



Neamp

Intergenerational narratives: How collective family stories

Relate to adolescents' emotional well-being

Robyn Fivush*
Widaad Zaman**

Abstract

An important form of collective memory is family stories. In this study we focus on intergenerational narratives, defined as stories that children know about their parents' childhoods. Intergenerational narratives create meaning beyond the individual and provide a sense of self through historical time and in relation to family members, and thus may facilitate positive identity and well-being. Especially during adolescence, when issues of identity and emotional regulation become critical developmental tasks, intergenerational narratives may be related to emotional well-being. Sixty-five mostly white, middle class 13- to 16-year old adolescents were asked to narrate stories about their mothers' and fathers' childhoods. Adolescents who told intergenerational narratives that included the perspective of their parent, and drew more intergenerational connections between parent and self, showed higher levels of emotional well-being. However, these relations only hold for female adolescents narrating stories about their mother's childhood. Explanations and implications of these findings for the role of collective memory in adolescent development are discussed.

Keywords:

Intergenerational narratives, Family Stories, Adolescents collective memory.

Resumo:

Uma importante maneira de recriar a memória coletiva é através das histórias familiares. Neste estudo nos centraremos nas narrativas intergeracionais, definidas como as histórias que as crianças conhecem acerca da infância dos seus progenitores. As narrativas intergeracionais criam um significado para além da percepção individual e proporcionam uma auto percepção através do tempo histórico em relação aos membros da família e, o que pode facilitar uma identidade positiva e de bem-estar. Especialmente durante a adolescência, quando as questões de identidade e de regulação emocional são tarefas críticas do desenvolvimento, podendo as narrativas intergeracionais estar relacionadas com bem-estar emocional. Sessenta e cinco adolescentes maioritariamente de classe média branca entre os 13 e os 16 anos de idade foram convidados a narrar histórias sobre as infâncias das suas mães e dos seus pais. Adolescentes que afirmaram que as narrativas intergeracionais incluíam a perspectiva dos seus pais, e que criaram mais laços geracionais entre os pais e eles próprios, apresentaram maiores níveis de bem-estar emocional. No entanto, esse tipo de relações apenas são identificados em adolescentes do sexo feminino que narram histórias sobre a infância de sua mãe. Estas

*

Robyn Fivush received her PhD from the Graduate Center of The City University of New York in 1983 and was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Human Information Processing, University of California at San Diego from 1982 to 1984. She joined the Emory faculty in 1984 where she is also a core faculty member of the Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, associated faculty with the Department of Women's Studies and a Senior Fellow in the Center for the Study of Law and Religion. Her research focuses on early memory with an emphasis on the social construction of autobiographical memory and the relations among memory, narrative, identity, trauma, and coping. She has published over 100 books, book chapters, and articles.

** Widaad majored in psychology and minored in child and family studies at Stony Brook University. There she completed her honors thesis with Dr. Harriet Waters. Widaad received her Master's Degree at Emory through a study focusing on intergenerational narratives and adolescent well-being. She proposed her dissertation research on co-constructed narratives and attachment in young children and plans to defend this research in the coming year.



Neamp

declarações e todas as implicações destes resultados para o papel da memória coletiva no desenvolvimento do adolescente encontram-se ainda em discussão.

Palavras Chave:

Narrativas intergeracionais, Historias familiares, memoria colectiva dos adolescentes.

1. Introduction

Narratives are both the process and product of how we create meaning from the events of our lives (Fivush, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Whether stemming from a cognitive or personality perspective, theorists agree that autobiographical narratives are intimately linked to identity and well-being (Conway & Pleydall-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 1992). Indeed, research with adults indicates that individuals who narrate more emotionally expressive and explanatory narratives subsequently show higher levels of both physical and psychological health (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997) indicating that the kinds of stories we tell about our experiences function to define self and regulate emotion.

Intriguingly, from the moment of birth, children are surrounded by stories about themselves and about their families (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999; Miller, Mintz, Hoogstra, Fung, & Potts 1992). Thus autobiographical narratives are situated in larger social and cultural narratives; we understand personal experiences through the experiences of others. One critical filter through which personal experiences are understood are *intergenerational* narratives. Although not well-defined in the literature, the concept of intergenerational narratives refers to the various types of stories families tell about previous generations, such as stories of the experiences of grandparents and parents before the child was born (Fivush, Bohanek & Duke, 2008; Pratt & Fiese, 2004). Intergenerational narratives create meaning beyond the individual and provide a sense of self through historical time and in relation to family members (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Norris, Kuiack & Pratt, 2004), and thus may facilitate positive identity and well-being.

Intergenerational narratives may be particularly important during adolescence. Cognitive advances during adolescent allow individuals to take the perspective of others in new and expanded ways, as well as project themselves into the future and imagine possible



Neamp

selves (Harter, 1999). In addition, adolescents become better able to note similarities and differences between self and others, as well as to note incongruities and discrepancies within their own identity, thus creating what Erikson (1968) has labeled the “identity crisis.” This is also the time when individuals begin to integrate individual autobiographical narratives into an overarching life story that provides thematic meaning for the self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2003). Adolescents who are able to incorporate intergenerational narratives in ways that help them to understand their own personal experiences, and create meaning structures beyond the individual, may show higher levels of emotional well-being. Yet, to date, what adolescents may know of their intergenerational past and how intergenerational narratives may relate to adolescent well-being is virtually unknown.

Surprisingly sparse research has focused on autobiographical narratives during adolescence at all. What little research does exist suggests that adolescents who narrate autobiographical narratives that include more self-reflection and insight also show higher levels of identity achievement and emotional well-being (see McLean & Pasupathi, in press, for an overview). Only a few studies have examined intergenerational narratives, and these have focused on the stories that parents tell children about their family of origin (but see Pratt & Fiese, 2004 for some research on stories that grandparents tell). In general, this research suggests that mothers tell narratives about their own childhood richer in themes of affiliation whereas fathers tell narratives richer in themes of autonomy and achievement (Fiese & Bickham, 2004; Fiese & Skillman, 2000). Further, when reminiscing with daughters, both mothers and fathers tell narratives of their own childhood richer in affiliation and emotion than when reminiscing with sons (Buckner & Fivush, 2000).

To our knowledge, only one study in the literature has examined the narratives that adolescents know about their parents’ childhood; Zaman and Fivush (in press) found that both adolescent males and females told narratives about their mothers’ childhood that were more elaborative and emotional than stories about their fathers’ childhood. Provocatively, whereas these intergenerational narratives followed gendered patterns according to the gender of the parent, when these same adolescents narrated their own personal experiences, their narratives varied by their own gender, with female adolescents telling more elaborated narratives richer in emotional language than male adolescents. This pattern suggests that adolescents are filtering both their own and others’ experiences through the gendered lens of the narrative protagonist. What remains in question is whether and how these intergenerational narratives



Neamp

are related to adolescent well-being, and whether there are gendered patterns in these relations as well.

If adolescents are using intergenerational narratives as models for their own life narratives, to create meaning for the self, then we might expect that those adolescents who are better able to take the perspective of their parent within these stories to show higher levels of well-being. Specifically, intergenerational narratives that include how the parent thought and felt about the experience may be related to adolescent's ability to use these stories to regulate their own emotional experience, and thus these adolescents would show higher levels of emotional well-being. In addition, adolescents who draw direct comparisons between the parents' childhood experiences and their own personal experiences may be using these intergenerational stories more explicitly to understand their own emotional experience, and thus this may also be related to well-being. Therefore, in this study, we examined perspective-taking and intergenerational connections within one specific type of intergenerational narrative, adolescents' narratives about their parents' childhoods, in relation to adolescents' emotional well-being. Moreover, given the observed gender differences in both adolescents' autobiographical narratives and their intergenerational narratives, relations between intergenerational narratives and well-being may also show gendered patterns, and thus gender was examined in this study as well.

2 - Method

Participants

These data are part of a larger study examining family narratives and adolescent identity and well-being. Families with an adolescent child were recruited through schools and churches; 65 highly educated (70% college degree or higher) middle class, two-parent opposite gender families participated; 59 were traditional and 6 blended. The majority self-identified as White/Caucasian (70%) or African-American (25%). Thirty-two females and 33 males ranging in age from 13 to 16 years (mean age 14.50) participated. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board, all parents signed informed consent and adolescents signed assent.



III - Procedure

Intergenerational narratives. A female research assistant visited the home and asked the adolescent to narrate two stories about their mother and two stories about their father, using the following prompt: "I am interested in how people tell stories about their families. These are stories about things that you have not experienced yourself, but that were told to you. So you are not going to remember them, because you were either too little, or not born yet. The first stories I'd like to ask you are stories about your mom when she was a kid. Can you think of two stories about your mom when she was a kid?" If a general description of the parent's childhood was provided, the adolescent was encouraged to think of a specific event. The researcher prompted for the narrative: "Can you tell me everything you know about that specific incident?", and at the end of the narrative, "Is there anything else you would like to add?" The procedure was repeated for the second event. Fathers' stories were elicited in the same way, and mothers' and fathers' stories were counterbalanced.

Emotional well-being. Mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). The CBCL was chosen to assess emotional well-being because it is widely used in the clinical and developmental literatures to determine the presence or absence of internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) and externalizing (e.g., acting out) problems in children, and has demonstrated high levels of reliability and validity. Internalizing and externalizing scores are calculated independently. Lower scores on either scale indicate less frequent internalizing or externalizing behaviors.

Coding The tape-recorded narratives were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Coding focused on the extent to which the adolescent took the perspective of the parent in the narratives, through the use of internal state language describing how the parent thought and felt about the experience, and the extent to which adolescents made specific connections between the parents' experiences and their own.

Internal State Content included affective states, emotion words, and cognitive states. Affect included all references to emotional reactions to situations (e.g., "My mother had a



Neamp

really hard time in high school.”) while emotions were specific words describing feelings and emotional behavior (e.g., “My father was really angry at his brother about that.”). Cognitive states referred to any reference to the parents’ thoughts or desires about the experience (e.g., “My father wanted to get a job to earn money for college.” Or “My mother thought her sister was prettier than her.”)

Intergenerational Content 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.”).

Reliability. Two judges independently coded approximately 25% of the narratives; Cohen’s kappa’s across coding categories ranged from .69 to .92. Remaining transcripts were coded by one judge.

3 – Results

The majority of adolescents were easily able to provide two stories about each parents’ childhood experiences, and their means across the two stories were used in analyses. However, 4 males reported only one story about their mother, and 5 males and 5 females reported only one story about their father; in these cases, the score for that story alone was used.

For descriptive purposes, Table 1 displays the means for all variables by gender. Previous analyses on this set of narratives indicated that adolescents told intergenerational narratives related to the gender of the parent but not related to gender of the adolescent. More specifically, narratives about the mother’s childhood included more affect and more specific emotion words than narratives about the father’s childhood but there were no differences in cognitive states or intergenerational connections. There were no differences by gender of



Neamp

adolescent for the narratives variables (see Zaman & Fivush, in press, for details of these analyses), or on the CBCL (for females, mean internalizing score = 53.67, mean externalizing score = 49.00, and for males, mean internalizing = 52.69 and mean externalizing = 49.62, all *t*'s non-significant)

In terms of the question of interest here, the left side of Table 2 displays Pearson Product correlations between adolescent females' internalizing and externalizing scores on the CBCL for each narrative variable for the narratives about mothers' and fathers' childhood. Adolescent females who took the perspective of their mother in telling intergenerational narratives, by including more affect, more specific emotion words and more cognitive states showed lower levels of externalizing behaviors, and girls who included more cognitive states also showed lower levels of internalizing behaviors. Correlations with affect and emotion words to internalizing behaviors are suggestive but do not reach traditional levels of statistical significance. In addition, adolescent females who drew more specific intergenerational connections when narrating their mother's childhood story show lower levels of both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. There are no significant relations between adolescent females' narratives about their father's childhood and their emotional well-being.

The right side of Table 2 shows the correlations between adolescent male's intergenerational narratives and their well-being. As can be seen, there are virtually no significant relations.

4 - Discussion

Previous research with adults demonstrates that more coherent and emotionally regulated narratives of personal experiences are related to higher levels of emotional well-being (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997). There is substantially less research with adolescents, but these studies also suggest that autobiographical narratives richer in emotional understanding and meaning-making are related to higher levels of identity achievement and emotional well-being (McLean & Pasupathi, in press). Theoretical explanations for these relations revolve around the idea that narratives provide an explanatory model for how and why things happened as they did that allows for emotional understanding and regulation.



We argue that understanding of one's own personal experiences emerges within a familial context in which one's own experience is interpreted in relation to stories of the intergenerational past. Especially during adolescence, when issues of identity and emotional regulation become critical developmental tasks (Harter, 1999), the ways in which adolescents understand and narrate intergenerational narratives is related to their own emotional well-being. Adolescents who tell intergenerational narratives from the perspective of their parent, and draw more intergenerational connections between parent and self, show higher levels of emotional well-being. Perhaps by using their parent's experiences to understand their own experiences, these narratives allow adolescents to create a sense of self that is embedded within a familial context, thus providing an emotionally secure base for individuation. However, these relations only hold for female adolescents narrating stories about their mother's childhood. Thus these relations appear to be gender specific. It must be emphasized that the correlations between adolescents' intergenerational narratives and well-being is not because females tell stories about their mothers that include more perspective-talking and intergenerational connections than do males. There are no gender differences in how adolescent females and males tell intergenerational narratives.

That we found these relations only for female adolescents narrating their mother's childhood experiences may be due to several factors. First, there is some evidence that adolescent females identify more strongly and have a closer emotional relationship with their mothers than their fathers (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). However, adolescent males also report having a closer emotional relationship with their father than their mother, so it may be that gender identification is a more important factor in this process than is emotional closeness. Related to this, females may develop a more relational sense of self, and therefore understanding one's own experience within a familial context may better facilitate emotional regulation for females than males (e.g., Chodorow, 1978). Finally, there is some evidence that females adopt the narrative style of their mothers but not their fathers, and there is little evidence that males adopt the narrative style of either their mother or father (Peterson & Roberts, 2003). Thus it may be that in adopting the narrative style of their mothers, adolescent females come to identify more closely with their mother's experiences.

Regardless of the explanation, the fact that adolescent females who narrate intergenerational stories about their mothers show higher levels of emotional well-being indicates that we must look beyond strictly autobiographical narratives as a mechanism for



Neamp

creating meaning for self. Future research must certainly examine such factors as socialization of narrative style and gender identification as contributing to this process, but these results confirm that individual self is at least partly embedded in, and understood through, an understanding of others, and that intergenerational narratives that place the individual in a familial past may be a critical part of individual identity and well-being.

Submetido em: December 27, 2010

5 - References

Achenbach, T.M. (1991). *Manual for the cross-informant program for the CBCL/4-18, YSR and TRF*. Burlington, VT: University Associates in Psychiatry.

Buckner, J.P., & Fivush, R. (2000). Gendered themes in family reminiscing. *Memory*, 8(6), 401-412.

Chodorow, N.J. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the socialization of gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Conway, M.A., & Pleydell-Pearce, C.W. (2000). The construction of autobiographical memories in the self-memory system. *Psychological Review*, 107, 261-288.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Youth and identity crisis*. NY: Norton.

Fiese, B. H. & Bickham, N. L. (2004). Pin-curling grandpa's hair in the comfy chair: Parents' stories of growing up and potential links to socialization in the preschool years. In M.W. Pratt & B.H. Fiese (Eds). *Family stories and the life course*. (pp. 259-277). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Fiese, B.H & Marjinsky, K.A. (1999). Dinnertime stories: Connecting family practices with relationship beliefs and child adjustment. In B.H. Fiese, A.J. Sameroff, H.D. Grotevant, F.S. Wamboldt, S. Dickstein, D.L. Fravel, K.A. Marjinsky, D. Gorall, J. Piper, M. St. Andre, R.



Neamp

Seifer, M. Schiller (Eds.), *The stories that families tell: Narrative coherence, narrative interaction, and relationship beliefs*. (pp. 52-68). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Fiese, B. H. & Skillman, G. (2000). Gender differences in family stories: Moderating influence of parent gender role and child gender. *Sex Roles, 43*, 267-283.

Fivush, R. (2008). Remembering and reminiscing: How individual lives are constructed in family narratives. *Memory Studies, 1*, 45-54.

Fivush, R., Bohanek, J. G. & Duke, M. (2008). The intergenerational self: Subjective perspective and family history. In F. Sani (Ed.), pp. 131-144. *Self continuity: Individual and collective perspectives*. New York: Psychology Press.

Frattaroli, J. (2006). Experimental Disclosure and Its Moderators: A Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 132*, 823-865.

Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a life: The emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin, 126*, 748-769.

Harter, S. (1999). *The construction of the self: A developmental perspective*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Jorgenson, J., & Bochner, A.D. (2004). Imagining families through stories and rituals. In A.L. Vangelisti (Ed.). *Handbook of family communication*, (pp. 513-538). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 71*, 291-301.

McAdams, D.P. (1992). Unity and purpose in human lives: The emergence of identity as a life story. In R. A Zucker, A.I. Rabin, J. Aronoff & S.J. Frank (Eds.). *Personality structure in the life course*, (pp. 323-375). NY: Springer.

McAdams, D. (2004). The redemptive self: Narrative identity in America today. In D.R. Beike, J.M. Lampinen, & D.A. Behrend (Eds.). *The self and memory* (pp. 95-116). New York: Psychology Press.



Neamp

McLean, K. & Pasupathi, M. (in press) *Narrative Development in Adolescence: Creating the Storied Self*. NY: Springer.

McLean, K., Pasupathi, M. & Pals, J. (2007). Selves creating stories creating selves: A process model of self-development. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *11*, 262-278.

Miller, P. J., Mintz, J., Hoogstra, L., Fung, H., & Potts, R. (1992). The narrated self: Young children's construction of self in relation to others in conversational stories of personal experience. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *38*, 45-67.

Norris, J.E., Kuiack, S., & Pratt, M.W. (2004). "As long as the go back down the driveway at the end of the day": Stories of the satisfactions and challenges on grandparenthood. In M.W. Pratt & B.H. Fiese (Eds.) *Family stories and the life course: Across time and generations* (pp. 353-373). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Pennebaker, J.W. (1997). *Opening up*. New York: Guilford.

Peterson, C. & Roberts, C. (2003). Like mother, like daughter: Similarities in narrative style. *Developmental Psychology*, *39*, 551-562.

Pratt, M.W., & Fiese, B.H. (2004). *Family stories and the life course: Across time and generations*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Steinberg, L., & Silk, J.S. (2002). Parenting adolescents. In M.H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Vol 1: Children and parenting (2nd Ed.)* (pp. 103-133). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Zaman, W. & Fivush, R. (2009). *Gender differences in adolescents' stories about themselves and their parents' childhood*. Submitted manuscript.

Table 1.

Means (and Std. Devs.) for Narrative Content by Gender of Adolescent

<u>Narrative Variables</u>	<u>Stories about Mothers</u>		<u>Stories about Fathers</u>	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Affective States	1.29 (1.53)	0.78 (0.89)	0.68 (0.84)	0.64 (0.80)
<i>Positive</i>	0.37 (0.69)	0.44 (0.67)	0.26 (0.44)	0.3 (0.47)
<i>Negative</i>	0.92 (1.07)	0.34 (0.51)	0.42 (0.59)	0.34 (0.56)
Emotion Words	1.21 (1.48)	0.83 (0.90)	0.66 (0.93)	0.63 (0.75)
<i>Positive</i>	0.4 (0.84)	0.39 (0.59)	0.24 (0.51)	0.28 (0.40)
<i>Negative</i>	0.81 (0.95)	0.42 (0.53)	0.42 (0.62)	0.34 (0.59)
Cognition Words	1.05 (1.14)	0.73 (0.97)	0.79 (1.05)	0.56 (0.83)
Intergen Content	0.91 (0.95)	0.84 (1.19)	0.96 (1.02)	0.97 (1.56)
<i>Parallels</i>	0.25 (0.44)	0.16 (0.29)	0.18 (0.41)	0.22 (0.43)
<i>Life-lessons</i>	0.05 (0.16)	0.04 (0.19)	0.07 (0.22)	0.09 (0.26)
<i>Current Relations</i>	0.61 (0.67)	0.63 (0.98)	0.71 (0.87)	0.66 (1.39)

Table 2.

Pearson's Correlations between Adolescents' CBCL scores and Narrative Content

<u>Narrative</u> <u>Variables</u>	<u>Girls</u>				<u>Boys</u>			
	<u>Stories about</u> <u>Mothers</u>		<u>Stories about</u> <u>Fathers</u>		<u>Stories about</u> <u>Mothers</u>		<u>Stories about</u> <u>Fathers</u>	
	Int	Ext	Int	Ext	Int	Ext	Int	Ext
<i>Affective</i> <i>States</i>	-0.255	-0.444*	0.103	-0.005	-0.082	0.120	-0.008	0.177
<i>Emotion</i> <i>Words</i>	-0.206	-0.417*	0.179	0.048	-0.154	0.048	-0.171	0.054
<i>Cognition</i> <i>Words</i>	-0.392*	-0.365*	0.291	0.201	0.044	0.187	-0.199	0.067
<i>Intergen</i> <i>Content</i>	-0.385*	-0.502**	-0.039	0.050	-0.190	0.078	0.138	0.381*

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$