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# 4

## Personal and Intergenerational Narratives in Relation to Adolescents' Well-Being

Robyn Fivush, Jennifer G. Bohanek, Widaad Zaman

### Abstract

*Narratives of the self are embedded within families in which narrative interaction is a common practice. Especially in adolescence, when issues of identity and emotional regulation become key, narratives provide frameworks for understating self and emotion. The authors' research on family narratives suggests that adolescents' personal narratives are at least partly shaped by intergenerational narratives about their parents' childhoods. Both personal and intergenerational narratives emerge frequently in typical family dinner conversations, and these narratives reflect gendered ways of being in the world. Adolescents who tell intergenerational narratives that are rich in intergenerational connections and perspective-taking show higher levels of well-being. These findings suggest that individual narrative selves are created within families and across generations.* © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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**A**utobiographical narratives are both the process and the product of self-understanding and emotional regulation. We create meaning through creating narratives (Bruner, 1987). The ways in which we recall the events of our lives help to define who we are in the world, and how we understand ourselves and others (Bluck & Alea, 2002; Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Pillemer, 1998). One critical function of autobiographical memory is to use past experiences in ways that allow us to cope with aversive experiences, resolve negative affect, and draw on past emotions in the service of understanding the present and future (Bluck & Alea, 2002; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008; Sales & Fivush, 2005; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003; Pillemer, 1998). Indeed, a great deal of research with adults has demonstrated that adults who are able to narrate the emotional events of their lives in more self-reflective ways show better physical and psychological health (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007), indicating that autobiographical narratives play a critical role in regulating emotion.

### **Autobiographical Narratives Are Socially Constructed**

Autobiographical narratives are not individual constructions; narratives of our personal experiences emerge in everyday interactions in which we share the events of our lives with others. Everyday conversation is replete with stories of the past. Whether chatting over the dinner table, talking over the phone, sharing daily activities or favorite stories with friends or family, we share the stories of our lives, and in this process, we reinterpret and reevaluate what these experiences mean to us and for us. Thus, narrative meaning is created in social interactions in which our personal experiences are interpreted and evaluated through social frames and interactions (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004; Fivush, 2008). Moreover, in the give-and-take of daily interaction, we do not simply talk about ourselves; we hear the stories of others. Thus, how we come to understand our personal experiences through socially shared narratives evolves in a context in which we also listen to the stories of others, and these stories can provide powerful frames for the way in which we understand our own experiences (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008; Norris, Kuiack, & Pratt, 2004; Mar, Peskin, & Fong, Chapter Six; Pratt & Fiese, 2004).

**The Socio-Cultural Perspective.** The idea that narrative meaning-making is constructed in social interactions stems from a Vygotskian perspective (1978), in which individual development is conceptualized as occurring within social and cultural contexts that privilege certain skills and knowledge; the social world is organized in ways that highlight certain activities and practices, and children are encouraged to participate in these activities in ways that lead to the development of culturally important skills. Telling and sharing one's personal past is a culturally mediated activity that is more or less valued by particular cultures, and particular members within a culture (Wang & Ross, 2007). In Western culture,

having and telling one's autobiography is highly valued (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; McAdams, 2001; Nelson, 2006). From the moment of birth, children are surrounded by stories, stories they tell about themselves, stories others tell about them, and the stories of others (Miller, 1994). Even in the first year of life, well before infants can participate in these narrative interactions, they are hearing about the triumphs and failures of past family members as filtered through the family stories told over and over to entertain, to soothe, and to teach (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995; Norris et al., 2004; Thorne, McLean, & Dasbach, 2004). Thus, individual lives are situated within family histories and individual stories are modulated by the stories of others, especially family stories.

**Adolescence as a Critical Developmental Period.** Narrative meaning-making may become increasingly important in adolescence, as children transition into an adult identity. Several key skills develop and coalesce during adolescence that allow the individual to create more meaningful and more emotionally regulated autobiographical narratives (see Habermas & Bluck, 2000, for a review). First, adolescents become cognitively able to engage in sophisticated perspective-taking, which allows them to understand and integrate the perspective of others into their own views, as well as to integrate their own perspective through time, from past to present and projected into the future (Habermas & Paha, 2001; Harter, 1999). Related to this, adolescents become capable of analyzing and integrating conflicting emotions, and better able to cognitively reframe events in ways that allow for emotional regulation (Compas, Campbell, Robinson, & Rodriguez, 2009; Harter, 1999). Emotional regulation skills may be especially important as adolescents experience increasingly intense and fluctuating emotions (Arnett, 1999), and the parent-child relationship becomes more emotionally labile (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998).

Although we know that personal narratives are important in the developing self-concept and emotional well-being throughout childhood (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006, for a review), the social and cognitive skills that develop in adolescence allow for a new way of understanding both one's own and others' experiences, through the increasing ability to take the perspective of others and integrate multiple viewpoints, as well as to create a more overarching life narrative that integrates multiple individual experiences (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; Reese, Yan, Jack, & Hayne, 2009). Thus examining how adolescents create meaning through narratives of self and of others is a window into how adolescents are understanding their experiences in larger social and familial contexts, and how they are using these experiences to understand themselves and their emotions.

## **The Family Narratives Project**

In The Family Narratives Project, my students and I are studying family narrative interactions in multiple contexts in families with pre-adolescents

(eight- to twelve-year-olds) and adolescents (fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds), in relation to multiple measures of identity and well-being. We have been particularly interested in personal narratives and intergenerational narratives, specifically the stories adolescents might know about their parents' childhoods. We assess narratives in multiple contexts to gain a broad perspective both on how narratives are created in shared conversations, as family members each contribute and weave a story together, as well as in contexts in which adolescents are asked to independently narrate specific types of events to an interviewer. Following from the sociocultural perspective, we view family co-constructed narratives as a critical context in which parents help adolescents to structure their experiences in ways that allow for emotional expression and regulation, and these skills will be internalized such that family narrative styles will be reflected in the adolescent's own narratives over time. Here, we report on an initial cross-sectional study with adolescents and their families, but based on longitudinal research with younger children, we assume that longitudinal patterns with adolescents will mirror earlier findings that parental reminiscing style influences children's developing narrative skills (see Fivush et al., 2006, for a review).

**Narratives Around the Dinner Table.** In an initial study, we chose to examine how personal and family narratives emerge in daily social interactions within families with a child transitioning into adolescence, and how these narrative interactions might be related to children's emotional well-being. We focused on family dinnertime conversations, as this is a time when the family comes back together at the end of the day and shares the day's events with each other (see Bohanek, Fivush, Zaman, Lepore, Merchant, & Duke, 2009, for more detail). We assumed we would hear many "Today I..." narratives, stories of what each family member did that day (Blum-Kulka, 1997), and we further assumed that families that shared their daily activities together in more elaborated ways, through collaborative narrative interaction in which family members request, provide, and negotiate information, would facilitate emotional regulation through shared meaning-making. We were curious about the extent to which families would also refer to more remote events, events from the family's past, during a typical dinnertime conversation, and how these stories might be related to children's emotional regulation. We reasoned that if children are constructing meaning for themselves both from their personal experiences and through the experiences of others, then we should see relations to emotional regulation for both personal stories and family stories.

*Method.* We asked thirty-seven broadly middle-class, ethnically diverse, two-parent families with at least one child between the ages of nine and twelve years old to tape record at least one dinnertime conversation. All members of the family were present during these recordings and the number of children in the family ranged from one to six, with a mean of 2.7. Audio tapes were transcribed verbatim, and two coders jointly examined each transcript and identified narratives that emerged within

the dinnertime conversations. A narrative was defined as any mention of a past event, whether earlier that day, last month, or an event from the distant past, such as a story the parent tells about her own childhood. For purposes of these analyses, other topics of conversation over the dinner table, such as talk about future events, talk about general dispositions and traits (e.g., "I know you like pork, that's why I made this."), and talk about general world knowledge (e.g., discussions of how electricity works), were not considered.

*Narrative Interaction.* Perhaps not surprisingly, narratives accounted for a large proportion of typical family dinner conversations. On average, in a twenty- to thirty-minute dinner, a narrative emerged every five minutes; we identified 235 narratives, with a mean number of 6.35 narratives per family. Most narratives were about recent events, events of that day or the day before (a mean of 4.02 narratives per family), but about a third of all narratives were about remote family events, events that occurred at least several weeks in the past, with the majority of events occurring many years ago (a mean of 2.08 remote narratives per family). Although our initial interest had focused on shared stories, perhaps we should not have been surprised that many families told stories of events that happened to the parents when they were children (26 narratives in all, accounting for 12 percent of all narratives told), which we labeled intergenerational narratives.

Overall, mothers and children contributed more to the narratives (a mean of 161.21 words for mothers and a mean of 139.53 words for children) than did fathers (a mean of 89.54 words). However, although there were more narratives about recent than remote events, once a narrative was initiated, family members contributed as much information about remote as about recent events. That families were so engaged in co-narrating remote family stories suggests that these narratives are an important part of daily family interaction. Indeed, children initiated stories about the family and intergenerational past just as often as did parents, and the high level of involvement in co-narrating these stories suggests that these are narratives that are told frequently and greatly enjoyed.

*Family Narratives and Adolescent Well-Being.* Provocatively, when we examined relations between participation in family stories across the dinner table and children's emotional well-being, as assessed by the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), which measures both internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviors such as aggression and acting out, we found differential patterns for type of narrative and gender of parent. Mothers who were more involved in co-narrating remote family stories had children who displayed fewer internalizing behaviors. More specifically, mothers who provided more information ( $r = -.31$ ), confirmed more information ( $r = -.34$ ), and negated more information ( $r = -.33$ ), indicating that they were more involved in telling the family story and negotiating what happened, had

children with lower internalizing behaviors. In contrast, fathers who were more involved in the “Today I...” narratives, narratives that family members shared about their individual day’s activities, had children who displayed fewer behavior problems. Specifically, fathers who solicited their children’s “Today I...” narratives through requesting information had children with fewer internalizing ( $r = -.32$ ) and externalizing ( $r = -.31$ ) behaviors. These patterns suggest that parents may play different roles in family narratives, with mothers being the kin-keepers, keeping the family history alive and meaningful (Rosenthal, 1985), and mothers who do this have children with higher levels of emotional adjustment. Fathers, in contrast, tend to spend more time away from the family during the day (even those mothers who worked full time in our sample reported spending more time at home with children than did the fathers). Those fathers who are more involved in catching up on the day’s activities and creating new stories for the family have children with higher levels of emotional adjustment.

**Intergenerational Narratives.** While we were expecting “Today I...” narratives over a typical family dinner, we were somewhat surprised at the number and variability of remote family stories told in this context. That these kinds of family stories, including intergenerational narratives about parents and grandparents, emerge reasonably frequently in daily interaction, and that these stories (at least as co-narrated by mothers) are related to child well-being, suggests that these kinds of narratives provide a framework for adolescents to understand the world and themselves. Some research has suggested that adolescents who incorporate their parent’s “voice” into their own narratives, especially about experiences that teach values and morals, show higher levels of well-being (Arnold, Pratt, & Hicks, 2004; Thorne et al., 2004). These studies examine the extent to which adolescents tell a story about themselves that includes lessons provided by their parents, but do not really address the stories that adolescents may know about their parents. Our results suggest that adolescents who are embedded in a storied family history show higher levels of emotional well-being, perhaps because these stories provide larger narrative frameworks for understanding self and the world, and because these stories help provide a sense of continuity across generations in ways that promote a secure identity (see Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008, for a full theoretical discussion).

**Gender Differences in Parent Childhood Stories.** Some research has also examined the stories that parents tell their children about their own childhood. These studies have focused on gender differences. Gender identity theory posits that females are more relationship and emotion oriented than are males, whereas males are more achievement oriented (Gilligan, 1982), and research finds that adult females tell autobiographical narratives that are more relationally and emotionally focused than are the autobiographical narratives of adult males (Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003; Fivush & Buckner, 2003; Thorne & McLean, 2002). In line with

these findings, mothers tell stories to their preschool children that are more relationship and affiliation oriented and fathers tell stories that are more achievement oriented (Fiese & Bickham, 2004; Fiese & Skillman, 2000). But to date, no one has examined what children take from these stories. What stories might adolescents know about their parents' childhoods and how might these parental intergenerational narratives be related to the adolescents' own well-being?

*Method.* To explore this idea, we asked 65 fourteen- to sixteen-year-old adolescents from broadly middle-class, racially diverse families to tell us stories they might know about their mothers' and their fathers' childhoods (Zaman & Fivush, 2009). Almost all the adolescents were able to provide two stories they knew about both their mother and their father when they were a child. No adolescent was unable to tell any intergenerational narrative. The narratives varied, from stories about family relationships in the parents' family of origin, interactions with peers, academic achievements, and accidents and mishaps.

We examined these narratives along three dimensions: structure, theme, and content. Structure referred to overall length and level of elaborative detail included on a scale from zero (no elaborative detail) to three (highly elaborative and detailed). Theme was derived from previous research on the stories that parents tell their children described above, and focused on affiliation (scored from 0 for narratives that included no mention of other people to three for narratives that focused explicitly on relationships) and achievement (again with zero for narratives with no mention of achievement and three for narratives that focused on working towards and achieving a specific goal). Finally, content referred to internal state language and included cognitive states (e.g., "My mother *knew* it was wrong."), general affect (e.g., "That was *hard* on her."), and specific emotion words (e.g., "My dad was *happy* about that."). Internal state content has been conceptualized as an integral part of narrative meaning-making, in that it expresses evaluation and interpretation of the experience (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). Further, as already mentioned, there is evidence that females include more internal state language, and especially more emotion, in their autobiographical narratives than do males.

*Narratives Told About Mothers and Fathers.* Intriguingly, we found few adolescent gender differences in parental intergenerational stories, but both girls and boys told very different kinds of maternal intergenerational narratives than paternal intergenerational narratives. Maternal intergenerational narratives were more elaborative (a mean of 1.61 for mothers and 1.25 for fathers), more affiliative (a mean of 1.44 for mothers and 0.99 for fathers), and contained more general affect (a mean of 1.03 for mothers and 0.66 for fathers) and specific emotion (a mean of 1.02 for mothers and 0.64 for fathers) than paternal intergenerational narratives, suggesting that adolescents are telling these stories as they have been told to them. This further suggests that parental intergenerational narratives

may provide adolescents with one way of understanding gender and gendered roles. That adolescent males and females tell stories about their parents' childhoods that differ by parental gender suggests that adolescents are understanding and propagating the gendered roles their parents are narratively portraying.

*Narratives Told About Self.* What might these gendered messages mean for adolescents' understanding of self and well-being? In addition to narratives of their parents' childhoods, we also asked these same adolescents to tell us narratives about their own personal experiences. Here, we saw the expected pattern of gender differences, with girls telling more elaborated (a mean of 1.84 for girls and 1.33 for boys) and more emotional (a mean of 6.18 for girls and 3.20 for boys) narratives than boys. Interestingly, there were no gender differences in themes of affiliation or achievement in the adolescents' personal narratives. Still, this pattern suggests that adolescents are telling their own stories through their own gendered lens, and they are telling their parents' stories through the gendered lens of the parent.

*Relations Between Intergenerational and Personal Narratives.* When we examine relations between the personal and intergenerational narratives, girls are telling personal narratives that look very much like their maternal intergenerational narratives; there are significant correlations on almost every narrative variable between these two narratives. However, there are no relations between girls' personal narratives and their paternal intergenerational narratives. For boys, there are no relations between their personal narratives and either their maternal or paternal intergenerational narratives. The patterns suggest that girls are mirroring their mothers' narratives in constructing their own gendered narratives, but it is not clear why boys are not mirroring their fathers (see Peterson & Roberts, 2003 for similar data).

*Creating Intergenerational Connections.* In collecting these intergenerational narratives, a noteworthy finding emerged. Many of the adolescents drew a specific intergenerational connection between their parents and themselves. These connections included mentioning a specific parallel across generations (e.g., "My dad played soccer when he was young, and that got me started in soccer" or "My mother used to fight with her brother all the time just like I fight with my brother."), reference to life lessons or values (e.g., "She told me about when she used to smoke so that I wouldn't smoke.") or a reference to the current parent-child relationship (e.g., "and now my mom and I read together every night" or "My dad still plays basketball with me every weekend."). These types of intergenerational connections are similar to what Habermas and de Silveira (2008) have described as "autobiographical reasoning" within personal narratives, where adolescents create continuity between multiple individual personal narratives, and to what McLean and Pratt (2006) have termed "life lessons" within personal narratives. The difference is that here, adolescents



are drawing these connections between themselves and their parents' experiences, not their own previous experiences.

There were no differences by either gender of adolescent or gender of parent in the occurrence of these connections, but the fact that many adolescents spontaneously made these connections in their intergenerational narratives seemed important, and we thought it might be related to whether adolescents were using these narratives in the service of understanding themselves.

*Perspective-Taking in Intergenerational Narratives.* In addition, many of the adolescents told intergenerational narratives rich in internal state language, providing information about how their parent thought and felt about the event. This kind of language suggests that the adolescent is taking the perspective of the parent in the narrative, and thus using the parent's experiences as a way of understanding how events in the world unfold and their consequences, possibly as a way of understanding one's own experiences. Thus, we examined relations between the intergenerational connections that adolescents drew in their narratives, their use of internal state language in these narratives and adolescents' emotional well-being, again measured through the CBCL. In this sample, we asked the mother to report on her child's behaviors and we also asked the adolescents to self-report, using the Youth Self-Report, the age-normed self-report form of the CBCL (YSR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001).

*Intergenerational Narratives and Well-Being.* Correlations were computed between the internal state language and intergenerational connections in the narratives and both maternal and child reports of well-being (Zaman & Fivush, 2009). The overall pattern of results indicated that adolescent males who told maternal intergenerational narratives that included more perspective-taking and intergenerational connections self-reported lower levels of externalizing behaviors ( $r$ s range from  $-.23$  to  $-.52$ ) and, to a lesser extent, lower levels of internalizing behaviors ( $r$ s range from  $-.21$  to  $-.39$ ). There were similar but fewer relations to paternal intergenerational narratives ( $r$ s for internalizing behaviors range from  $-.22$  to  $-.28$ , and externalizing behavior correlated with intergenerational connections at  $r = -.37$ ). For girls, their self-report of well-being was unrelated to either maternal or paternal intergenerational narratives. A different picture emerges using maternal reports of adolescent well-being. Here, girls who included more intergenerational connections and perspective-taking in their narratives about their mothers' childhoods showed lower levels of maternally reported internalizing ( $r$ s range from  $-.21$  to  $-.39$ ) and externalizing ( $r$ s range from  $-.37$  to  $-.50$ ) behaviors, but there were no relations to paternal intergenerational narratives, nor were there any relations between maternal reports of adolescent well-being and boys' intergenerational narratives.

*Linking Personal and Intergenerational Narratives.* Although interpretations of these patterns are complicated, two things are clear. First, for

female adolescents, there is both a closer link between their personal narratives and their maternal intergenerational narratives as well as between their maternal intergenerational narratives and their mothers' reports of their well-being. Thus, it seems that when female adolescents take the perspective of their mothers, and use maternal intergenerational narratives to structure their own personal experiences, their mothers report higher levels of adolescent well-being. Second, male adolescents are neither mirroring their parental intergenerational narratives in their own personal narratives nor is their maternally reported well-being related to their parental intergenerational narratives. However, boys who show a higher level of perspective-taking in their maternal and paternal intergenerational narratives self-report higher well-being.

### **Constructing Gender and Identity Through Narratives of the Familial Past**

Clearly, future research will need to elucidate these patterns. Most important, these initial studies were cross-sectional, and longitudinal research is critical in elucidating developmental patterns. Still, these first forays into research on intergenerational narratives and adolescent well-being are provocative. Family narratives, stories about both the family day and the family past, are frequent in everyday interactions, and families that are more engaged in sharing these stories have adolescents who show higher levels of emotional well-being. That adolescents are engaged in co-narrating family stories in everyday interactions suggests that these stories are interesting and important to them. Indeed, adolescents listen to and learn these stories and are easily able to tell stories about their parental intergenerational past.

Moreover, family narrative interaction is a gendered activity. Mothers are more engaged in family stories than are fathers, and mothers that contribute more to keeping the family past alive through such stories have children who show higher levels of emotional well-being. Further, as would be predicted by Vygotskian theory, children are learning the forms and function of family stories through participating in daily family interactions. Family stories tell about gendered lives and provide a framework for understanding the self. Both adolescent males and females tell maternal intergenerational narratives that are more elaborative, affiliative and emotional, and less achievement oriented, than paternal intergenerational narratives, suggesting at least one way in which gender is constructed through narratives and across generations. Further, adolescent girls, at least, seem to be learning how to tell their own gendered narratives through these interactions. Adolescent girls are telling narratives similar in structure and content to their maternal intergenerational narratives, and girls who tell maternal intergenerational narratives higher in intergenerational connections and perspective-taking have higher levels of maternally reported

well-being. Although the picture for males is more complicated and awaits further research, the patterns thus far indicate that adolescents are learning how to understand themselves at least partly through family stories. Who we are as individuals emerges in social interactions studded with stories, stories about ourselves and our families in the past that shape who we are in the present and in the future.

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ROBYN FIVUSH is the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Psychology at Emory University in Atlanta.

JENNIFER G. BOHANEK is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Developmental Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

WIDAAD ZAMAN is a graduate student in the Department of Psychology at Emory University in Atlanta.