

## *Remembering and reminiscing: How individual lives are constructed in family narratives*

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### **Abstract**

Stories we tell about our lives very much define who we are as individuals, within particular families, cultures and historical periods. In this article, I review psychological research that demonstrates how autobiographical memories are created and re-created in daily interactions in which we share our stories with others, and how this process is modulated by individual, gendered and cultural models of self expressed in everyday family reminiscing. I focus on two critical developmental periods: the preschool years when autobiography is just beginning to emerge; and adolescence when autobiographical memories begin to coalesce into an overarching life narrative that defines self, others and values. I show how individual differences in the ways in which families reminisce are related to individual autobiographical narratives. Importantly, just as our individual narratives are shaped by cultural and historical models of selves and lives, individuals come to shape their culture and their historical moment by the stories they tell.

### **Key words**

autobiography; narrative; memory; self; gender

*There were many such stories, and he understood just how important they were, and listened with patience and respect. A life without stories would be no life at all. And stories bound us, did they not, one to another, the living to the dead, people to animals, people to the land? (Smith, 2004: 189)*

From the moment infants enter the world, they are surrounded by stories – stories of their parents and their parents before them, of family and friends, and of how this new life will unfold and enrich the ongoing narrative (Fiese et al., 1995). The stories individuals tell about their lives, what psychologists have called autobiographical narratives, are critical at multiple levels of individual and cultural analysis. For individuals, autobiographical narratives define who we are in relation to our family, our nation, our

history. From cultural-historical perspectives, the stories that individuals tell are both shaped by and shape the very understanding of history in the making and in the past. The stories we tell shape our selves and the world in which we live.

Intriguingly, by the time toddlers begin to use language, they are already participating in sharing stories of the past with their parents, listening, confirming, adding bits and pieces of information, and by the end of the preschool years, children are actively engaged in telling and sharing the stories of their lives (see Nelson and Fivush, 2004 and Fivush, in press for reviews). As Bruner (1990) has argued, human beings are story tellers; it is through stories that we understand our worlds and ourselves. In this article, I describe how children come to tell the stories of themselves and their families, and how this process is constructed in family reminiscing that values the having and telling of a life story, and that varies by individual, culture and by gender. The premise throughout is that memory in general, and autobiographical memory in particular, is constructed in social interactions in which particular events, and particular interpretations of events, are highlighted, shared, negotiated and contested, leading to fluid dynamic representations of the events of our lives that function to define self, other and the world.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY AND NARRATIVE

Autobiographical memory is commonly defined as memories related to the self (Pillemer, 1998; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). As such, autobiographical memories differ from simply recalling what happened to include information about why this event is interesting, important, entertaining, etc., essentially why this event is meaningful for the self (Fivush and Haden, 2005; Fivush and Nelson, 2006; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Thus it is the evaluative and interpretative information that transforms a memory from a simple *recounting* of what occurred to a *reminiscing* about what the event means. Moreover, it is through sharing the events of our lives with others that these evaluative interpretations evolve over time, as events and their consequences continue to unfold, with developmental changes in understanding, and with input from listeners who share, confirm, negate and negotiate these interpretations (Fivush and Haden, 2005; Fivush, in press).

### Language and narratives

Language is clearly a critical tool in autobiographical memory (Vygotsky, 1979; Nelson, 1996; Fivush and Nelson, 2006). Although autobiographical memory is not linguistically represented, it is through language that expresses and organizes the multiple sensory components of a personal memory into a form that can be communicated to and with others that autobiographical memories come to take on new understandings for the self. More specifically, language modulates autobiographical memory in two ways: first, language allows us to share the past with others and through this joint reminiscing new interpretations and evaluations of past events evolve, and, second,

language provides an organizational structure for autobiographical memories, namely narratives.

Narratives are canonical linguistic frameworks that organize event memories into comprehensible chronological and causal sequence of events in the world (Bruner, 1990; Fivush and Haden, 1997). Although children understand temporal and causal sequence well before they are linguistically sophisticated (e.g. Bauer, 1996), narratives move beyond these simple sequences to allow a hierarchical explanatory frame for events that includes linking disparate events through time as related through themes (e.g. personal relationships), motifs (e.g. all my personal relationships fail) and relations to self (e.g. my relationships fail because I am too needy). In this way, narratives allow for deeper layers of meaning and evaluations that move beyond descriptions of events to imbue life experiences with psychological motivations and intentions, essentially creating a human drama.

## Narratives and self in cultural context

Narratives of past events provide the building blocks of a life story. It is as individuals create narratives of specific experiences that are then linked together through time and evaluative frameworks that individuals construct an overarching life narrative that defines self (Habermas and Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001; McLean et al., in press). Moreover, the form and function of narratives are socially and culturally constructed and constrained in multiple ways. First, cultures define the shape of a life; whether defined as a 'life script' (Bernstein and Rubin, 2003) or a 'culturally canonical biography' (Habermas and Bluck, 2000), cultures define developmental periods, such as infancy, childhood, adulthood, old age and the appropriate events that should occur during each of these periods, such as education, marriage, childbearing, and so on. These life scripts are enacted and embodied in culturally mediated activities, such as schooling and work life, cultural artifacts, such as novels and plays, and cultural rituals, such as graduation and weddings. By being immersed in a particular culture, each individual internalizes aspects of these cultural models and creates individualized representations of their life and their self, forming a life narrative in relation to the cultural script, whether it is conforming or deviating from these ideals.

In this way, cultures also influence the form of the self. In broad strokes, western cultures define a self as an autonomous agent who controls one's own destiny, whereas eastern cultures define a self as an interpersonal agent in relation to a family or community (Oyserman and Markus, 1993; Wang, 2001a). Cultural views of self are interwoven with cultural life scripts, defining the way in which life events should be interpreted and evaluated. Indeed, adults in western cultures provide personal narratives focusing on themes of autonomy and achievement, whereas adults in eastern cultures tell personal narratives focused on community and the moral good (Pillemer, 1998; Leichtman et al., 2003).

Within cultures, issues of race, class and gender further differentiate appropriate life scripts (Fivush and Marin, 2007). Little attention has been paid in the psychological literature to issues of race and class as related to autobiographical narratives,

but gendered ideals of self suggest that females have a more relational sense of self, focusing on issues of care and community, whereas males have a more autonomous sense of self, focusing on individual identity and achievement (Basow, 1992; Gilligan, 1982). Again, these gendered ideals are expressed in autobiographical narratives; adult females tell personal narratives imbued with emotional connection between self and other, focusing on relationships and affiliations, whereas adult males tell personal narratives more heavily focused on self, with less mention of emotional connectedness and relationships (see Pillemer, 1998 and Fivush and Buckner, 2003 for reviews).

These culturally mediated internalized models of a life and of a self become the filters through which we experience and evaluate events. This process is dynamic, enacted in everyday social interactions, in which participants re-create and re-vision these cultural models (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). Thus, the ways in which families reminisce, and how this process differs by gender and culture, provides a critical site for examining the social construction of individual autobiographies.

## FAMILY REMINISCING

Reminiscing is part of everyday social interactions within virtually all families. Whether over the dinner table, during bedtime routines, while carpooling or doing homework, references to past events are frequent and often extended (Miller, 1994; Fivush, in press). These stories of the past may be simple references to events of the day, they may be more extended shared reminiscing about events the family experienced together, or they may be stories about the familial past, about the parent's childhood or the grandparents' adventures (see Pratt and Fiese, 2004 for a review). Not surprisingly, family reminiscing differs developmentally, depending in part on the abilities of the child to participate, but, at all points in development, the process is social with parents and children together creating stories that carry individual meaning. Here, I focus on two critical developmental periods, the early preschool years, during which autobiographical reminiscing emerges (Nelson and Fivush, 2004), and adolescence, during which the more overarching life narrative begins to take shape (Habermas and Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001).

### The emergence of autobiographical narratives

When children begin to talk about the past, at about 16 to 18 months of age, parents provide most of the content and structure of the narrative, with children participating mainly by confirming or repeating what the parent says (Hudson, 1990; Eisenberg, 1985). Very quickly, however, children begin participating more fully in these conversations; two-year-olds provide bits and pieces of information in response to parental questions, and three-year-olds introduce new topics and new aspects of the past event being discussed. By the end of the preschool years, most children are able to provide a reasonably coherent narrative of a personally experienced event (Eisenberg, 1985; Fivush, 2007). This developmental progression, from almost complete reliance on the

parent to provide the narrative structure to independent skill suggests that children are learning the forms and functions of autobiographical reminiscing through participating in parentally guided, or scaffolded, interactions.

### *Maternal reminiscing style*

Intriguingly, parents differ in their reminiscing style along a dimension of elaboration (see Fivush et al., 2006, for a full review). Most research focuses on white middle-class mothers in western cultures, so these findings must be interpreted within these constraints. Still, the findings are robust; some mothers display a highly elaborative reminiscing style, asking many questions, and providing a great deal of embellished information about the event under discussion (e.g. the mother asks, 'Remember when we first came in the aquarium? And we looked down and there were a whole bunch of birdies ... in the water? Remember the name of the birdies?') And the child responds, 'Ducks!' and the mother continues, 'Nooo! They weren't ducks. They had on little suits. [pause] Penguins. Remember what did the penguins do?'). In contrast, other mothers display a less elaborative reminiscing style, asking few questions that tend to be repetitive and sparse in detail (e.g. the mother asks about a visit to the zoo, 'What kind of animals did you see?' and the child responds 'Giraffe' to which the mother asks, 'And what else?' The child responds 'Roar' and the mother asks, 'What's roar?', and the child explains, 'Lion' and the mother again asks, 'What else did you see?') (examples are from Reese et al., 1993). More highly elaborative mothers provide a great deal of background and contextual information, expanding and elaborating on actions and objects and weaving them into an ongoing narrative, whereas less elaborative mothers seem more interested in eliciting specific pieces of information from their child, and spend little time expanding these pieces of information into detailed descriptions and explanations of events, leading to little sense of narrative in these exchanges. Highly elaborative mothers also focus more on the emotional and evaluative aspects of past events (Fivush and Haden, 2005; Fivush, 2007), thus creating more psychologically nuanced and personally meaningful narratives of the past.

Importantly, mothers are consistent over time in their reminiscing style; even as children become more engaged participants in joint reminiscing, mothers who are highly elaborative early in development remain highly elaborative later in development (Reese et al., 1993; Harley and Reese, 1999). Just as important, this is not simply a measure of talkativeness; mothers who are highly elaborative during reminiscing are not necessarily more talkative in other conversational contexts, such as unstructured play (Haden and Fivush, 1996), suggesting that reminiscing is a unique context in which mothers have specific goals of sharing the past. Critically, mothers with a highly elaborative reminiscing style facilitate their children's developing autobiographical narrative skills. Longitudinal research indicates that maternal elaborative reminiscing style is more predictive of children's developing autobiographical narratives than children's own earlier language or narrative skills (Reese, 2002; Fivush et al., 2006), and experimental studies that train mothers to be more elaborative during reminiscing find that these children become more narratively skilled than children of untrained mothers (Peterson et al., 1999). The research evidence is clear: a highly elaborated maternal reminiscing style

predicts children's more elaborated independent autographical narratives across the preschool years (see Reese, 2002 and Fivush et al., 2006 for reviews).

### *Culture and gender in maternal reminiscing style*

Research on cultural differences in maternal reminiscing finds that western mothers are more elaborative overall, and more elaborative about emotional aspects of the past, than Asian mothers, whereas Asian mothers focus more on morality and compliance (Leichtman et al., 2003; Wang, 2001b). By the end of the preschool years, western children are telling more elaborated, detailed narratives of their personal past and display higher levels of emotional understanding and regulation, whereas Asian children focus more on moral rules and social roles (Han et al., 1998; Wang, 2003), suggesting that maternally scaffolded narratives are part of children's developing understanding of their life experiences. In terms of gender, there is some evidence, at least in western cultures, that both mothers and fathers are more elaborative (Reese et al., 1996; Fivush and Buckner, 2003) and focus more on emotions (Reese et al., 1996; Fivush et al., 2003) when reminiscing with daughters than with sons. In turn, by the end of the preschool years, girls are telling longer, more detailed and more emotionally imbued narratives of their personal experience than are boys (Buckner and Fivush, 1998).

Patterns of individual, gendered and cultural differences in early parent-child reminiscing as related to children's developing autobiographical narratives suggests that children are learning how to interpret and evaluate their personal experiences in these early interactions. Parents, and especially mothers, who scaffold elaborated, richly detailed narratives of the past, focusing on emotions and evaluations, have children who come to tell their own personal narratives in more embellished, emotional and evaluative ways.

### **Family narratives and adolescent identity**

As children develop through middle childhood and into early adolescence, they become increasingly able to think about multiple facets of an event simultaneously, to maintain cognitive and emotional ambiguity, and to infer and deduct both physical and psychological connections between events (see Habermas and Bluck, 2000 for a review). With these skills, adolescents become capable of overarching life narratives infused with increasingly sophisticated perspective and evaluation. Thus, in adolescence, we see the beginning of a life narrative that links events across time and places the self in relation to others, embedded in an unfolding human drama of interconnected stories. How these stories are constructed in family reminiscing remains critical for adolescents' developing sense of self-understanding.

### *Family reminiscing*

We have begun to explore relations between family reminiscing and adolescent self understanding in a two year longitudinal study beginning when children are just entering adolescence, at about 10 to 12 years of age. In this research, the entire family is asked

to narrate together highly emotional events that the family has shared in the past. Some families display an overall collaborative style (similar to elaborative reminiscing early in development) with each family member contributing to an emerging, coherent narrative of what occurred, constructing a shared perspective on the past event, in which each family member's contributions are woven into a single story that expresses and validates multiple perspectives. Other families engage in more independent reminiscing, with each family member telling their part of the story, but these disparate parts are not woven together; rather, the narrative remains a series of individual stories of what occurred. A shared collaborative perspective is related to higher adolescent self-esteem, whereas an independent perspective is related to higher adolescent self-efficacy (Bohanek et al., 2006). A closer examination of the emotional content of these narratives reveals that families that express and explain more emotion, providing a more embellished causal understanding and resolution of emotional experiences, have adolescents who display higher social and academic competence (Marin et al., in press). These patterns indicate that different aspects of family reminiscing are related differentially to adolescent's emerging sense of self.

### *Intergenerational narratives*

In addition to soliciting family narratives of shared emotional experiences, we also tape-recorded family dinner time conversations in order to examine how family narratives emerge more spontaneously in everyday interaction (Fivush et al., in press). Narratives emerge frequently (about once every five minutes), with multiple family members contributing across several conversational turns in co-constructing the story. Not surprising, the majority of narratives are about events that happened that day. Perhaps more surprising, many families also tell stories about more remote events, events shared by the family in the past, and stories of the parent's childhood and other extended family members. These stories are often long and embellished, with all family members participating in the retelling, indicating that these stories are often told and enjoyed. Provocatively, families that tell more of these kinds of family stories over the dinner table have adolescents who know more of their family history, and also display higher self-esteem and lower levels of internalizing (anxiety, depression) and externalizing (aggression, acting out) behavior problems. These findings point to the critical importance of placing one's own life in the context of familial history that provides a framework for understanding one's self as a member of a family that extends before one's birth and provides the stage on which one's individual life will be played out. One's own story is embedded in the stories of others in the past and in the present.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I described research demonstrating the prevalence and importance of family narratives. Stories we create with others through socially shared interpretations and evaluations of our personal past constitute our very being. This process begins early in development and continues throughout the life span. Memory of our past is not

relegated to a dusty archive, but lives in the moment, in a constantly evolving dialectic between our self and others in the telling and retelling of who we are through what we remember. Research has shown how this process is modulated by individual, gendered and cultural models of self expressed in everyday family reminiscing. Importantly, just as our individual stories are shaped by cultural and historical models of selves and lives, individuals come to shape their culture and their historical moment by the stories they tell. Autobiographical narratives are not just about the individual, but are very much about the historical time and place within which lives are lived and interpreted. Clearly, as Smith (2004) notes in the quote that began this article: 'A life without stories is no life at all.'

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