

“Today I...”: Ritual and Spontaneous Narratives During Family Dinners

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Every night across countless dinner tables, families retell both their impromptu day-to-day stories and more familiar shared narratives. Family dinnertime has recently gained recognition across many disciplines for the positive child outcomes with which it is associated, in both academic and behavioral spheres. Of course, there are many aspects of family dinnertime that are likely factors in child development. For example, the ritualization of dinnertime provides regular, sacred family time, emphasizing the importance of family, and also reinforces both individual and family identity through family conversation (Duke et al, 2003). Family knowledge seems to have an important role in the formation of a self-autobiography and identity (McAdams, 1989); yet dinnertime narrative conversation, in which we expect valuable family and individual information to be communicated, remains largely unstudied. Therefore, the nature of my research is exploratory. I will provide both quantitative and qualitative descriptions of family dinner narratives in an effort to describe the essence and diversity of family dinner conversations.

Recognizing the importance of family mealtimes

In 2001, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) and Coca-Cola teamed up to launch an annual “Family Day”: the fourth Monday in September when the government deemed families should make an extra effort to eat together. President George W. Bush, 35 state governors, and the Mayor of Washington D.C. officiated the day in 2002, and over 15 National Organizations endorsed and promoted it. The guidelines for celebrating Family Day are to: “Eat dinner together. During dinner, turn off the TV and talk and listen to each other.

Involve the entire family in planning and cooking the meal,” (CASA, 2003). Families from any older generation would surely laugh at a government-issued annual family dinner prescription; the helpful guidelines and fifteen tips on how to enjoy family meals on a regular basis are as absurd to some as a manual instructing Americans on how to get dressed. And yet, family dinnertime is what CASA studies and other research have determined is the most important negative predictor of a child’s likelihood to smoke, drink, use illegal drugs, experiment with sex at a young age, or get into fights. In light of family dinnertime’s importance, it becomes all the more important to address because it’s on its way to extinction.

The CASA study (2003) also found that children who have regular family mealtime are at lower risk for suicidal thoughts and are more likely to do better in school. Teens that have frequent family dinners are more likely to be emotionally content, to work harder and perform better in school, to have positive peer relationships, and to have healthier eating habits. Additionally, teens that have family meals have lower stress and report less boredom, both factors which correlate significantly with substance abuse: high stress teens are twice as likely as low stress teens to smoke, drink, get drunk and use illegal drugs. Teens who are often bored are 50% more likely than teens who are not often bored to smoke, drink, get drunk, and use illegal drugs. These results hold true regardless of the teen’s gender, family structure, or family’s socioeconomic level (CASA, 2003).

All of these teen health statistics are important because each year family mealtime is becoming a more and more obsolete tradition. Hofferth and Sandberg (2001a, 2001b) used data from the 1997 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income

Dynamics to examine how American children under age 13 spend their time, and how their time in each activity has changed. Time spent in structured sports and schoolwork doubled, while free time, unstructured outdoor activities, and playtime significantly declined. In family activities, Hofferth and Sandberg identified mealtime as a likely important correlate of children's well-being; more specifically, mealtime was found to be the single strongest correlate of academic achievement scores and low rates of behavioral problems, regardless of race, gender, education, age of parents, income, or family size. Mealtime was a more powerful predictor of these child outcomes than time spent in school, studying, at church, or playing sports. Time spent in meals at home is likely to be associated with a more stable, organized family life.

Hofferth and Sandberg (2001b) posit that the beneficial effects of family dinnertime could be because parents and children are able to discuss what happened during the day. Over all ages, the amount of time spent engaged in household conversations dropped 33% from 1981 to 1997, from 53 minutes to 35 minutes per day (Hofferth, 2001a). Specifically, children ages 9-12 years old lost half of their daily household conversation time, going from 53 minutes in 1981 to an average of 27 minutes in 1997. One additional conversation during a mealtime has the potential to double their conversation time for a whole day. Cheal (1988) recognizes that modern family ties are constrained by hectic lifestyles and asserts that family relationships become somewhat voluntary unless there is a purposive commitment. Thus, family dinner defines and simultaneously reinforces the kinship network.

Ritual and meaning-making

Rituals, or “patterned family interactions” (Wolin & Bennett, 1984), make up core behaviors of family life that create and simultaneously reinforce a family’s sense of who they are (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Haines, 1988; Imber-Black, 1989; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Ritual interaction influences awareness of a familial collective loyalty and a jointly constructed, shared reality (Wolin and Bennett, 1984), reaffirms family bonds (Troll, 1988) and verifies emotional attachment (Cheal, 1988). Dinnertime is one such ritual. As it evolves with the family, dinnertime continues to maintain and reflect the family’s unique patterns of interaction and organization (Fiese, 1995; Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Ritual plays a vital role in family development, not only in organizing behavior within the family but also in defining and clarifying rules, boundaries, and roles (Bennett, Wolin & McAvity, 1988). Families with children, regardless of their configuration, have identities that are represented and perpetuated by rituals.

Routines, which might include mealtimes and bedtime routines, are the most frequent of ritualized interactions in the family, and tend to develop spontaneously. Routines seem to be especially important during the early stages of parenthood because they help to define roles and responsibilities (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993; Wolin and Bennett, 1984). David Haines (1988) observed that highly ritualized family functioning is a certain phase in the household’s developmental cycle, and that elaboration of ritual seems to increase with marriage length and number of children. The more patterned interactions families employ, the higher the ratings of overall family adjustment and the mother’s perception of her parenting competence (Sprunger, Boyce & Gaines, 1985). Routines also play vital roles in family socialization by communicating

attitudes, values, and norms important to the family, thus reinforcing family roles, highlighting power variables, reflecting family rules, and revealing parental philosophy of discipline (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973). Through rituals of patterned interaction, individuals solidify the aspect of individual identity that grows out of the family identity (Wolin and Bennett, 1984), and enhance feelings of safety and belonging, both in the family and in the culture (van der Hart, 1983).

Clearly, regular and frequent family mealtime has beneficial outcomes for children. Something happens at the dinner table besides eating which influences a child's behavior in non-familial spheres. What happens when a family gathers around the table at the end of a day? Is it the content of the conversation that's important, or is it just the existence of the conversation? I posit that both are important; however, the narratives that occur at the family dinner table are especially essential for family members to process, review, and gain validation for the events that are discussed. Narratives serve to affirm and reinforce the individual and shared histories of family members. At the same time, telling our narratives within a family context strengthens the network of support that members need to make meaning of their lives.

The family narrative and its construction

A "family" is composed of a group of individuals, each with their own personality. But when members come together, a new "sum" personality emerges, and exists in full only when all members are present. The family whole becomes bigger than the sum of its individual parts, and assumes an identity and personality all unto its own. Individuals seem to take on different roles and behaviors than when they are separate from their family. The stability and coherence of a family resides in the coordinated

behaviors of the whole, a relationship which affects every domain of life, from the forming of new relationships to coping with a family crisis or stressor (Sameroff & Fiese, 1999).

Family narratives elicited by researchers in an interview provide a rich view of a family's self-representation of relationships. They also convey a family's major affective themes. Sherman (1990) suggests that illuminating multigenerational emotional patterns has therapeutic benefits, for both emotional continuity and a reconstructed picture of the family's narrative past. An absence of family stories seems to indicate a parent's difficulty in establishing a comfortable relationship with their own child.

Family narratives also appear to affect children's cognitive skill development. Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith (1992) assert that co-narration and joint construction of everyday events among family members fosters and refines sociocognitive and sociolinguistic skills, abilities which translate to other realms of life. Storytelling among familiars, they found, provides a rehearsal for intellectual skills that are later played out in settings like formal schooling. Specifically, they assert that family storytelling functions as a locus for the cultivation of theory engagement, including perspective-taking, metacognition, analytic and critical thinking, and theory reconstruction (Ochs et al., 1992). Additionally, Fivush, Haden, & Reese (1995) stress that narrative co-construction establishes a shared history from the interpersonal bonds created through joint remembering. Family dinnertime is often one of the few routine places where a family can be together and engage in narration. Other potential venues are carpooling, bedtime routines, and family car trips, but often these settings don't include all members or aren't as regular as mealtimes.

Fiese and Marjinsky (1999) examined how family representations are related to practices, which are related to child behavior. They propose that the act of storytelling, including how the family works together to create a story and how the family interacts with the social world, serves to reinforce the shared values of the family and to support interaction patterns evident across settings (Fiese and Marjinsky, 1999). Ochs et al. (1992) argued that family storytelling is a site for the socialization of self and other. Retelling and re-working narratives serve to explain and clarify to all members, and co-construction encourages perspective-taking, critical thinking, theory-building, and relationship roles within the family.

Storytelling is not singularly constructed; in fact it is an “interactionally achieved discourse and sense-making activity,” (Ochs et al., 1992, p. 38). In family activities, such as dinnertime and carpools, children are audience to and direct contributors in jointly produced narratives, engaging in the basic processes of “scientific discourse and thought,” or linguistic, social, and cognitive structures and practices that allow co-narrators to construct and evaluate explanations of events (Ochs et al., 1992, p. 40). Ochs et al. videotaped the dinnertimes of twelve families and found theory positing, challenging, and redrafting through co-narration in their conversations. Ochs et al. also believe that having a shared background and interpersonal bonds of trust and affect help facilitate and may propel cognitive skills, whereas more removed social relationships may inhibit the development of these skills.

While a narrative is most basically the happenings of an event, a “good” narrative generally goes beyond the factual story by adding meaning and coherence (Haden, 2003). It features orienting information (including background information and connections to

other events), thus setting it in a larger social context, and evaluative information that conveys why the event was memorable and important. As children age and both their command of the language and general knowledge about the structure of events improve, they become better at telling a narrative on their own. They progress from choppy, adult-guided response descriptions to longer, more complex and self-supported narratives (Fivush et al., 1995; Eisenberg, 1985). Throughout development, much variation still persists. Maternal narrative construction plays a key role in the extent that a child's own narrative construction skill, and consequently their ability to make sense of their experiences, develops. Haden, Haine & Fivush (1997) found in a longitudinal study that mothers who emphasized evaluating while reminiscing with their children at 40 months had children who put greater emphasis on evaluation during individual narratives at 70 months. Mothers who provide more orienting information have children who also provide more orienting information (Fivush, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1992, 1994). These larger implications of different parent elaboration styles are important: children are developing the ability to represent and make sense of their experiences and themselves. References to the thoughts, beliefs, and desires of participants in a past event's narrative can enable a child to interpret other's actions and coordinate different perspectives (Haden, 2003).

Tessler and Nelson (1994) conducted a study with 4-year-olds and their mothers on a picture-taking walk through an unfamiliar neighborhood. They found that children did not recall anything about the experience that was mentioned only by themselves or by their mother; they remembered just the topics that had been jointly discussed as the event had happened. The nature of family dinnertime is often different; while sometimes

multiple members of the family shared the same event together, it is often the case that each member brings a different set of narratives to the table. Therefore, while the individual narrative is not jointly encoded, it is often jointly constructed through clarification questions and extra family knowledge members may contribute. Thus, it appears that the dinner table is somewhat of a “reworking” ground for children to validate and process their daily narratives.

Mother’s role as “kin-keeper” and the preservation of the family identity

Independent narratives and shared narratives hold very different meanings. While both are likely to be important, the differences in the nature of the two narratives suggest that each narrative plays a different function in a child’s life. While I addressed narrative construction above, I have not yet addressed the process of how the telling of family stories, or narratives (I will use these words interchangeably), provide a child with a sense of history, lineage, and continuity. Recalling the family stories I know about my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents reveals an overwhelming number of stories from my mother’s side, and hardly any from my father’s. The few stories that I know from my father’s side were almost all told to me by my mother. My case is certainly not unique, as much research has supported the role of the mother as the family’s “kin-keeper” (Sherman, 1990; Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989). The wife is thought to be the preserver of family lore, for both her and her husband’s side of the family. Even in families of divorce, women’s roles continue to be of importance in maintaining kinship links and traditions (Pett, Lang, and Gander, 1992). This has been a consistent theme throughout history. Family historian John Gillis (1996) claims that women’s and children’s time was identical with family time, while men were more on the periphery.

Rosenthal (1985) described the “kin-keeper” as usually fulfilled by the key maternal family figure and passed across generations when the reigning kin-keeper becomes unable to continue. McDaniel (1998) examined the kin-keeping role in the way that mothers perpetuate family traditions in ritual celebration. The kinkeeper often assumes responsibility for preserving family folklore, preserving celebration conformity, and protecting traditions and customs. It is often a role that is a source of intense pride. It is becoming the “family guardian of traditions” and serves as a role of self-definition, responsibility, and justification. McDaniel posits that women fulfill both their desire to know family stories and their desire to preserve family stories by listening to their mothers and initiating stories with their daughters to ensure that family narratives are maintained and passed on in this matriarchally-dominated fashion. While McDaniel studied family celebratory rituals that are not as routine as dinnertime, the same basic interaction patterns within the family are likely to remain consistent. Families might not rehash all the family lore every evening, but similar kin-keeping patterns are likely to be maintained. Thus, a major objective of this study is to examine how this plays out in everyday dinnertime conversations.

Establishing a self-history

Within family interaction and storytelling, a self-history, or identity, takes root. An identity is a life story filled with setting, scenes, characters, plot, and themes (McAdams, 2003), and must be established by the presence of an autobiographical memory, which emerges in the late preschool years (Nelson, 2003). When it emerges, it suggests a new level of self-understanding that serves to integrate the whole self and establish the self-history as unique. Autobiographical memory is culturally framed; full

of incidents and significances for the self that makes meaning by giving a narrative event a setting, a central action or goal, a motivation, a highlight or surprise, a success or failure, an emotion, a conclusion, and an evaluation. A self-history is also more complex than simply a self-timeline of events: it is the personal storytelling that integrates experiences into a personal narrative and therefore helps a child to establish an identity (McAdams, 1989). The family story is composed of many narratives that create a family history, of which the child is a small but vital element.

The identity is created both with the child's understanding of an overarching theme of independent autobiographical memories and in moving beyond the individual to how the child sees him or herself within the context of family, neighborhood, and culture. The family provides the most accessible link that a child has to the greater world. This embeddedness in a larger family story provides a sort of a scaffold "lens" that expresses rules of interaction and beliefs about relationships (Sameroff & Fiese, 1999), helps a child make meaning of new experiences (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995), and weaves a common thread between the child's and parents' childhoods through the parent's telling of their own experiences, lessons, and values growing up (Fiese, 1991, as cited in Fiese et al., 1995). In other words, family stories act as a form of socialization (Fiese et al., 1995).

Who's talking?

The existing literature on conversational styles for reminiscing about the past identifies *high elaborative* (long and embellished discussions of narratives) and *low elaborative* (short narrative discussion with little descriptive information) parents. Children with more highly elaborative mothers fare better in answering questions and

providing details about an event than children with low elaborative mothers. For individual children, the literature indicates that reminiscing styles can generalize across situations, over several years (Reese et al., 1993), and across siblings of different ages (Haden, 1998). However, for caregivers, it appears that there is not a consistent conversation style across differing contexts; rather, reminiscing style may have more to do with the value placed on the sharing of the past rather than general talkativeness of the caregiver (Haden & Fivush, 1996).

Additionally, as McDaniel's kin-keeping findings on family ritual alluded to earlier, it appears that there are parental gender differences in percentage of narrative talk. Beals and Snow (1994) examined narrative contributions to mealtime conversations by parents and their "target" child, between 3-5 years old. They found that mothers were consistently the biggest contributors, averaging about 40% of all narrative utterances, target children contributed roughly 30%, fathers contributed only about 14% of narrative utterances, and other members contributed the rest. Mothers' mean length of turn was about three times the length of their children's turns, and as children aged from 3-4 years to 5 years old, their mean length of turn increased. This last finding is logical; as children age and gain a greater command of the language, they should continue to increase the length of their conversational turns.

Reminiscing about shared experiences creates and maintains social and emotional bonds (Fivush, Haden & Reese, 1995). Most important for establishing long-lasting autobiographical memory is the personal function of retaining memories meaningful to the self. These are collaboratively constructed as parents give the child a perspective on

the narrative that the child may adopt as his or her own, or may contrast with his or her own experience and reject (Fivush, 1991; Nelson, 1996).

Another interesting line of research examines how narrators develop autonomy in their narratives. The dinner table provides an ideal setting to practice storytelling, and allows children to rehearse and develop their autonomous voice as a storyteller. Blum-Kulka and Snow (1992) regard family dinner table conversations as prime opportunities for children to explore and find their voice as an autonomous constructor of a self-text. They compared the dinnertime narratives of American middle and working class families and Israeli middle-class families to see if this was a consistent theme across social class and culture. I highlight the findings that look specifically at middle-class American families. Blum-Kulka and Snow found that over 80% of the narratives involved children and just 15% identified narratives told by adults only. Fifty-eight percent were child initiated, and of all the narratives, about three-quarters were self-initiated. Older children participated in far more narratives than their preschool siblings, and Blum-Kulka and Snow think this suggests that chance for participation increases with children's age. Also, half of the narratives had participation from at least four participants (there were at least four people in each family).

While there exists literature on ritual, family, identity, and narrative, few studies have examined how these constructs play out day-to-day by getting *inside* family dinnertime narratives. Little research has quantified dinnertime conversations across many families to observe overall family talk trends. Therefore, I will provide both quantitative and qualitative descriptions of family dinner conversations in an effort to pull out the main themes. Since the nature of this research is exploratory, I will initially

describe dinnertime by asking more basic questions: first, what kinds of narratives are being told and how often? What are the main themes of the narratives? Who in the family initiates the narratives, and how much does each member talk about the past? I will look at whether parents' talk predicts children's narrative initiations or talking. Finally, I will provide qualitative examples of the different types of narratives and discuss their main features. While my research is exploratory, I will make one trend hypothesis. In light of the maternal kin-keeping literature (McDaniel, 1998), as well as the literature that has quantified family members' talk time (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992), I predict that overall, mothers will talk more than fathers, and this difference will be particularly reflected in talking about the shared past.

Method

This study is part of a larger Family Narratives Project conducted by Robyn Fivush and Marshall Duke at the Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life (MARIAL), a Sloan Center on Working Families. The project focuses on examining relations between family narratives and children's resiliency. It studies middle class families with at least one preadolescent "target child" between the ages of 9 and 12 years old. In addition to dinnertime conversations, the larger study also collected elicited family narratives on positive and negative family events, and several measures of individual and family function, including: (1) The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE); (2) The Family Life Inventory of Life Events (FILE); (3) The Family Hardiness Index (FHI); (4) The Family Functioning Scale (FFS); (5) The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL); (6) The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scales (ANSIE/CNSIE); and (7) The "Do You Know...?" questionnaire. All measures were completed individually by

the mother, father, and target child. An overarching hypothesis of the larger study is that children who have more family knowledge and family stories will have more positive outcomes.

Participants

Forty two-parent families participated in the study, and 37 of these families participated in the dinnertime portion of the project. Thirty are dual-earner families, and 7 are single-earner families. Twenty-eight families are Caucasian, 3 are African-American, 5 are mixed race, and one is Asian-American. Thirty of the families are traditional nuclear families, 5 are blended families, and 2 are extended families with at least one additional adult living with them. Three families had one child present at the meal, 22 families had 2 children present, 8 families had 3 children present, 3 families had 4 children present, and 1 family had 5 children present at the meal.

All families were given a tape recorder and asked to record 2-3 family dinnertime conversations over a two-week period. Thirty-one families returned at least two conversations and six families returned just one dinner conversation. If two conversations were available, the second one was used in analyses. All conversations were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy before coding. Dinner conversations varied in length from 20-45 minutes.

Transcription and Coding

Two coders read through all transcripts together and identified each narrative. A narrative was defined as a reference to a specific past event. Narratives began when the narrative topic was introduced and ended when the topic changed. Non-narrative dinner talk (such as “pass the corn”) was omitted in the counted narratives. Once all the

narratives were identified, they were quantified by *length* (number of words per person in each narrative), *narrative type* (independent or shared), *time of occurrence* (recent or remote), *initiation* (the family member who initiated the narrative), and *theme*.

To elaborate on the categories, the *length* of the narrative expresses how much total talk occurred for each family member (mother, father, and children), and was quantified by counting the number of words per family member in each narrative. The *narrative type* expresses whether the past event being described was experienced by just one person at the table (independent), or experienced by more than one family member (shared). This categorization captures how the narrative is told: if it is independent, the narrator has more freedom to select which parts are told, what they can exaggerate, and what they can omit. Shared narratives hold members to accuracy boundaries, as multiple viewpoints of the same event emphasize different parts in its co-construction. *Time of occurrence* expresses when the narrative's event took place (recent or remote). Recent events indicate that the event happened either that day or the day before, and remote events took place any time before the previous day. *Initiation* describes who in the family initiated the narrative. The *theme* of the narrative was what the experience of the narrative described: independent narratives were categorized as either event-specific or relational, and shared narratives were classified by who shared in the experience, yielding six categories: independent event, independent relational, shared between children, shared between parents, shared between parents and children, and shared with the whole family. These categories were chosen because each captures a different type of interaction: independent event narratives were predominantly work- or school-focused, involving the interaction between the individual and his or her daily routine, whereas

independent relational narratives encompassed the retelling of conversations and personal interactions of note. Shared narrative categories were chosen because the interactions between the different groups each represented a different dynamic within the family.

Results

Analyses addressed a number of questions; therefore this section will be divided into three parts. First, how many narratives of each type were present in dinner conversations? Are there any differences in type or time of narrative? What event themes do the dinnertime narratives represent? Second, who initiates the narratives? Who talks? Are contributors consistent across narrative type? And third, what predicts children's initiations or amount of talk?

General Narrative Descriptions

Of the total 235 narratives that occurred across the 37 families, 226 of them could be classified by time and narrative type (the nine narratives that could not be classified due to the lack of time reference were omitted from analyses). In sum, there were 110 *Recent Independent* narratives, 39 *Recent Shared* narratives, 44 *Remote Independent* narratives, and 33 *Remote Shared* narratives, as depicted in Figure 1. A 2 (time: recent vs. remote) by 2 (narrative type: independent vs. shared) Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on number of narratives revealed both significant main effects and an interaction. There was a significant main effect for time, with a greater number of narratives about recent events than about remote events ($F(1,36) = 11.11, p < .01$). There were significantly more independent narratives than shared narratives ($F(1,36) = 14.09, p < .001$). There was also a significant interaction between time and narrative type, ($F(1,36) = 6.89, p < .05$), with independent narratives being much more prevalent in recent

narratives than in remote narratives, but shared narratives being similarly prevalent across time (see Figure 1).

Theme. The number of narratives across families by theme, percent of total narratives, means per conversation, and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. About two-thirds of narratives (158, or 67.42%) were independent, and of these, 77 (32.77%, of total) were event-oriented and 81 (34.47%) were relationally-focused. Of the other third, the shared narratives, the categories were determined by who was present for the event. Forty-two of the shared narratives were between parents and children (17.87% of total), 14 were between just children (5.96% of total), 7 were between just parents (2.98% of total), and 14 were shared by the whole family (5.96% of total). Qualitative analyses will re-address narrative theme in the discussion section.

Initiating and discussing the narrative

The second set of analyses addressed who initiated the narratives and how much each family member contributed to the narrative's telling. To examine number of initiations, a 2 (time) by 2 (narrative type) by 3 (speaker) Repeated Measures ANOVA was performed. A significant main effect of time, ($F(1,36) = 11.11, p < .01$), and of narrative, ($F(1,36) = 14.09, p < .001$), revealed that overall, more recent narratives were initiated than remote narratives, and more independent narratives were initiated than shared narratives. These effects make sense because each narrative must be initiated, so the main effects must correspond to the overall effects of the frequencies of narratives, as shown in Figure 1. A significant interaction between time and narrative was also observed ($F(1,36) = 6.89, p < .05$), and follow up Paired Samples t-tests revealed that there were a significantly greater number of recent independent initiations than recent shared

initiations ($t(1,36) = 3.62, p < .001$), but no significant difference between recent shared and remote shared initiations (see Figure 1). An interaction between time and speaker (see Figure 2) approached significance ($F(2,72) = 2.74, p = .07$). Follow up Paired Sample t-tests revealed that across narrative type, mothers have significantly more recent initiations than their children ($t(1,36) = 2.34, p < .05$), and tend to have more than their husbands ($t(1,36) = 1.87, p = .07$). There are no significant differences in who initiates remote narratives.

Narrative talk. Family members were not equal contributors of total narrative talk, defined as the number of words each speaker contributed to the overall narrative.

Mothers accounted for 38.87% of total narrative talk, fathers accounted for 22.03% total narrative talk, and children contributed to 39.10% total narrative talk. To examine the narrative talk by speaker, time, and narrative type, a 2 (time) by 2 (narrative type) by 3 (speaker) Repeated Measures ANOVA was performed on number of narrative words. Results are shown in Table 2. There was more recent narrative talk than remote narrative talk ($F(1,36) = 6.55, p < .05$), and speakers did not contribute equally ($F(2,72) = 3.02, p < .05$). Over *all conversations*, families talked more about independent than shared narratives (likely due to the high number of recent independent narratives), although the main effect was just outside of significant range ($F(1,36) = 3.66, p = .06$). However, in means *per narrative*, the amount of talk varies. Despite the differences across speakers in Table 2 between recent independent and recent shared narratives and remote independent and remote shared narratives, follow up Paired Samples t-tests revealed that differences in mean words per narrative were not significant.

The interaction between time and speaker of narrative talk did approach significance ($F(2,72) = 11.11, p=.06$). In order to follow up this interaction, shown in figure 3, a series of Paired Samples t-tests were performed, revealing that mothers talk significantly more than their husbands ($t(1,36) = 3.05, p<.01$), and children talk significantly more than their fathers ($t(1,36) = 3.16, p<.01$). There were no significant differences between mothers and children for recent narratives. It is important to note that means of remote narrative talk between members were substantially different and followed the same patterns as the recent narratives, even though there were no statistically significant differences. This is likely because standard deviations were so large.

Predicting children's participation in dinnertime narratives

To determine how family variables related to children's narrative talk in dinnertime conversations, a series of Hierarchical Regression Analyses were performed. Within each regression, predictor variables were based on their importance in the model. Because the number of narratives of each type varied across families, we controlled for it by entering the frequency of that narrative type into the model first. The next variable we controlled for was the number of children present at the dinnertime conversation, so that was entered as the second step in each model. To determine whether children's participation was predicted by parents' conversational involvement, the number of words mothers and fathers used in that narrative type were entered third and fourth, respectively. Four independent regressions were conducted to predict children's initiations of recent and remote narratives and four independent regressions were conducted to predict children's contributions to recent and remote narrative talk.

Initiations. In the recent independent narrative initiations (Table 3), the total number of recent independent narratives was a significant predictor of children's initiations, explaining 57.8% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,35) = 47.86, p < .001$). When we added number of children present at the meal into the model, it approached significance, accounting for an additional 3.7% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,34) = 3.24, p = .08$). Adding mother's recent independent narrative talk (defined by number of narrative words) accounted for an additional 3.8% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,33) = 3.60, p = .07$), and adding father's recent independent narrative talk accounted for 2.3% more of the variance ($\Delta F(1,32) = 2.22, p = .15$).

In the recent shared narratives initiations (Table 4), the total number of recent shared narratives was a significant predictor of children's initiations, explaining 45.1% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,35) = 28.71, p < .001$). Adding the number of children present at the meal into the model accounted for an additional 1.3% of the variance, which was not significant. Neither mother nor father's recent shared narrative talk were significant predictors either.

For remote independent narrative initiations (Table 5), the total number of remote independent narratives was a significant predictor of child initiations, explaining 65.5% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,35) = 66.44, p < .001$). When we added the number of children present at the meal into the model, it was not significant, accounting for just an additional 1.6% of the variance. Adding mother's remote independent narrative talk accounted for an additional 8.2% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,33) = 11.00, p < .01$), and adding father's remote independent narrative talk into the model accounted for an additional 6.4% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,32) = 11.18, p < .01$).

In the remote shared narrative initiations (Table 6), the total number of remote shared narratives was a significant predictor of child talk, explaining 46.0% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,35) = 29.80, p < .001$). When we added the number of children present at the meal into the model, it was not significant, accounting for less than 1.0 % of the variance. Mother's remote shared narrative talk accounted for an additional 8.0% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,33) = 5.79, p < .05$) and father's remote shared narrative talk accounted for an additional 12.3% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,32) = 11.71, p < .01$).

Overall, it is important to note that certain predictors of initiations are consistent across narratives: as would be expected, the more narratives of each type there are, the more children initiate. However, it is somewhat surprising that the number of children present at the meal does not predict how much children initiate narratives, with the exception of the recent independent narratives in which it seems to be highly ritualized that each child have a turn to talk about their day. It is also interesting to note that fathers' and mothers' remote narrative talk predicts children's remote narrative initiations, but fathers' recent narrative talk does not predict children's recent initiations, and mothers' is just approaching significance with regards to the recent independent narratives.

Narrative talk. In the recent independent narratives (Table 7), the total number of recent independent narratives was a significant predictor of child talk, explaining 50.1% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,35) = 35.21, p < .001$). Adding the number of children present at the meal into the model accounted for an additional 11.3% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,34) = 10.01, p < .01$). Adding mother's recent independent narrative talk accounted for an additional

2.8% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,33) = 2.63, p=.11$), and adding father's recent independent narrative talk accounted for 2.3% more of the variance ($\Delta F(1,32) = 2.24, p=.14$).

In the recent shared narratives (Table 8), the total number of recent shared narratives was a significant predictor of child talk, explaining 19.3% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,35) = 8.38, p<.01$). Adding the number of children present at the meal into the model did not account for any additional variance, however; adding mother's recent shared narrative talk accounted for an additional 69.2% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,33) = 199.56, p<.001$), while father's recent shared narrative talk did not account for any change in variance. The more mothers talk about the recent past, the more their children do, suggesting that mothers are scaffolding their children's shared narratives, while fathers are not.

In the remote independent narratives (Table 9), the total number of remote independent narratives was a significant predictor of child talk, explaining 59.2% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,35) = 50.69, p<.001$). When we added the number of children present at the meal into the model, it was not significant, accounting for just an additional 2.5% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,34) = 2.20, p=.15$). Adding mother's remote independent narrative talk accounted for an additional 4.9% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,33) = 4.81, p<.05$), and adding father's remote independent narrative talk accounted for 5.5% more of the variance ($\Delta F(1,32) = 6.34, p<.05$). It is interesting to note that mother's and father's talk was actually a negative predictor of children's talk: the less parents talked in remote independent narratives, the more their children did.

In the remote shared narratives (Table 10), the total number of remote shared narratives was a significant predictor of child talk, explaining 63.2% of the variance

($\Delta F(1,35) = 35.21, p < .001$). When we added the number of children present at the meal into the model, it was not significant, accounting for just 0.4% more of the variance. Neither mother's nor father's remote shared narrative talk accounted for significant changes in variance, although mother's talk approached significance, accounting for an additional 2.7% of the variance ($\Delta F(1,33) = 2.66, p = .11$). Fathers accounted for just 0.8% additional variance.

Across regression models predicting children's participation, total number of narratives is a consistently significant predictor of children's narrative talk: this is a logical trend because as families have more narratives, they will talk more overall. As in the child initiations, it is surprising to note that the number of children present at the meal did not predict amount of children's narrative talk, again with the exception of recent independent narratives in which number of children was significant. Clearly, there is a ritualized pattern of turn-taking for children when it comes to talking about one's day—a pattern that does not map onto other types and times of narrative talk. Mothers' and fathers' narrative talk were significant predictors of remote independent narratives, and mother's narrative talk was also a significant predictor of children's recent shared talk.

Discussion

One of the more general, and yet most interesting, findings of this study is found in looking at the sheer numbers of narratives in dinner conversation. There were 235 narratives across 37 families, averaging just over 6 narratives per dinner. Assuming that a dinner lasts an average of 30 minutes, there is a reference to a past event less than every five minutes. This means that families are constantly learning about and reconfirming

both their independent and shared histories: as siblings, as parents and children, as couples, as families, and as individuals.

It is also interesting to note how directly the timeframe of the event was communicated in narratives; in just a handful of cases was the time of the event left unspecified. Maybe families do this to make narratives more accessible for future reference to family members, or perhaps this is a product of the families spending so much time away from each other that they have to specify the context in order to orient members to the less familiar family stories.

Previous research has not broken down narratives by narrative types and time of occurrence. To reiterate, recent narratives occurred in the past two days and remote narratives were any time beyond; independent narratives were experienced by one person at the table without other family members present, while in shared narratives at least one other family member was present. It is interesting to observe the overwhelming dominance of the recent independent narratives as compared to similar numbers of recent shared, remote independent, and remote shared narratives. It is clear that recent independent narratives are a ritualized part of family dinner conversations.

Not only do recent independent narratives dominate in frequency, but children's participation in them is uniquely related to specific family variables. Recent independent narratives were the only type of narrative in which number of children was a predictor of children's initiations and narrative talk. This pattern is interesting in two ways: first, it denotes a ritualized pattern of interaction across families and family members that prescribes each child in the family the right to "own" the floor to talk about their day for a part of the meal. The second interesting aspect of this finding is that the number of

children present at the meal did not predict any other narrative types, meaning that children talked about shared narratives and independent remote narratives the same amount, regardless of the size of the family. Shared narratives were highly dominated by child-participatory stories, meaning that children either hear stories that feature themselves *or* their siblings, or hear more stories that involve multiple family participants told from multiple perspectives.

With regards to why number of children doesn't predict children's independent remote initiations or talk, I posit that this might be due to the nature of the independent remote narrative: it is brought up usually because it is triggered in some way by the conversation, but because it is neither ritualized nor shared by other members, its telling is more spontaneous.

There were also interesting differences between members' contributions. Mothers initiated more recent narratives than did fathers and children, suggesting that they play a large role in the ritualization and regulation of recent independent and remote independent narratives. Mothers and children talked more than fathers in recent narratives, and although not significant, the same pattern was observed in remote narratives. These differences suggest that mothers are providing the scaffolding for children as they learn to tell their "Today I..." and "Today we..." stories, while fathers are not doing as much scaffolding. This interpretation is supported by the finding that amount of mothers' talk seem to predict children's initiations, although mothers' and fathers' talk are equally likely to predict children's narrative talk. Additionally, more mother than father talk suggests that mothers are telling more detailed stories of their own daily experiences, while fathers are not talking as much about theirs. Mother and father

talk predicts both children's initiations and narrative talk in remote independent narratives, suggesting that perhaps parents are scaffolding these narratives. Thus, parents who participate more in independent narratives have children who initiate and tell more of these kinds of narratives.

In recent shared narratives, it is interesting that neither mother nor father talk predicts children's initiations, although the amount that mothers talk about the recent shared past overwhelmingly predicts the amount that children talk about it. This indicates that mothers promote *conversation* about a shared history, although it's interesting that they don't predict children's *initiations* of a shared history. Perhaps this is because mothers initiate most shared narratives, and therefore introduce *and* scaffold the conversation. Specifically with regards to the remote shared past, mothers' talk approaches significance in predicting children's remote shared talk, and both parent's shared remote narrative talk predicts children's initiation of remote shared narratives. For mothers' talk, this seems to be the same promotion of shared history trend. For children's initiations, this probably means that by showing interest in talking about the remote shared past, parents are probably stirring up stories and questions from children about other remote shared events.

While statistics are helpful in understanding overall trends of narratives, they cannot capture the daily range of topics and interaction styles as well as qualitative analyses can. In the following examples, I will try to represent the diverse narratives that were told at the dinner table by providing narratives that capture the main themes across families. Because time plays a large part in which narratives are told, I will classify the narratives first by time, then subdivide them by narrative type and theme. In the

following examples, I have omitted the non-narrative talk (i.e. “These carrots are mushy”) in favor of following the narrative through uninterrupted. The symbols “<” and “>” indicate overlapping talk.

Recent Independent Narratives

Independent narratives were by far the most common form of narrative told at the dinner table. Members’ experiences separate from the family are retold around the dinner table as independent narratives to give voice to stories that would otherwise not be told on a regular basis. Over two-thirds of all narratives (68.1%) were of independently experienced events, and 71.4% of these occurred in the recent past. This is consistent with the dinnertime literature, which has shown that when comparing American families to families of other nationalities (Aukrust & Snow, 1998; Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992), American dinnertime narratives focus much more on the events that happened to family members independently in the outside world. It is suggested that this type of narrative talk is in line with and reinforces American cultural norms of independence in negotiating the world.

Recent Independent Event Narratives. Half of all narratives told at dinnertime were the re-telling of individually experienced events from that day or the day before. About half of these narratives discuss informational events about the day, usually work or school experiences. Blum-Kulka and Snow (1992) found American middle class “telling one’s day” narratives to take on a strongly ritualistic element. They posit that a family member’s right to talk about his or her day’s activities is a product of culturally specific rules and expectations. The following family’s mutual understanding and negotiation of turn taking at the beginning of dinner crystallizes this concept:

Example 1:

Mom: What about today?

Sib 3: I don't know.

Mom: (Unintelligible) after Mariah? Let Joseph talk.

Sib 3: I'm after, I'm after 'riah.

Mom: Okay. Who after Joseph?

Sib 2: Melanie got that <(unintelligible).

Sib 1: Melanie, > you can be after Joseph.

Sib 2: Okay. First in the morning, first in the morning I came in and I did my morning work. I was... they was just getting' in the classroom and so I had to do a patchwork quilt and then I (unintelligible). And then Ms. H. came in after we did our morning work (unintelligible). We talking about the VV Rule.

This meal conversation's beginning with the negotiation of who will talk and in what order is highly ritualized. Not only is it valued in this family that each member has the right to "own" the floor for part of the dinner conversation, but clearly the accepted topic in the family is the retelling of the day's events. Sibling 2 gives a very factual account of the happenings of her morning in school, clearly following the "today at school" script that changes only in the events inserted, but not in form. After Sibling 2's mentioning of the "VV Rule", the family debates the meaning and validity of this grammar mnemonic. Thus, in retelling the events of her day, Sibling 2 is also recalling and explaining her newly acquired knowledge to her family. It is clear why this kind of review is helpful for children in understanding new concepts in school. Parents provide both the soundboard

off which children can bounce their comprehension of their school lessons, and the feedback that determines how much more studying needs to be done. School work is a frequent theme in household conversation, especially when the day's events included a test, or getting back a graded assignment.

Recent Independent Relational Narratives. Members may talk about events in their days, as in the previous example, or they may share more relational information, usually centering on the recollection of a conversation or interaction. Recent independent relational narratives vary substantially in length from the mentioning of an interaction to the rehashing of an entire dialogue. About half of recent independent narratives were relationally focused. In the next example, it is clear that the father recalls a past conversation with his daughter and re-emphasizes its importance to her and the family, targeting the discussion with specific questions for his daughter about her peer relationships:

Example 2:

Dad: So Ashley how was... how was school today?

Sib 1: Excellent.

Dad: Including the problem with your friends?

Sib 1: <Yes.

Mom: It was what? > < Aces?

Sib 1: Excellent. > Excellent.

Mom: Excellent. I'm glad to hear that.

Dad: Well, I mean did you interact with them today?

Sib 1: Well, not really. When they came near me I just kind of turned... turned my head away.

Dad: Oh yeah?

Sib 1: Uh huh.

Mom: So you didn't even talk to 'em today?

Sib 1: Kinda. A little bit.

Dad: Did you make another friend?

Sib 1: Oh, you know, Philip and Ryan. I-I played around with them.

Dad: Did you?

Mom: <Oh really.

Sib 1: Yeah. Uh huh.>

Dad: That was...

Sib 1: Huh?

Dad: That was okay?

Sib 1: Yeah. They're really, really funny. And I played with Ashley S. She's a new kid at the school.

Dad: Hm.

Mom: Well that's good. Is she in your class?

Sib 1: (Chuckles) No. She's in – I think she's in Mrs. H's class.

Mom: 'Cause new kids have a hard time sometimes. What'd Sheena say to you?

Sib 1: Uh, nothing much.

Mom: Well...

Sib 1: She didn't even say sorry about what she said yesterday.

Dad: Because she probably doesn't know that <she...

Mom: She probably doesn't realize that> she hurt your feelings.

Dad: Yeah. That's what I told her. She needs to let her know in private that she did.

Sib 1: 'Cause I could still tell that they were trying to back it up like they mean what happened, but...

Dad: People do that.

Initially in this narrative, the target child resists getting into details about what happened with her friends at school, preferring to leave it at "excellent". The father is persistent, however, and his daughter opens up to talk about her reactions in dealing with her friends and the new friends that she made. Her parents have a stream of questions for her about each friend and situation, expressing their concern and involvement in their child's peer relationships. Her parents reaffirm her strength and coping skills in the way she handled the situation; in fact, the mother even complements her daughter for making friends with a new girl in the class. At the end of the narrative, the father is eager to offer his interpretations and solutions for his daughter instead of listening to more of what she has to say or asking how she wants to act. Even so, by discussing this emotionally difficult event with her parents, the daughter's family support network is made very clear. Her strength and abilities to cope with difficult situations are reaffirmed.

Recent Shared Narratives

Shared narratives are events that happened when more than one family member was present. They are jointly encoded, and jointly reconstructed for the other listeners. They can occur between the children, the parents, a mix, or all members. In the recent

shared narratives, the most common shared narrative types were child-child and parent-child. Overall, there was only one recent parent-parent narrative and one recent family narrative, suggesting that the telling of that type of narrative is rare. There were far more of these narratives from the remote past told, which will be addressed later in the discussion.

Recent Shared Child-Child Narratives. Recent shared child-child narratives were about events that children had shared, such as an after school activity, a trip to the hairdresser, or playing together. Six percent of all narratives were shared between children, and all of these occurred in the recent past. Perhaps this trend is indicative of the children's need to encode the narrative in order to remember it (Tessler & Nelson, 1994), and that parents do more active encoding with their children than children do while they are together. It could also be that parents ask about events that they know occurred, and oftentimes they don't know what their children did together during the day. Also, because dinners were often mid-week, it might just be that children aren't spending a lot of time during the day with their siblings. In the following example, Siblings 1 and 2 spent the day with their Girl Scout troop exploring the creek.

Example 3:

Sib 2: And (unintelligible) we felt something hard... we had to step on really closely <or go around it. Mom, I got (unintelligible). Like sometime you had to run across it. We had to walk because we had to...

Sib 1: No, sometimes you had to just get out of it there 'cause the rocks... some rocks aren't in the ground and it can get (unintelligible). They can fly up

to the top of the water and just (unintelligible). Like in the wind, they move and then they might (unintelligible).

Mom: Oh. <(unintelligible).

Sib 2: Mom?> <Mom?

Sib 1: The rocks were....> Well, some of the rocks weren't hooked into the ground.

Mom: I didn't know that. It would be cool to go see the creek. <I know they had (unintelligible) basketball.

Sib 1: Yeah, and you can...and you can go in the creek. Um, you don't have to be like a Girl Scout because um...

Sib 2: Yeah, 'cause boys went in the creek too.

The children in this narrative wrestle for the floor to tell the story, and while they both talk about the instability of the rocks and strategies for avoiding a fall, neither child wants the other's account to take the place of her own. Instead, both children retell the same basic theme of the event. This excerpt also illustrates the mother's participation in a shared narrative, even though these children are so talkative that not much scaffolding is necessary to move the narrative along.

Recent Shared Parent-Child Narratives. Over half (54.5%) of shared narratives were between a parent and child, about equally divided between recent and remote narratives. They were often retold around the dinner table to tell to the other parent or children that didn't experience the event, or because something in the conversation sparked their remembrance or further discussion. The following is one such example of a parent-child recent shared narrative:

Example 4:

Sib 1: Eyal went to (unintelligible) while Maayan went to (unintelligible).

Mom: Maayan went to go pick out a cello. Which, by the way, you know how expensive cellos are to rent? \$53.50 a month. It goes towards the purchase of it. Now, I don't wanna...

Sib 2: I told the woman, "Excuse me. I'm only gonna be doing this for a year." And she goes, "I bet you aren't." And I said, "Yes I am." And she says, "You wanna bet?"

Mom: Well, she is a young woman who plays violin and is majoring in like biology <and music at Agnes Scott...

Sib 2: Well, it's none of her business to get into my business.>

Mom: Actually she seemed pretty cool. You know, with those multiple earrings in her ear.

Sib 2: Kind of ugly, I'm sorry.

Dad: So where do they stand on the...

Mom: They said they had to get one ready. <(unintelligible). So, apparently, it's the same place that um the (unintelligible) rent-rented their violins.

In this shared narrative, several things are accomplished. First, facts about the cello rental are communicated to the father. Second, Sibling 2 and her mother re-examine their interactions with the saleswoman. They jointly re-construct a multi-dimensional view of her, each adding very different perspectives, to create an overall character description. Sibling 2 is concerned with the attitude from the saleswoman, while the mother thought she appeared to be someone who her daughter might find to be cool. By discussing their

different opinions, they better learn each other's viewpoints, and preferences. Although there isn't a resolution about the saleswoman, by both establishing their unique perspectives on the same person and situation, the accuracy improves enhances the depth of the narrative.

Remote Independent Narratives

Of the remote independent narratives (more than two days ago), over 60% occurred in the past week. They didn't differ much in content from the recent narratives except that they seem to be of particular importance because their telling was not ritualized like the recent narratives were. The other 40% of remote independent narratives occurred over a week prior, and were predominantly over a year beforehand.

Remote Independent Event Narratives. Remote independent event narratives were either event stories from the past week (predominantly from children) that did not have a chance to be retold earlier, or more distant stories of parents mentioning something from their childhood that related to the conversation. In the following example, the conversation prior to the child's narrative was discussing Sibling 1's transition from "children's church" to "big church".

Example 5:

Sib 1: I almost fell asleep in children's church once. But I didn't. (Laughs.) I'm like (demonstrates).

Mom: (Chuckles.) Yeah.

Sib 1: Well, actually, I was like (demonstrates).

This reference to the past is a very common way that family members reference past events that are relevant, but don't necessarily have a meaty story surrounding them. The

child falling asleep in children's church was applicable to the conversation and a funny story; however, there wasn't much need to surround it with other information.

Remote Independent Relational Narratives. More abundant than remote independent event narratives, remote independent relational narratives were most often told by parents who were recalling information from their childhood, or a time when children were not around. In the following example, a mother retells a story about her childhood distaste for asparagus. The conversation was initially sparked by the children resisting finishing their asparagus.

Example 6:

Mom: I told you about asparagus, how weird it is.

Sib 2: And how (unintelligible) you hated it when you were a kid.

Mom: I didn't like it when I was a kid, which is a really terrible thing 'cause my father grew it fresh in the garden.

Sib 1: Well, at least it was better than the stuff you buy at the store.

Mom: I know. I'm sorry I missed it.

Sib 2: Well...

Sib 1: Messed it?

Mom: Missed it. I didn't eat it.

Sib 1: Oh.

Mom: My parents didn't make me 'cause they liked it so much they didn't care if I didn't eat it. (Chuckles). They made me eat the frozen or canned peas, <but they didn't care if I didn't eat the asparagus from the garden.

Sib 2: But I thought you said...>

Dad: (Unintelligible) likes peas.

Sib 2: But I thought they said that they didn't <(unintelligible).

Sib 1: They didn't grow peas in the garden?>

Mom: They did actually did. They grew peas and beans and rhubarb and asparagus. One year he grew corn and that was pretty cool.

Sib 1: Did it turn out okay?

Mom: It was okay. It wasn't great.

Sib 1: Not as good as the store?

Mom: No. It's hard to grow...corn's an interesting crop. It's very hard to grow very small amounts of it. It likes big patches of itself.

Many things are happening in this narrative account of the mother's childhood. First, the mother is paralleling her children's dislike for asparagus to her own when she was a child. She is also trying to reiterate her present reflection on missing out on eating garden-grown vegetables; perhaps in hopes that her children will try to one-up her by eating something that she didn't like when she was a child. While it's clear at the beginning of the story that the family has heard it before, perhaps in a similar asparagus-dinner context, she still twists the story enough that the children are engaged and begin to ask questions for new information on the familiar basic story. As this story is repeated over time, the children gradually learn more details and are better able to frame it within a larger picture of their mother and her childhood. In addition, the mother is also able to provide a lesson about how to grow corn. In this particular example, the mother actually provides a lot more detail about her childhood in this story than is typically given. I

chose to use this one as an example, however, because it captures many of the themes that are typically present in parent childhood narratives.

Remote Shared Narratives

Remote shared narratives provide the family information about their shared history. For children especially, it is important to hear their own life retold with the constancy of the same family members around them. There were a few narratives that were told about the children's childhoods from many years prior, but the majority of narratives told occurred within the last two years and were initiated by a conversation topic that triggered their recollection. These remote narratives are reconstructed by family members piecemeal, with varying amounts of confusion and uncertainty. Often there is debate over the facts (for example, what kind of fish was caught, which anniversary it was, or whose party they went to) which usually help to provide a context and orientation for family members. Most often, there is not a firm resolution that answers what, where, and when the event happened, but more a tentative resolution that hinges on the pieces of information that the family can agree on.

I will present examples from the most common remote shared narratives that were retold: parent-child narratives, parent-parent narratives, and whole family narratives. There were no remote shared child-child narratives, which is interesting to note in light of the fact that there was only one recent shared parent-parent narrative. This is probably a function of both scheduling (parents work separately all day, while children might attend the same school or go somewhere after school together) and of what parents deem important to talk about (because they both know what they shared together, they do not think to retell it, and children do not think to ask about their parents' days). Additionally,

shared family narratives were not about recent events, but were almost all from the remote past. This is likely a function of the family having little time during the day together but many family experiences from the remote past. In a shared family narrative, the retelling of the story reaffirms the time that the family has spent together, thus reinforcing the family unit as a whole.

Remote Shared Parent-Child Narrative. The next example is an illustration of a remote shared narrative experienced by the parents and older brother, to give to their younger child as her own narrative. First the father establishes the continuity of the family by orienting and confirming that every member knows which house it happened in, even if they didn't live there. Thus, each listener has a starting point and link to the event. By asking the younger child questions about the narrative despite her absence, the parents help the child to recreate the narrative herself by providing the unique information to the telling of the story (the rose's color), thus making her an integral part in the story, and the family.

Example 7:

Dad: You know we did once, Maya?

Sib 1: Huh?

Dad: Hey, Nikhil?

Sib 2: Yeah?

Dad: Come here. Let's see if you remember this. In the old house, not the house you were born in, Maya, but the house Nikhil was born in.

Sib 2: Yeah?

Mom: Oh, the very first house? House number one?

Dad: Mom was wanting to plant... guess what mom planted.

Sib 2: (unintelligible)

Dad: Which flower was she going to plant?

Sib 2: Roses.

Dad: (unintelligible) roses, right?

Mom: Ah. What about the color?

Dad: And so...so...then the roses...

Sib 2: Uh red...white...pink.

Mom: (Laughs)

Sib 2: Orange.

Mom: (Laughs). Close.

Sib 2: Salmon?

Mom: No. (Laughs).

Dad: Come. Come.

Mom: What's my favorite colored rose?

Sib 2: Yellow.

Mom: That's right.

Dad: Right. So we planted these roses and then guess... do you know which insect comes on roses?

Sib 2: Uh... caterpi...no.

Dad: They're called... they're little insects that look like these, but they're little and white. They're called aphids. So all the aphids are coming...

Mom: They're good insects though aren't they?

Dad: No. They were eating your roses and we ordered ladybugs.

Mom: Oh, right.

Dad: From the (unintelligible) catalog. So a couple of weeks later,
(unintelligible) they sent this little packet of ladybugs. (Unintelligible).
Then we... a couple of days later, threw them out and you know what
ladybugs eat?

Sib 2: What?

Dad: Aphids.

Mom: (unintelligible).

Sib 2: (Unintelligible)

Dad: So we... so we had... we ordered two hundred ladybugs and set them out
in the back and they went and ate up the aphids.

Sib 2: Why didn't you just let them all free at the same time?

Dad: Then there's too many and there's not enough food for them to eat and
then they start dying. So let them sort of grow a little bit at a time and
establish a colony.

Sib 1: <(Noise).

Sib 2: Well what are (unintelligible)?

Sib 1: Look mama. Look.

Dad: Maybe we should order some uh ladybugs. ><(unintelligible).

Mom: Very good job.

Not only does this narrative integrate all members in its retelling, but it is also educational. The father integrates a biology lesson by explaining how the food chain

applies to the own family's experience, and an environmental lesson about overpopulation of species by explaining about staggering the number of ladybugs he introduced in the population. A family's rose garden narrative has become an educational lesson as well as a tool to integrate the younger sibling into the family history.

Remote Shared Parent-Parent Narratives. Of all the narratives, there were the fewest parent-parent narratives (3%), and all but one occurred in the remote past. This is supported by the research of Haines (1988), who found that dinnertime conversation seemed to be designed with parental attention to children. Parent-parent narratives either discussed something that the parents had done that was applicable to the children, and usually had occurred within the past week (for example, talked about construction of a child's tree house or asked a neighbor for advice about a child's injury), or referenced an event that was triggered in the conversation (a trip or an anniversary). In the following narrative, the parents struggle to remember the orienting information of their different anniversary celebrations, rather than the descriptive details of the evenings.

Example 8:

Mom: Last year we went to the vegetarian place? Is that right?

Sib 2: Where do you guys... <where do you guys go on...

Dad: No. Last year> we went to your uh video thing.

Mom: Oh. The year before we went to...

Dad: Uh huh.

Sib 2: Where do you guys... where do you guys <go on your anniversary?

Mom: That was when we met with (unintelligible). <We go to...

Dad: Wherever we want to.>

Mom: Yeah. We got out to dinner.

Sib 2: I mean where, where do you go on your anniversary?

Mom: We went to a really nice restaurant in Virginia Highlands. Virginia Highlands. It was a bit far. Although it was interesting.

Dad: We did.

Sib 2: But you two went, “Wow, this place is cool,” huh?

Sib 1: Well, it’s time to go home.

Sib 2: (Giggles) It’s like...

Dad: (Laughs) Not (unintelligible).

Sib 1: Get off the plane, “Oh, this place is neat.”

The majority of this narrative is spent trying to remember which year the parents went to which restaurant. Sibling 2 doesn’t seem that interested in the information that his parents are providing, even though they are answering his repeated question in their conversation. His question, “Where do you go on your anniversary?” indicates that Sibling 2 does not understand that the parents vary their celebration from year to year, but rather that he expects their anniversary meal to be geographically ritualized each year. Sibling 1 doesn’t become involved in the narrative until Sibling 2 creates a funny hypothetical situation of their parents’ reaction to arriving at a restaurant after a long trip in the car, and steers the conversation away from the parent-centered discussion following the narrative.

Remote Shared Family Narratives. Remote shared family narratives were not that common overall, totaling just 6% of all narratives. Activities varied significantly (from

family vacations to a dinner at a restaurant), but all reinforced the idea of family togetherness because each story was experienced by everyone at the table. In the following example, the family was discussing the recent baptism of a friend's baby, sparking the retelling of Sibling 1's baptism, which has been told to her before. It's clear that Sibling 1 is proud of her behavior in this story.

Example 9:

Sib 1: I didn't cry when I was a baby and I got baptized. I was sleepin'.

Mom: No. You didn't get baptized with water.

Sib 3: No.

Sib 1: I didn't get <baptized...

Sib 3: You got> baptized with oil.

Mom: Uh huh.

Sib 1: What's oil?

Sib 3: Oil.

Mom: <With virgin...

Dad: Like olive oil.>

Mom: ...olive oil.

Sib 1: I was (unintelligible)?

Mom: That they... that they pray over.

Sib 1: Oh, and they put a cross on my head?

Mom: Yes.

Sib 3: Yeah, I remember that.

Mom: Don't. Don't, don't, don't do that.

Sib 3: (Laughs.) It was when church went on.

Sib 2: I want to go to <church.

Sib1: No> we went in that other church.

Sib 3: And um you...

Sib 1: When we were in that... the church where <(unintelligible).

Sib 3: And daddy uh>...daddy went up there and put a cross on you. Why wasn't I able to go up there? Grammy made me stay up there. Grammy made me sit up there.

Mom: Sit up where, Gabby?

Sib 3: Up there with her while you... while you...while Trinity was getting baptized. She made me sit up there.

Mom: Well, when Trinity was christened, every...the whole family was down there. Uh huh.

Sib 3: I don't know. I remember seeing you...

Dad: If you don't remember then why are you talkin'?

Mom: <Yes.

Sib 3: You guys went down there first and... and them um... and then you guys were doin' this and doin' that and then we got to do down there. But I was kinda like...

Mom: Excuse me. When you were baptized... I mean when you were christened, were Grammy and you up there saying, "Why didn't I get to go down there?" No!

This family reconstructs Sibling 1's baptism from different directions; angles which are not entirely resolved by the end of the narrative. Sibling 3 and her mother have different memories of how the baptism transpired, and it's clear by the end of the narrative that the parents don't confirm Sibling 3's memory, nor do they want to hear her own version of the event. Perhaps because they don't really think that Sibling 3's role in her sister's baptism is that important, or perhaps because they feel the narrative needs to be resolved with the whole family being together during the baptism (even though Sibling 3 remembers not being able to be a part of it), the parents don't validate her incongruent recollection.

Conclusion

The nature of this project was exploratory, and yet the larger scale implications are great. Clearly family dinners, if just to be together, are important. Perhaps the same dialogue that occurs around the dinner table for some families could occur in the car, or while playing Boggle, or watching TV. But from what I have learned over this project, I believe this is unlikely. I am hard-pressed to come up with a common habitual family activity in which all members are regularly present and have the time to devote half an hour to family dialogue. This is where, in many ways, a family identity is formed: through regular interaction and storytelling. As evidenced by the impressive number of narratives, especially recent independent narratives that occur around the dinner table, I wonder where and how often they are able to occur when families don't eat together. Do you tell the same story of your day to all family members, or does just one member hear it? Does this in some way alter the ways that families understand each other, based on which stories they have each heard? Since Americans have increased their work and

school schedules in the past decades, has family togetherness fallen by the wayside?

While this project did not answer these bigger questions of the changing family time, it did look inside family dinners to see how families discuss the past.

Limitations. With this narrower scope came a few limitations. First, each dinner conversation came from one family at one time. Therefore, it is unknown whether the conversation that we recorded was representative of a typical dinner in that household. Unfortunately, we also did not ask families how often they ate together, so it wasn't clear whether their dinner togetherness and conversation was highly ritualized, or a rare occurrence. In the future, it would be valuable to check for consistency across multiple dinner conversations from the same family. Also, the awareness of the presence of a tape recorder at the table may have affected how members interacted and what conversation topics were discussed. The sample size was also relatively small, and while diverse in its interpretation of "middle class," did not represent other income brackets, and therefore cannot be generalized to all American families. The predominantly white racial makeup of the group is not representative of Atlanta, GA, although it is fairly representative of the United States overall. Additionally, by looking only at two-parent households, we were able to compare spousal contributions; however, this sampling does not represent the large number of single-parent households in the population in which a parent must navigate both parental roles. In the future, it would be important to include adequate single-parent household representation, and to look at how narrative conversation might differ.

Suggestions for future research. My project was an overall description of family dinnertimes; as such, it was unable to go into depth in many aspects of narrative

construction. First, I did not address the tellers of the narratives that were shared by multiple family members. Shared narratives are likely to be important in establishing a shared history, and future research should examine the shared narrative construction process. Do parents or children tell more of the experiences that they shared? How is the telling of the narrative negotiated between different dyads, triads, or the whole family? Additionally, time constraints did not enable my analyses to look at child and family well-being outcome measures, but it is important for future research to do so. Literature has already established the clear benefits to the structure of dinnertime and the ritual of togetherness; however it remains unknown whether a large part of the benefit of dinnertime is that family knowledge and history are communicated. Therefore, do some mealtime conversation topics yield better outcomes than others? Is the dinner table a primary outlet for the sharing of family stories, or are other venues equally or more important?

Family knowledge and family identity seem to be instrumental in the formation of an individual identity. From the results of this study, it is clear that the dinner table is an active forum for narrative conversation to occur. Whether about independent or shared experiences, children learn through this multi-perspective dialogue how to construct the narratives that form their individual and familial pasts, and use them to create a meaningful self-history.

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Table 1

Total Number of Narratives and Means (and Standard Deviations) classified by Theme

	n	% of total narratives	Mean per conversation
Independent event	77	32.77	2.08 (1.94)
Independent Relational	81	34.47	2.19 (1.97)
Shared (child-child)	14	5.96	0.38 (0.98)
Shared (child-parent)	42	17.87	1.14 (1.08)
Shared (parent-parent)	7	2.98	0.19 (.52)
Shared (whole family)	14	5.96	.38 (.76)

Table 2

Mean Number (and Standard Deviation) of Narrative Words per Narrative by Time, Narrative Type, and Speaker

	Mom	Dad	Children	Narrative Mean
Recent				
Independent	32.9 (29.8)	28.0 (36.6)	41.8 (42.1)	102.7 (71.7)
Shared	58.7 (176.7)	24.8 (62.4)	49.8 (151.6)	133.3 (384.4)
Remote				
Independent	43.5 (101.0)	19.6 (35.8)	21.2 (28.8)	84.3 (118.5)
Shared	26.2 (34.1)	17.1 (29.0)	26.8 (37.8)	70.0 (79.7)

Table 3

Predictors of Child Initiations in Recent Independent Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
1. Narratives	47.86	1,35	.00**	.58				
2. Narratives, Children	27.08	2,34	.00**	.61	3.24	1,34	.08+	.04
3. Narratives, Children, M words	20.63	3,33	.00**	.65	3.60	1,33	.07+	.04
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	16.60	4,32	.00**	.68	2.22	1,32	.15	.02

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 4

Predictors of Child Initiations in Recent Shared Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
1. Narratives	28.71	1,35	.00**	.45				
2. Narratives, Children	14.69	2,34	.00**	.46	.82	1,34	.37	.01
3. Narratives, Children, M words	9.52	3,33	.00**	.46	.03	1,33	.88	.00
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	7.47	4,32	.00**	.48	1.16	1,32	.29	.02

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 5

Predictors of Child Initiations in Remote Independent Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
1. Narratives	66.44	1,35	.00**	.66				
2. Narratives, Children	34.62	2,34	.00**	.67	1.62	1,34	.21	.02
3. Narratives, Children, M words	33.54	3,33	.00**	.75	11.00	1,33	.00**	.08
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	35.71	4,32	.00**	.82	11.18	1,32	.00**	.06

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 6

Predictors of Child Initiations in Remote Shared Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
1. Narratives	29.80	1,35	.00**	.46				
2. Narratives, Children	14.52	2,34	.00**	.46	.05	1,34	.83	.00
3. Narratives, Children, M words	12.97	3,33	.00**	.54	5.79	1,33	.02*	.08
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	15.82	4,32	.00**	.66	11.71	1,32	.00**	.12

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 7

Predictors of Child Talk in Recent Independent Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
1. Narratives	35.21	1,35	.00**	.50				
2. Narratives, Children	27.14	2,34	.00**	.62	10.01	1,34	.00**	.11
3. Narratives, Children, M words	19.83	3,33	.00**	.64	2.63	1,33	.11	.03
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	16.00	4,32	.00**	.67	2.24	1,32	.11	.02

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 8

Predictors of Child Talk in Recent Shared Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
1. Narratives	8.38	1,35	.01**	.19				
2. Narratives, Children	4.07	2,34	.03*	.19	.00	1,34	.96	.00
3. Narratives, Children, M words	85.09	3,33	.00**	.886	199.56	1,33	.00**	.69
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	63.71	4,32	.00**	.888	.84	1,32	.34	.00

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 9

Predictors of Child Talk in Remote Independent Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
1. Narratives	50.69	1,35	.00**	.59				
2. Narratives, Children	27.31	2,34	.00**	.62	2.20	1,34	.15	.03
3. Narratives, Children, M words	21.85	3,33	.00**	.67	4.81	1,33	.04*	.05
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	20.62	4,32	.00**	.72	6.34	1,32	.02*	.06

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 10

Predictors of Child Talk in Remote Shared Narratives

Model	<u>Overall Model</u>				<u>R-square change</u>			
	F	df	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔF	df	<i>p</i>	Δ <i>R</i> ²
1. Narratives	60.09	1,35	.00**	.63				
2. Narratives, Children	29.75	2,34	.00**	.64	.42	1,34	.52	.00
3. Narratives, Children, M words	21.69	3,33	.00**	.66	2.66	1,33	.11	.03
4. Narratives, Children, M words, F words	16.38	4,32	.00**	.67	.81	1,32	.37	.01

Note. Narratives = number of recent independent narratives; Children = number of children present at the dinnertime conversation; M words = number of words said by mothers in recent independent narratives; F words = number of words said by fathers in recent independent narratives.

***p* < .01

**p* < .05

+*p* < .10

Figure 1. Number of Narratives by Time and Narrative Type

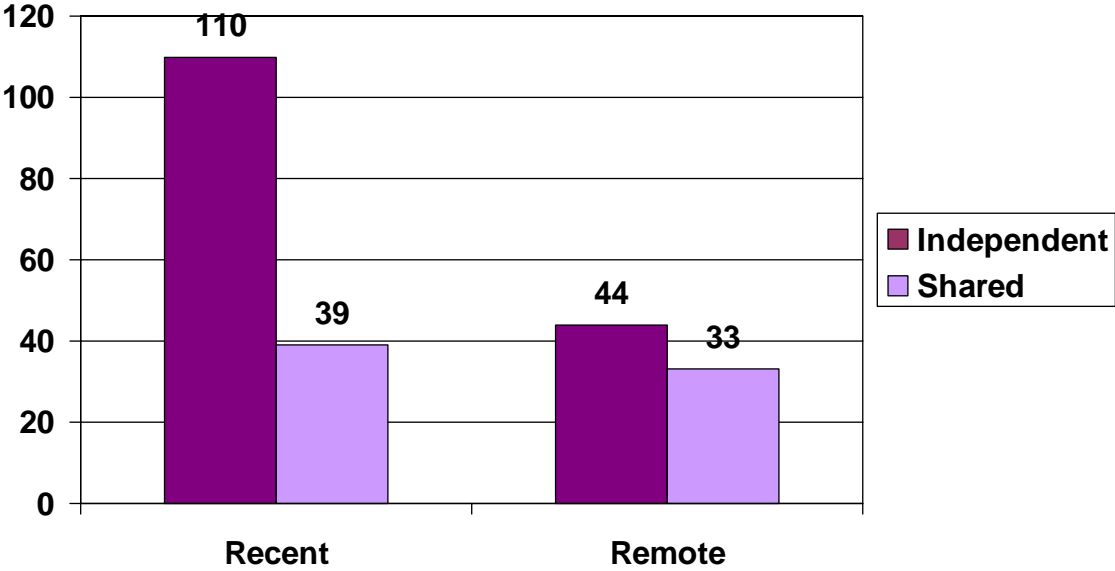


Figure 2. Total Number of Initiations by Person across Narrative Type

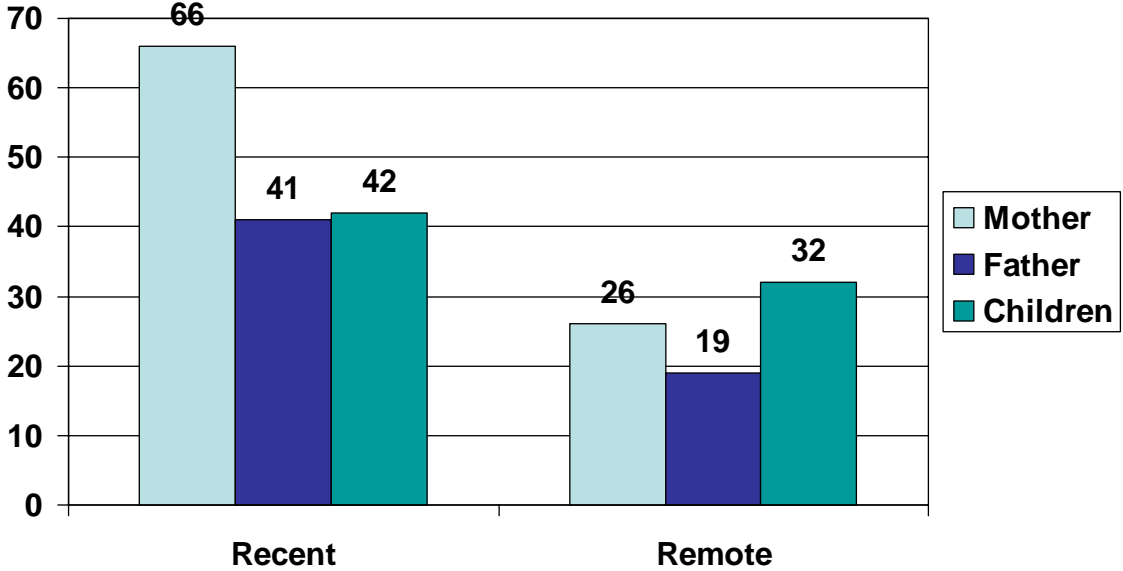


Figure 3. Mean Number of Words (and standard deviations) per Dinner Conversation by Person across Narrative

