

## **Narratives and Resilience in Middle-Class, Dual-Earner Families**

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We all create our own life narrative; in constructing and recounting our past, we are simultaneously constructing and reconstructing our selves. In the words of Rosenwald and Ochberg,

How individuals recount their histories – what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience – all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned” (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p.1).

But obviously the stories of our lives unfold within rich social and cultural contexts. The stories that we form and that we tell are created with other people and are told and retold in everyday interactions. Perhaps the most important site for story telling, at least for young children, is the family. The ways in which families construct and reconstruct the events of their lives provides a sense of identity both for each individual family member as well as for the family as a whole.

At the MARIAL Center at Emory, we are conducting a study of family narratives, focusing on the ways in which families create shared stories of past experiences. Most important, we are trying to establish ways in which family narratives are linked to resilience, the ability to cope with and recover from stressful experiences. Initially, we focused on working families for two reasons. First, as family structure becomes more complicated, with both parents working in and out of the house, and negotiating more complex parent and child schedules, the ways in which families come back together at the end of the day becomes a critical point in daily life for families to recreate themselves as an emotionally cohesive unit for the construction and support of individual identities. Second, because working families are already under stress, when specific stressful events occur, family members are even more dependent on each other to provide a source of emotional understanding and integration necessary for individual coping.

Sadly, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a third reason for our study emerged, the need to find ways of immunizing all families in America—working and non-working alike—against the clearly inevitable stress of unpredictable future events that will affect us individually and collectively. Our data set—information on family adjustment, coping patterns, use of narratives, child adjustment—for the most part pre-existed September 11.

Thus, without planning to do so, we have the wherewithal not only to assess the relationship between family narratives and family adjustment, but also to do so in a design wherein all families experienced the same external stressor at exactly the same time. This will allow us to examine immediate, short term and long term effects in a remarkably controlled fashion.

As mentioned, we have completed data collection on 40 working families living in the metro-Atlanta region. These are two-parent families with a target child between the ages of 9 and 12 years. Most of these families have other children as well, and many are blended or extended families. We chose families with a pre-adolescent child because we know from the clinical literature that the teenage years are particularly rife with family conflict and this is the developmental period when children are most likely to begin to have problems with identity that can lead to serious outcomes such as delinquency, depression and substance abuse. Thus we targeted families just before a developmental high-risk period with the hope of establishing family patterns of communication that may buffer children from the difficulties of navigating the teenage years. To this was added the opportunity of observing target children and their families as they deal, together and separately, with the after-effects of September 11. Our goal is to follow these families over the next several years to assess long-term relations among family narratives, family functioning and individual outcome.

### **Spontaneous and elicited narratives**

With each of these families, we collected both spontaneous and elicited narratives. Spontaneous narratives emerged from audiotaped dinnertime conversations, similar to work that has been done by Elinor Ochs, Barbara Fiese and others. These narratives elucidate the ways in which working families negotiate individual and family identity, within the context of reestablishing cohesiveness at the end of the day. We also gathered elicited narratives in which we asked the family to talk about two events that they shared together, a stressful experience and an emotionally positive experience. (This was pre-September 11; our plan now is to return to each family and determine how they coped with that tragedy.) We also included elicited narratives to examine the specific ways in which families create coherent identities through shared highly emotional experiences.

Why are we focusing on narratives as a way of assessing family communication and functioning? As noted, there are both theoretical and empirical reasons to conclude that narratives are a predominant way in which individuals make sense of their experiences and themselves. And as others have argued, we too, propose that narratives are constructed in social interaction. In previous research, one of us (RF) examined the content and structure of parent-child reminiscing about shared past experiences across the preschool years, and demonstrated two important things. First, there are systematic and consistent individual differences in the ways in which parents reminisce with their young children. Second, and equally important, these individual differences are linked to children's developing abilities to tell the stories of their lives. Those children whose parents engage in richly elaborated, emotionally integrated reminiscing become able to tell more coherent, more detailed, and more emotionally integrated narratives of their

own past. These kinds of results point to the importance of adult structuring or “scaffolding” of children’s developing personal narratives.

Within the clinical literature, there is increasing evidence that elaborated and emotionally integrated narratives of past experiences, and especially of stressful and traumatic events, are related to better coping and outcome. In fact, for trauma survivors, the most effective therapeutic intervention is narrative therapy, in which the therapist helps the individual to create a coherent account of the traumatic event. (Much of this was done with survivors of the World Trade Center destruction.) Extrapolating from these two areas of research, we propose that families that are able to help each other create coherent and emotionally meaningful accounts of past experiences, and especially of stressful experiences, were more resilient even in the face of a tragedy of the magnitude of September 11 and will be more resilient to the everyday stressors that all of us face.

In order to assess this connection, in addition to gathering family narratives, we also collected a great deal of standardized data from each family member concerning various aspects of individual and family functioning. These measures included: 1) The Family Inventory of Life Events (FILE), which assess the number and extent of stressful events each family has faced; 2) The Family Hardiness Index (FHI), and 4) The Family Functioning Scale (FFS), which assess type and level of family functioning; and two measures of individual functioning, including, 1) The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (ANSIE), which assess the extent to which individuals believe they have control over their life experiences, and 5) The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), which assess specific child behavior problems including depression, anxiety and acting out.

Thus ultimately we will be able to link aspects of family narratives to standardized measures of psychological well-being. Here in this working paper, however, we are going to focus on a preliminary qualitative analysis of two of our families narrating a stressful event. Through these excerpts, we hope to demonstrate the value of using these kinds of data to establish how family members co-construct their experiences in ways that may hinder or facilitate individual identity and resilience.

### **Excerpts from family narratives**

The first family is an extended family structure, two biological parents, one 10 year old son and the maternal grandmother. When asked to narrate a stressful event, the child jumps in and begins:

TC: Uh when I broke my leg.

Mom: Um huh.

TC: I really didn’t like that, cuz I had to wear a cast, and before I had to wear a cast I had to wear a knee brace and it covered just my knee and it was really small, but it still hurt because my leg would kinda of spasm a lot.

Dad: Um huh!

Mom: I know.

TC: I didn’t like that, and um ya know, and then I got my cast on and everything was kinda better that m-my leg didn’t spasm at all and um it was kinda easier to walk

around on crutches. Because my leg was bent instead of flat out straight and um, it was just easier for me to walking knowing that, uh I didn't have to bend my leg.  
Dad: You wouldn't be banging it on the ground.

TC: Yeah, and I wouldn't be banging it, and I could just kinda lift it. It was kinda heavy, though and it was really itchy.

Mom: (laughing)

TC: So the first week was horrible.

Dad: Um huh.

TC: Because it was so itchy and I had the worst time trying to sleep.

Dad: I remember that.

TC: Yeah.

So here, we see that the child tells his part of the story, and the parents affirm and express commiseration through back-channeling. The child is encouraged to provide his account of the event and his subjective evaluations are confirmed and validated. The father then asks the son to expand on his experience, in particular to express his emotional reactions:

Dad: Do you remember going to the hospital that night?

TC: Yeah.

Dad: That was kinda painful for you wasn't it?

TC: Yeah

Dad: I remember you laying down in the backseat of the Subaru <wagon,

TC: Car, yeah,

Dad: Crying and just, just,

TC: It hurt.

Dad: just it was tearing me up to hear you so hurting and then they were moving you around it was like your legs banging the floor and your going Ahhh! And then you had to get up on the table to get the X-rays.

TC: Yeah.

Dad: And they're moving your leg around and I think that hurt too didn't it?

TC: Yeah.

Here we see the father not only confirming his son's emotional reaction but also affirming it in the sense that the father, too, was emotionally distraught; they share the sense of the experience together as a shared emotional moment. The father and son continue to talk about this experience for a while, and then the father turns to the mother who has been quiet up to this point and asks her to join in to the conversation:

Dad: What did you think?

Mom: I was pretty freaked out about the whole thing because I got all worried, I really didn't like that you were in so much pain and you're leg was spasming, and you were crying and ya know I didn't know how to make it stop hurting and,

Dad: Um huh.

Mom: Ya know, moms don't like when there little one gets hurt. Not good, and um ya know then I got worried about the whole thing when Dad said, oh, they said we have to go see this doctor a pediatric orthopedic oncologist, and I was like what.

TC: (laughing)

Mom: And ya know, you were looking at the X-ray in the car going this isn't normal is it? Ya know where the bone cyst was. And going, no that is why we are going to the doctor, and then when the doctor looked at it and said it is fine it is just a regular bone cyst, we were like Ohhh!

Dad: Big relief.

Mom: So relieved.

Dad: Big relief.

Mom: Big relief. So, um, so then a broken leg was still pain for you but it was such a relief for us that, that was all it was and um for me and m- and um and so uh I don't know, I just um but you have been a real trooper, really you have.

Dad: Um huh!

Here, the mother talks about her emotional upheaval at this event, especially a scare involving a possible bone tumor. The parents share a clear emotional moment in reliving the relief of the cyst being normal. But rather than keeping the focus on themselves, the mother then brings the focus back onto her son, and how well he has been handling the whole situation. So each family member talks about their own feelings and reactions, but the parents keep the focus on the son. This is his event. The mother then makes a very interesting move – she turns from the negative aspects of the experience to put a more positive spin on things:

Mom: Oh! What I loved was when the day you went back to school,

Grandmother: Oh dear!

Mom: And you had your cast on, oh this is supposed to be a negative thing but this is so positive that, ya know it was so neat that you went in to the classroom and kids were all in another place and kids came in one by one ya know.

TC: Yeah they were, they were in lunch and then they came in and they were all looking at me and I was sitting in the chair. Hey, Dylan, you're back, what happened? They all wanted to sign my cast.

Grandmother: We didn't see you for about five minutes.

TC: Yeah!

Grandmother: There was just so many kids around, (unintelligible)

TC: xxx was like I asked to go first, it was just like funny ya know.

Dad: Um huh.

Grandmother: So did you like being the center of attention that day?

Dad: Oh that at that grin, of course he did.

The mother explicitly acknowledges the negative aspects of the event but also talks about the outpouring of social support and what a positive thing that was. This is the only place in the entire conversation that the grandmother chimes in at all. It is almost as if she were allowing the nuclear family unit to deal with their stressful experience together without her intrusion, but now that the focus is on a positive aspect, she feels free to contribute.

At the end, the whole family has resolved their negative emotions, their fear and stress and brought the conversation around to a reasonably positive resolution, still focused on the child. The family together constructs a coherent and emotionally integrated account of the event, confirming each other's contributions and emotional reactions. At no point is the child's interpretations or emotional reactions to the experience questioned or negated; rather the child is always affirmed and validated.

### **Narratives from a blended family**

Contrast this with the second family. This is a blended family: a father, stepmother and 10-year-old son, and also a new infant. To place it in perspective, the father and son have been having a series of conflicts since moving into this new house just before the new baby was born. Here, the father begins the conversation focusing immediately on the son's emotional state the day before.

Dad: so, so yesterday, um... you were sad about what?

TC: I was just getting bored and stuff (unintelligible)

Dad: none answered the problem, okay and a... and you and I um... were having difficulty communicating

TC: well

Dad: and a...I think I was getting kind of put out with you.

Mom: You were doing some heavy housework

Dad: yeah, yeah

Mom: cleaning and um... moving around

Dad: so anyway, um.. I guess that I was lucky, talk about, you know, what that felt like. From my standpoint, I would like to hear what it felt like from your and Belle anything you were sort of on the sidelines so anything you want to say will be helpful. Um... so do want to, do you want to go first or do you want me to (unintelligible), so what I think what happens to me is you know you're my son and I don't like to see you um... feeling a miserable, you know, and I think also I feel responsible for that and um... but I also know that I made certain things that I have to do for the household like yesterday we were moving his room um.. or moving his crib into his room and getting that set up and that something, that's (unintelligible) to do earlier this week and I said to Belle that I had it done yesterday and a... so you were, you know, you were really bored, which I guess you know that, that's not the purpose of (unintelligible).

TC: a-ha

Dad: and, um, and so I felt myself, um, at that point in time, I think I just wanted you to um... to take care of it yourself and not bother me with it, but, but I still couldn't quite ignore it, I think I... think it was getting to me and then that makes me kind of frustrated when I let it get to me and I let it bother me because I'm trying to get things done (unintelligible) kept on slowing me down and a... um... So that's how I felt at first and I just wanted to be able to say: Joseph we're going to get

together this evening, we're going to do some, you know, we're going  
 (unintelligible) together and I wanted you to figure out what to do with yourself.  
 TC: okay

What we see here stands in sharp contrast to the first family. First, the father selects the event and chooses to talk about the day before when he and his son were in conflict. But although he initially says he wants to ask about what the son was feeling, he doesn't let his son speak. Instead he monologues about how he himself was feeling. And again, although he also says how he feels miserable when his son is upset, as did the first father, this father then turns it on the son by claiming that it is in some sense his son's fault for both of them feeling stressed. Clearly, the father focuses on his own emotions and does not elicit or acknowledge his son's emotions. The father then solicits his son's reactions again:

Dad: in the meantime, now I have more to say about later on, um.. but tell us, tell me.

TC: well, it was like I was really bored and I was sick of watching TV and I thought ...

Then the baby started crying and it was hurting my ear, irritating me and you said that I just trying to reject what you were saying and um... so (unintelligible) of anybody and didn't know what to do. It's not (unintelligible) for four hours and um.. I didn't, I didn't think that we were going to do anything with the (unintelligible) game night, so and a... then we weren't supposed to (unintelligible) went to the (unintelligible) so, it got better.

Dad: so, so

TC: I was supposed to (unintelligible) for four hours so <watching TV>

Dad: <yeah so> do you think if you had known that things were going to turn out good in the end that it would have been easier to tolerate the waiting, if you knew like I was going to see a movie with dad and it's going to be good and do you think that would of made the waiting any more tolerable or would..

Here, the son gets his chance to tell why he was upset, but rather than acknowledging his son's emotional difficulties, especially around issues of sharing his father with the new baby, the father does not validate his son's emotional state or discuss the underlying reasons; he simply defends himself by restating that he did spend time with his son later that day. Even though he does not acknowledge his son's emotional reactions, he continues to ask for them. However, he dictates how his son should express his emotions:

Dad: so maybe we can, kind of try to talk to me, you know, like, Dad, you know...

Mom: This is how I feel, this how (unintelligible)

Dad: This is how I feel, yeah, kind of like when you come up and your like, "I'm so bored," you know that I think that's like the bait that you cast out in your netting, and I usually take it and then I have to start telling you that you have to be responsible for, you know, finding things to do while I'm working and I start, I start, and then I start making suggestions and trying to solve it for you and then you all, what would we do, or I don't want to do that and then you do that little dance that we do, or you know, I end up saying mean things to you, um, so I think

- if you knew, tell me, tell me if this sounds true, actually I want you to tell me how, how you, what you think would work better for you. Do you know?
- TC: um.. just um.. like
- Dad: hang on just a sec ( baby cries) So, so, you knew what was coming up.
- TC: yeah if I could like (unintelligible)
- Dad: okay, so I said the (unintelligible) have a friend, go ahead and just take him out just out there (unintelligible), if you want to have a friend over then that's something you want to plan to have during the week, and I'll help with that if I need to talk to parents or anything like that but if you start planning, have plans to have a friend over at one o'clock on Saturday most kids are going to already have their plans and it's going to make it harder, so, so I guess that's the deal I'll strike with you, if you will, if you will try to figure out which friend you want to see and let's plan it during the week and then you won't have to wonder on Saturday what you are going to do, and I guess that I'm going to do is I will let you know, I'll try to let you know what we're doing, what you can expect, and I think that I, I guess, to some degree I think I did that yesterday. I said that I promise you that we will get together after I do the house work this evening and you know, we'll have fun but I think you were questioning, you were, all you heard about was the game night and that didn't sound (unintelligible), I think you were worried (unintelligible)

Although the father asks for his son's version of the event and his emotional reactions, in fact, he never allows his son to express his own perspective. In contrast to the first family, in which the son's narrative was confirmed and validated, this son's perspective was dismissed. His version of the event was reinterpreted and his emotional reactions were negated. Moreover the constructed version of what occurred follows no clear or coherent story line; there is no sense of a family narrative.

### **Differences in family narratives**

So from this very preliminary exploration of these two different family narratives we can already see differences in how families are making sense of their shared experiences and the ways in which this sense making can lead to cohesive family identities or divided identities. The ways in which families accept or refute, corroborate or deny, and validate or invalidate each other's contributions and perspectives we think will have profound implications for how individual family members come to understand themselves in relation to the family. Those families who co-construct coherent, emotionally integrated version of their shared past are simultaneously building identities based on self-worth and validation. What we hope to demonstrate in the larger project is that these coherent, emotionally integrated family narratives are linked to a positive sense of individual identity and resilience in the face of inevitable stresses and challenges associated with normal development as well as in response to the unpredictable events of this modern world.