

An ecological systems approach to family narratives

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Abstract

We propose an ecological systems approach to family narratives that describes three dynamically interacting systems of family narratives: shared family narratives, communicative family narratives, and family history. We review developmental research on family storytelling within each of these levels and describe how they interact to create individual narrative identity, focusing on adolescence.

Keywords

autobiographical memory, collective memory, ecological systems, family narratives

It was my mother's second year when she had a troubling experience. My mother's final exams were approaching and she was doing her best to cope with the workload and the stress. After revising for a sufficient amount of time my mother decided to take a break and clear her mind. However, as my mother stepped out of her room she heard a lot of noise coming from down the hall. There was a crowd of people craning their heads out the window trying to glimpse down at something. My mother's curiosity got the better of her so she exited the building only to find there was an even bigger crowd outside and an area sectioned off by police tape. As my mother made her way through the crowd she felt excited partly but mostly worried as she had no idea what was going on. My mother finally got a glimpse of what the people were trying to see and ultimately my mother felt physically sick as she was staring at one of her classmates, who also happened to live a few doors down from her. He had committed suicide as he felt overwhelmed by his workload. Although my mother had only exchanged a few words with him everyday or so, my mother was enveloped by grief and self-hate as she wished she could have done something to help him. Ultimately my mother did the only thing she could think of to help him. She prayed for his well-being in the afterlife and she asked God to guide him and help him find the answers to the questions he seeks. Although my mother was initially scared and grief-stricken during this incident, she came to the conclusion that life is fragile and should never be taken for granted.

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In this narrative example, told by a male college student, we see the richness and complexity of how narrative memories are used to understand others and construct individual identity. This example also illustrates that memory itself is a slippery construct. Whose memory is this? The experience occurred before this narrator was born. The original narrator (the parent) experienced the event years before she told it to her child and had likely shared this experience multiple times previously, creating subtly different narrative accounts each time. The parent most likely told this story to her child for a particular reason, and thus the narrative was told in a particular way. The adolescent experienced hearing the narrative, filtered through his own personal experiences, connecting his experiences and his parent's experiences in some meaningful way to create this story. Perhaps, what is most amazing considering this complexity is that it matters how adolescents tell family narratives, both shared family experiences and family history. Adolescents who know and tell family narratives show higher levels of identity development and psychosocial well-being. That memories are related to well-being highlights that memories are as oriented to the future as to the past. As argued by multiple authors in this volume (Conway et al., 2016; MacLeod, 2016; Schacter and Madore, 2016), memories guide future selves and future behaviors. We argue that narratives of others, especially family members, also become part of our own autobiography and guide our personal future.

We propose an ecological systems approach that place family narratives at the juncture of the individual and culture. We first present an overview of the theoretical model, beginning with an explication of why narratives are important for identity and how an ecological systems approach can help delineate the role of family narratives in individual autobiography. We then describe each ecological system, or niche, of family narratives in developmental context. Throughout, we highlight individual autobiography as deeply informed by multiple systems of family narratives and family history.

The ecology of family narratives

Narratives as identity

Narratives are culturally canonical linguistic forms that provide a structure for the fluidity of lived experience and the creation of a coherent and continuous identity (Conway et al., 2016; McAdams, 2001; Ricoeur, 1991). Narratives move beyond simple chronological accounts to include thoughts, emotions, motivations, intentions, and evaluations, essentially describing a human drama of self and others (Bruner, 1990). Although memory and narratives are not isomorphic and autobiographical memories are represented in multiple modalities, narratives provide a form for expressing autobiographical memories to others and to ourselves, and thus simultaneously shape how we subsequently remember our past (see Fivush et al., 2011b, for a full theoretical discussion of this distinction). As we share our experiences, we understand them in new ways, framed by others' interpretations and evaluations. And as others tell us their experiences, we understand our own experiences in new ways as well, using others' stories as frames. Evidence from both neuroscience (Dudai and Edelson, 2016) and social psychology (Merck et al., 2016) demonstrates how memories are shaped and reshaped in social interactions. Memories of personal experiences are constructed through ongoing dynamic and reciprocal interactions between the developing individual and persons, institutions, and surrounding culture. In a very real sense, just as Young (2016) argues that monuments and memorials must be considered as individual and collective simultaneously, so must autobiographical memories.

Family narratives as embedded niches

We propose that family narratives comprise embedded layers of “ecological niches” simultaneously informed by narratives that families share among themselves and cultural narratives that inform individual and family lives (see also McAdams, 2004; McLean and Breen, 2016). Based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems approach, human development is conceptualized as occurring within a series of nested systems or ecologies. The guiding theoretical principle, as further articulated by Wang (2016), is that the individual is, from the moment of birth, embedded within social and cultural systems that inform and infuse every interaction. At the center of this system is the individual; this includes individual characteristics (biology and temperament), person variables (race and gender), as well as individual trajectory (developing cognitive and socio-emotional skills). At all points, the individual child is at the center of the system, and individual differences are a critical component of how these interacting ecologies develop over time. Moving out from the center is the micro-system, comprising social others with whom the individual interacts on a regular basis (the family, the school, and the peer group). The family is the core of the micro-system in that it is the first ecology with which the individual interacts and it remains throughout development. Even if specific family members or statuses change through births, deaths, divorces, and so on, these are the individuals who comprise an ongoing highly significant group within which the individual develops. The micro-system is embedded within the exo-system, which comprises ecologies that impinge on the child even if not directly experienced, such as the parent’s workplace. At the outermost level is the macro-system comprising the cultural constructs, social and economic conditions, and history. Two points must be emphasized. First, the systems, or niches, are permeable and dynamically interacting at all points in development. Second, there is increasingly shared meaning, as individuals participate in familial and cultural shared narratives, with the greatest shared meaning constructed at the level of cultural institutions such as narratives of politics and religion (see Welker, 2016).

We adapt Bronfenbrenner’s general model to the domain of family narratives, as shown in Figure 1. We build on McLean’s idea of “narrative ecologies” (McLean, 2016; McLean and Breen, 2016) that describes how identity develops in adolescence through narratives constructed within personal stories, family stories, and the cultural macro-system, as expressed through master narratives, media, and technology. Our model expands this idea across development and details how the exo- and macro-systems are explicitly brought into the child’s evolving micro-system in everyday family storytelling.

Briefly, the micro-system consists of shared family narratives, stories told about experiences that parents and children engaged in together. Thus, shared family narratives are both directly experienced and narrated by the family. At the exo-system are narratives that family members tell that have not been directly experienced by all members of the family. These are stories about events the teller has experienced but the listener has not and include at least two kinds of narratives: First, are the narratives that children have experienced but the other family members have not; these include stories children tell their parents about their day at school, activities with friends, and so on (Wang and Song, 2014). These stories remain part of children’s personal experiences, but may be re-evaluated in light of reminiscing about them with family members. Second, and more interesting for our purposes here, are stories not directly experienced by the child, but told to the child by other family members, especially parents. Here, we focus on two types of parent narratives: narratives that parents tell about their activities in their current lives, such as daily work experiences and narratives parents tell about their own personal past, such as stories of their own childhood experiences. These latter narratives, that we call intergenerational narratives and Assman

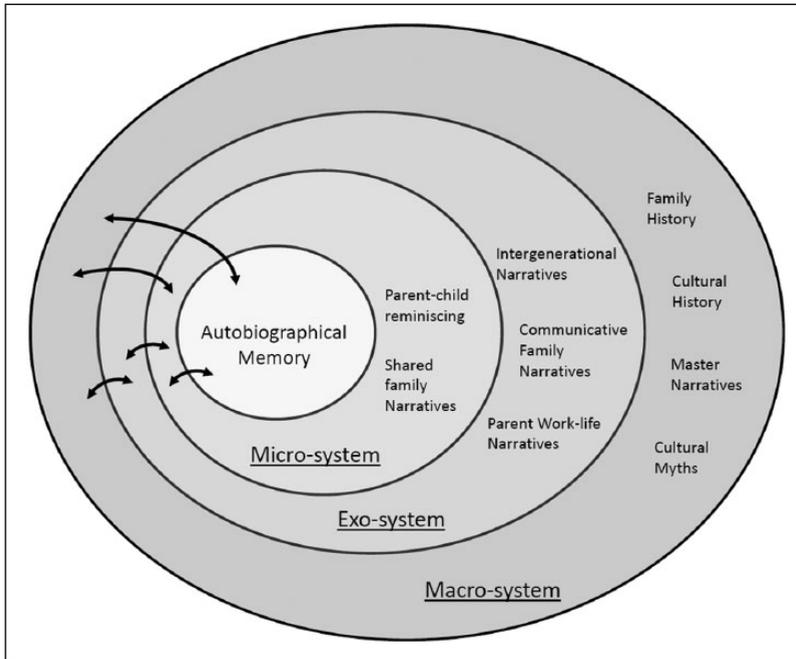


Figure 1. Ecological systems model of family narratives (adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory).

(1995) calls communicative memories, are memories of lived experience by the teller that can span one to two generations. Although not directly experienced by the listener, communicative family narratives have immediacy in that the teller is narrating personally experienced events, and tellers and listeners have a personal connection. Finally, at the macro-system are the more extended family histories, stories about great-grandparents and family ancestors that have moved into family myth passed down across the generations or what Assman calls cultural memory. Here, too, are the larger cultural narrative frames that define the shape of a life (Habermas and Bluck, 2000), as well as the cultural master narratives, often embodied within mass media, as described by McLean and Breen (2016). We emphasize, as depicted by the bidirectional arrows connecting all system levels, that systems are in constant and dynamic interaction. Individual autobiographies are reciprocally created within family stories of shared experiences, intergenerational exploits, and family myths, all of which are infused by social, cultural, and historical narrative frames.

The micro-system: shared family narratives

Early emergence of shared family narratives

Infants are born into storied worlds. From birth, stories are told to and around infants—stories of the family, fables, and fairy tales. These form the exo-system and macro-system that surround the micro-system of the immediate family and will be discussed in later sections, but it is important to note that this is the niche within which shared family narratives emerge. Focusing on the micro-system, parents and children begin to engage in co-constructing narratives of shared experiences virtually as soon as children begin to talk. Children learn both the forms and functions of

autobiographical narratives through engaging in parentally guided reminiscing (see Fivush, 2013, for a review). At this early phase, parents provide most of the content and structure essentially pulling the child into a narrative telling. Critically, there are individual differences in family narrative style. Most of the research has focused on mothers (but see Fivush and Zaman, 2014, for a review of research with fathers), and much of it has focused on industrialized Western cultures. How family narratives may differ by culture is beyond the scope of this article, but Wang (2016) provides an eloquent discussion of cultural differences in reminiscing.

In co-constructing narratives with their children, mothers vary along a dimension of elaboration, with some mothers providing more highly detailed, coherent, and emotionally expressive narratives of the shared past than other mothers. Individual differences between mothers are stable over time and siblings, but importantly, narrative talk is not related to maternal talk in other contexts (Fivush, 2013), and this continues to be the case as children grow into adolescence (Merrill et al., 2015). This suggests that family narratives are a particular niche within family talk more broadly and likely serve particular communicative functions. By the end of the preschool years, children of more elaborative mothers are telling more detailed and coherent narratives of their own personal experiences than are children of less elaborative mothers, and these effects continue into adolescence (see Fivush et al., 2011a, for a review). Thus, what we see in early childhood is the emergence of culturally mediated narrative forms for expressing one's experiences in coherent ways, and this form is shaped by the social interactions in which parents and children reminisce about shared experiences together.

Adolescence and narrative identity

Shared family narratives take on an increasingly important meaning in adolescence, when a primary developmental concern becomes the exploration of identity (Erikson, 1968) through narrative meaning-making; adolescents begin to reflect on what their experiences mean in terms of who they are as individuals; they begin to use narratives both to express their identity to others (see McLean and Syed, 2015, for a review) and to use the narratives of others as frameworks for understanding themselves (Pratt and Fiese, 2004). Thus, adolescents become more invested, independent participants in family storytelling. As during the preschool years, adolescents' families show individual differences in how they co-narrate shared experiences (see Fivush et al., 2010, for review). Some families show a highly collaborative style, with all family members integrating bits and pieces into a coherent ongoing story, compared to less collaborative families, where each family member tells their part of the story but there is little integration across the pieces. Highly collaborative families also engage in more emotional expression and explanation than do less collaborative families. And, families that narrate highly collaborative, emotionally expressive narratives of shared family experiences, especially stressful experiences, have adolescents who show higher levels of self-esteem, perceived social competence, academic competence, and fewer internalizing behaviors (anxiety, depression, withdrawal) and externalizing (anger, aggression, acting out) behaviors than adolescents of families who narrate less collaborative and emotionally expressive narratives. Thus, shared family narratives are an important mechanism through which children and adolescents create identity and psychosocial well-being.

The exo-system: communicative family narratives

Whereas many family narratives are of shared experiences within the micro-system, others move out into the exo-system, events experienced by the teller but not by the listener. Although not directly experienced by the child, parents, relatives, and others bring a multitude of experiences

into the micro-system through family narratives shared on a daily basis, and through these narratives, children are exposed to worlds larger than they can directly experience. Parents and grandparents begin telling stories even to infants, telling newborns stories about the family in which they have been born (see Pratt and Fiese, 2004, for a review).

There is surprisingly sparse psychological research on these kinds of communicative family narratives (but see Pratt and Fiese, 2004), but we have begun to examine them in the Family Narratives Project (see Fivush et al., 2011a, for an overview). Here, we use our study of family dinnertime conversations as an illustration of the variety of family stories told on a regular basis (Bohanek et al., 2009; Merrill et al., 2015). At the dinner table, we see how multiple narrative ecologies come together around a family sharing their day and their lives; thus, this is a perfect context to examine how the macro- and exo-systems are brought into the micro-system on a daily basis through family storytelling. Narratives are introduced into family dinner conversations approximately every 5 minutes. Although some of these stories are co-narrations of shared family experiences, the majority of narratives around the dinner table are communicative family narratives, stories of one family member not directly experienced by other family members.

Many of these communicative family narratives are “Today I” narratives, stories of what individual family members did during the day. These stories account for just over half of all narratives told. Not surprisingly, about half of these are the children telling about their day at school often at the request of the parents, but perhaps surprisingly about half of these stories are narratives told by the parents about their day at work. Parental work stories reflect the exo-system, that is, events not directly experienced by the child, but by being told around the dinner table, these experiences are brought into the child’s world, giving children a glimpse into the larger environments in which they are embedded. To illustrate, in this excerpt, the mother of 11-year-old Micah and 9-year-old Melissa (pseudonyms) shared the story of a workplace incident at dinnertime. She recounts witnessing a customer in her store shoplifting greeting cards while the manager of the store was not present:

Mother: So, I was stalled because I knew right then I said, “I know that lady took that card.” But I couldn’t, you know, I couldn’t say nothing. So I reluctantly ... I was trying to think of what to do. So I went on and closed up the drawer and we was going back up front ... she had went in the back with ... so she turned around and went up front first and I walked behind her. By the time she turned around to walk in, I saw the card sticking out of her sweater.

Micah: Uh huh.

Mother: So I went and got the card out of her sweater. I said, “What is this?” She’s talking about, “I don’t know how that got there.”

Micah: Uh huh.

Melissa: Ha ha.

Mother: So I went and told Janice ... Janice was helping some customers. So I said, “Janice can you come here just for a minute?” So Janice came and I told her. I said, “This lady stole this card.” I said, “She had it in her pants under her sweater.” So the lady then denied that she got it. She just kept saying, “I want to pay for this card.” Well she, you know, cause she- I wanted to call the police on her. She’s talking about, well, she just kept saying, “I’m going to pay for this card.” The card that she- that I got from under her sweater.” (Laughs)

For brevity, we summarize the rest: the mother goes on to recount that she calls the manager, that the customer leaves the store, and that they decide not to call the police but only before discovering more stolen merchandise they had not realized was taken. The mother, in sharing this story

with her children, conveys more than just an action-by-action account. The parent is modeling what a “good” story looks like in the culture and how to structure a story to make it compelling. In doing so, the children are exposed to the mother’s perspective, what she was thinking and feeling at the time of the event (e.g. “I *know* that lady took the card ... I was trying to *think* of what to do.”), which contributes to children’s developing ability to take multiple narrative perspectives, and possibly to create more flexible future possibilities (see Conway et al., 2016; Schacter and Madore, 2016). Obviously, the parent is also modeling a world imbued with moral values and expressing personal conflicts that must be negotiated in this complex situation. By sharing their lives with their child through communicative family narratives and bringing the exo-system into the child’s micro-system through these narrative tellings, the parent is implicitly teaching the child how to understand their world and their place in it.

One of the most intriguing types of narrative to emerge across dinner conversations are intergenerational narratives, stories parents tell about their own childhood experiences. As described by Assman (1995), this kind of communicative memory crosses three generations, as individuals tell stories of lived experiences to the next generation, providing frameworks for the transmission of values and belief systems as embodied in these narratives. These stories are often cued by the context of the ongoing conversation (e.g. “I went through something similar when I was your age ...”). Thus, the parent explicitly brings their narrative into the child’s world, often providing explicit intergenerational links between the parent’s experiences and the child’s experiences, providing explanatory frameworks for the child to make sense of their own personal experiences. Intergenerational narratives offer unique glimpses to the child about moments from the parents’ own life story that may impart life lessons and instill values but may also involve events that express family identity, both the identity of parents as individuals and the identity of the family as a collective group with unifying features. Consider the example at the beginning of this article. In this narrative, an emerging adult describes a difficult event experienced by his mother in college. He is able to take the perspective of the mother (“enveloped by grief and self-hate ...”), which makes her coping with the situation all the more compelling (“She prayed for his well-being in the afterlife ...”). By describing her resulting outlook, “she came to the conclusion that life is fragile and should never be taken for granted,” the narrator concludes by drawing a connection to his mother’s change in world view. Although we do not know how the narrative was originally told, this example demonstrates how one may come to understand the self from past experiences. Furthermore, through these narratives, young people learn about their parents’ histories and identities.

That intergenerational narratives emerged reasonably frequently across typical dinnertime conversations suggests these are an important part of the family narrative ecology. Indeed, in a subsequent series of studies, we found that adolescents know and easily tell these kinds of intergenerational narratives, and that adolescents who make more explicit intergenerational links between themselves and their parents show higher levels of identity exploration, levels of self-esteem, levels of growth and autonomy, and lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (see Fivush et al., 2011, for a review). Thus, communicative family narratives are critical for developing identity and well-being. All this, of course, is informed by larger cultural narratives at the level of the macro-system.

The macro-system: family history

Family narratives are embedded within and informed by larger cultural narratives and myths. Cultural narrative frames define the shape of a life, including what and when prototypical experiences will occur (schooling, romantic partner, parenting, etc.) (Habermas and Bluck, 2000), and

include the myths and motifs that imbue our world view in ways that provide interpretive frameworks for lived experience. Cultural narratives include master narratives framed by the mass media (McLean and Breen, 2016), as well as stories and myths that define our histories and religious systems as a people (Stroumsa, 2016; Welker, 2016). Here, we focus on one specific aspect of the macro-system, family history that moves out of communicative memory to include ancestors and family myths. Clearly, family history is informed by cultural master narratives and motifs. A good example is McAdams' (2001) description of the "redemption" narrative, in which the individual overcomes great obstacles to achieve personal success. This master narrative is common in American stories of ancestors that overcame great odds to immigrate and live successful lives (Stone, 1988). There is very little empirical research on how these stories are transmitted across the generations, but we do know that adolescents who know more about their family history, such as where their grandparents were born and went to school, show higher levels of identity development and lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Duke et al., 2008). We have also seen in our research ways in which parents link their own stories to larger social and political cultural history. For example, several of the adolescents in our research narrate stories about their parents' involvement in the civil rights movement in the American south or link their larger family histories to significant historical events, such as World War II, the kind of intergenerational historical memory described by Svob and Brown (2012). By placing shared and communicative family narratives within the larger macro-structure of family history informed by cultural master narratives, family narratives link the individual to the larger cultural worlds in which they live. These worlds include historical and political memory (Young, 2016), as well as narratives that merge into the mythic stories of religious traditions (Stroumsa, 2016). We know that these stories are told, but we know little about how individuals incorporate these cultural and family history narratives into their own frameworks for developing personal narrative identity as members of families, communities and culture.

Conclusions and future directions

An ecological systems approach to family narratives provides a coherent framework for understanding how various types of family narratives are shared and brought into the individual's developing identity and well-being. At the micro-level, narratives of shared family experiences contribute to understanding one's experiences and the creation of a shared family history. At the exo-level, parents and other family members experience events outside of the realm of the child's experience, which they bring into the micro-system through communicative narratives. This facilitates the child's understanding of the larger world and their place in it. These narratives, particularly intergenerational narratives, create shared values and belief systems within the family and contribute to individual narrative identity by providing frameworks for understanding selves in the world. Finally, at the macro-level, family narratives are informed by family history, which is itself embedded in cultural world views and values. Importantly, we have shown how these different levels are brought to bear on developmental processes through the mechanism of family storytelling. Within these family narrative niches, children learn both how to tell their own narrative, as well as why narratives matter. Indeed, children and adolescents who share and tell more coherent, more emotionally expressive and explanatory narratives about self and about family show higher levels of identity development and psychosocial well-being. Research on family narratives is just beginning. We still know little about how these different types of family stories are differentially told within families and how each type of story may contribute differentially to individuals' developing narrative identity. This story is just beginning; there is much yet to be told.

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