-252.
- Labov, W. (1982). Speech actions and reaction in personal narrative. In D. Tannen (Ed.) *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- McAdams, D.P. (1985). *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- McAdams, D.P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*, 100-122.
- McCabe, A., & Peterson, C. (1991). Getting the story: A longitudinal study of parental styles in eliciting narratives and developing narrative skill. In A. McCabe, & C. Peterson (Eds.).

- Developing narrative structure* (pp. 217-253). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nelson, K., & Fivush, R. (2000). Socialization of memory. In E. Tulving and F. Craik (Eds.). *The Oxford handbook of memory*. (pp. 283-295).
- Nelson, K., & Fivush, R. (2004). The emergence of autobiographical memory: A socio-cultural developmental theory. *Psychological Review*.
- Nowicki, S., Jr., & Duke, M.P. (1974). A locus of control scale for college as well as non-college adults. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 38, 136-137.
- Nowicki, S., Jr., & Strickland, B. R. (1973). A locus of control scale for children. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 40, 148-154.
- Ochs, E., Taylor, C., Rudolph, D., & Smith, R. (1992). Storytelling as a theory-building activity. *Discourse Processes*, 15, 37-72.
- Oppenshaw, D.K., Thomas, D.L., & Rollins, B.C. (1984). Parental influences of adolescent self-esteem. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 4, 259-274.
- Pennebaker, J.W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychological Science*, 8, 162-166.
- Reese, E., & Fivush, R. (1993). Parental styles of talking about the past. *Developmental Psychology*, 29, 596-606.
- Reese, E., Haden, C., & Fivush, R. (1993). Mother-child conversations about the past: Relationships of style and memory over time. *Cognitive Development*, 8, 403-430.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ryan, R.M. (1993). Control and information in the interpersonal sphere: An extension of cognitive evaluation theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43, 450-461.

Sales, J.M., & Fivush, R. (in press). Social and emotional functions of mother-child conversations about stressful events. *Social Cognition*.

Thorne, A., & McLean, K.C. (2003). Telling traumatic events in adolescence: A study of master narrative positioning. In R. Fivush & C. Haden (Eds.), *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a life narrative: Developmental and cultural perspectives*.

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Table 1. *Family Narrative Interaction Styles*

Interaction Style	Collaborative	Child-Centered	Disconnected	Facilitated/Moderated	Disharmonious
Description	The narrative unfolds as the family members each add small bits of information; the narrative is being told by all the participants simultaneously, as if they are all of one mind.	Parents try to elicit information from the children by asking leading questions, prompting them, and giving them cues.	Family members take turns telling the story, each telling their own point of view.	The conversation is moderated and facilitated primarily by one parent.	Family members appear to be disconnected, are not like-minded, and/or don't have a shared understanding of events.
Indicators	Family members finish each others sentences, say the same thing simultaneously, or interrupt without changing the topic.	The conversation is dominated by questions from parents and responses by the children.	Family members listen to each other and are allowed to finish their own thoughts without interruption.	A single moderator initiates topics, chooses speakers, gives extended monologues, or ignores other family member's input.	Mild disagreements, denial of feelings, little shared affect, put-downs, complaining, and parental lecturing.
Combined Styles	"Coordinated Perspective"	"Individual Perspective"		"Imposed Perspective"	



Table 2. *Description of events.*

	Number of Families	Percentage of Families
<i>Positive Events</i>		
Family vacations	31	78%
Sibling birth	3	8%
Sports/tournaments	3	8%
Visits to/from relatives	2	5%
Ceremony	1	1%
<i>Negative Events</i>		
Death of friend/family	12	30%
Death of pet	8	20%
Child's illness/injury	5	13%
Accident/disaster	5	13%
Family conflict	3	8%
Move to new city	3	8%
Mishap during vacation	3	8%

Table 3. Mean scores for each family interaction style within positive and negative event narratives, and correlations across event type.

	Positive Event Score	Negative Event Score	Correlation between pos and neg scores
<i>Interaction Style</i>			
Collaborative	1.35	.73	.56**
Child-Centered	2.17	2.07	.49**
Disconnected	2.05	2.13	.52**
Facilitated/Moderated	.12	.20	.54**
Disharmonious	.10	.30	.43**

+ =  $p < .10$

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

Table 4. *Spearman correlations among interaction styles: Correlations among positive event interaction styles above diagonal, correlations among negative event interaction styles below diagonal*

	Collaborative	Child-Centered	Disconnected	Facilitated/ Moderated	Disharmonious
Collaborative	_____	-.37*	-.09	-.33*	-.02
Child-Centered	-.30+	_____	-.33*	.08	.09
Disconnected	.08	-.46**	_____	-.03	.16
Facilitated/ Moderated	-.21	-.07	-.22	_____	-.08
Disharmonious	.02	-.32*	.11	-.01	_____

+ =  $p < .10$

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

Table 5. Means (standard deviations) for Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory and Locus of Control

	All Children	Boys	Girls
RSE scale range 10-40	32.31 (3.92)	32.58 (3.85)	32.05 (4.07)
LOC scale range 0-40	13.5 (5.31)	13.2 (5.65)	13.8 (5.06)

Table 6. *Correlations between Clustered Interaction Styles and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory and Locus of Control*

	<i>Rosenberg Self-Esteem</i>			<i>Locus of Control</i>		
	All kids	Boys	Girls	All kids	Boys	Girls
Coordinated Perspective	.27+	.10	.45*	-.14	-.19	-.07
Individual Perspective	-.12	-.28	.11	.34*	.51*	.06
Imposed Perspective	.03	.10	-.08	-.12	-.25	.09

+ =  $p < .10$

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

Appendix

Sample excerpts of family narrative interaction styles

Excerpt 1: Coordinated perspective:

In this excerpt, the mother and target child (TC) are discussing the time the younger sister burnt her hands on some grits that were sitting on the table (< > indicates overlapping talk). Both mother and child interweave their contributions to the emerging story, creating a coordinated perspective of what happened:

TC: And um so there w- were these gr-grits Gabriella (younger sibling) was gonna eat for  
breakfast and so and, and um <so

Mom: They> were sitting on the table.

TC: So, they were very hot and then,

Mom: I guess, well Auntie Mona had Michael put them in the microwave. <They were  
those instant (unintelligible) microwaves.

TC: And > sh-she, I think she overcooked them.

TC: So they were very <hot,

Mom: She> was letting them cool off.

TC: And then and she was letting them cool off, and I had a um, magnifying glass and I  
um there was, they had the light and so it was under the light and I put the  
magnifying glass, um right on the um, on the <um

Mom: over> the bowl, the grits,

TC: over the bowl and for um, a couple of seconds and then David called me downstairs  
and, and um,

Mom: And then she

TC: and then she accidentally

Mom: and then she <um

TC: touched it>

#### Excerpt 2: Individual perspective

In this excerpt, the father, the target child (TC) and a sibling (Sib) are discussing a family vacation. The father questions both the target child and the younger sibling, who respond to his questions, but no integration of either of their perspectives is provided, nor does either parent provide their own perspective on the event.

Dad: Was it a vacation or was it something you had to do?

TC: Vacation.

Dad: So what do you remember about the trip out there?

TC: <Uh...

Sib: That we would have to run around and eat some French-fries.

Dad: That's all you remember that you ate some French-fries <and...

Sib: We went scuba diving.

Dad: You went scuba diving.

TC: And then we got to get really close to fish and we got to um, we went down water slides on tubes.

#### Excerpt 3: Imposed perspective

In this excerpt, the father imposes his version of the story of the target child's success at baseball. Although he questions the son, and the son responds, the father restates and reinterprets the son's contributions to fit his own perspective on the event.

Dad: ...And what was remarkable about the experience for us is that (target child) was unknown, untested and new at this. And what position did you start off uh batting order?

TC: Uh, second?

Mom: <No, no, no.

Dad: No, no, no.> At the beginning of the year, what..?

TC: Eighth.

Dad: Eighth. You were eighth batting order, which means you were one of the worst hitters there. And then how did you move up during the year?

Mom: By hitting. (Laughs) <By hitting the ball.

TC: Uh, the best>, then to second.

Dad: Second.

TC: Then back to second.

Dad: Then back to second. And, in the beginning of the year, you started off playing what position?

TC: Left field.

Dad: And then what position did you finish at the end of the year?

TC: First base.

Dad: First base! From the outfield to the infield and from eighth in the batting order to second.