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Personal and Intergenerational Narratives: Narrative Coherence and Adolescent Well-being

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Abstract

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Personal stories and intergenerational narratives about previous generations may be beneficial to adolescents as they develop their adult identities. However, virtually no research exists exploring the relationship between intergenerational and personal stories and well-being. Sixty-four 13 to 16-year-old middle-class, racially diverse adolescents narrated four personal stories and two stories about each parent's childhood. In addition, mothers and adolescents completed well-being measures. Narratives were coded for narrative coherence (theme, context, and chronology). Theme was affected by narrative type as adolescents told more thematically coherent personal narratives than intergenerational narratives and more thematically coherent maternal than paternal intergenerational stories. Females were more contextually coherent than males. Furthermore, coherence dimensions varied together within the personal and paternal intergenerational narratives as adolescents high on chronology were also high on theme and context. High narrative coherence in personal and maternal intergenerational narratives correlated with lower internalizing and externalizing behavior for mother-reported well-being scores. These results indicate it does matter how adolescents structure their narratives.

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Contents

Personal and Intergenerational Narratives: Narrative Coherence and Adolescent Well-being

In our everyday lives, we use narratives to inform others of past events, current incidents, and even what we see for our futures. We reminisce with our families about shared events, including vacations, losses, and achievements, and parents frequently share stories about their childhood experiences with their children. Stories permeate our everyday interactions and are used to convey a variety of emotions and thoughts. Current theorists make the argument that all stories are important for an individual's development and well-being. To put this in context, I first discuss the nature of a narrative.

Narrative Identity

A narrative is a story, which incorporates components of culture, chronology, thoughts, and emotions. Narratives are a canonical way of characterizing and classifying our past experiences. By organizing experiences into narratives, individuals are able to make sense of the world around them and create meaning through narration (Fivush, 2007). In his "life story" model of identity, McAdams (2001) suggests that our identity itself takes the form of a narrative. He posits that during late adolescence and early adulthood individuals begin to incorporate their past events, perceptions of the present, and hopes for the future into an integrative narrative of the self. This, in turn, instills a sense of psychosocial unity and purpose within the context of the individual's culture. The life story incorporates a vast range of personal, shared, and reported events, emphasizing the integral relation between narrative and identity.

Expanding on McAdams' (2001) ideas, McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) refer to personal narratives as "situated stories" because these accounts are positioned within a

specific situation to fulfill a particular end**.** Situated stories serve as connecting concepts to create a map of self development throughout an individual's life, emphasizing the intimate connection between ourselves and our stories. Narratives of personal experience become the means by which our identity manifests itself and how it is expressed in communication (Fivush, Bohanek, & Marin, 2010). Personal narratives also provide a medium through which we are able to understand ourselves and make sense of past events. While the current literature emphasizes the critical role personal narratives play in our development of self, it also stresses the importance of family stories in our identity formation (Pratt & Fiese, 2004).

Families commonly reminisce about the past and also share stories from their everyday lives. Even when these narratives do not directly relate to an individual, they are still impacting the formation of personal identity. These types of family stories, often referred to as intergenerational narratives, involve stories about previous generations. Intergenerational narratives serve as a framework for characterizing an individual as a member of a family with a shared and established history. They also provide the setting on which an individual's life develops (Fivush, 2007). Therefore, stories of the past, even ones not experienced, serve as models for understanding our own experiences and establishing a sense of self both throughout historical time and in relation to our family (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008). Family stories maintain a family identity across generations, which offers an individual further stability in establishing his or her own identity (Pratt & Fiese, 2004). Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, and Rimmer (1995) found that narratives about parents' childhood experiences are relatively common in families, especially those with young children. Parents may share these stories with their

sons and daughters as a means of teaching family values and also life lessons. Yet, surprisingly, there is very little research on these kinds of intergenerational stories, even less on the family stories adolescents may know, such as stories about their parents' childhoods. Thus, one of the objectives of this study was to examine more systematically both adolescents' personal and intergenerational stories, and how these narratives might relate to adolescents' well-being. In particular, I examine narrative coherence as it has been found to be an important factor in the benefits of narrating life events.

Narrative Coherence

Narrative coherence involves how well an individual is able to construct and organize a story. Broadly defined, a coherent narrative maintains a meaningful chronological order of actions consistent with the primary topic, and reaches a resolution in the end (Peterson & McCabe, 1992). Coherent narratives also incorporate the ability to integrate different aspects of an experience with purpose and unity (McAdams, 1993) and allow individuals to express and regulate thoughts and emotions to promote meaning making (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). According to McLean (2005), meaning making provides insight into both personal and social levels of narrative identity. A critical aspect of meaning making refers to how an individual justifies the influence of a past event on another event or on an aspect of the self. The extent to which individuals can explain and understand how and why the event occurred as it did allows them to assign meaning to the reported events (Fivush, Sales, & Bohanek, 2008). Therefore, a coherent narrative provides the structure necessary to interpret the story's meaning.

While narrative coherence allows the speaker and the audience to better understand the account being told, telling coherent and emotionally expressive narratives

has been linked to an individual's well-being in adulthood. Baerger and McAdams (1999) asked adults to complete the Life Story Interview, which involves several prompts to construct a story of their past, present, and what they see as their future. They also requested the participants complete well-being measures, such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWCS), Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), and the Happiness Scale. The authors coded the construct of Life Story Coherence (LSC), which includes four indices: orientation (the manner in which the narrative describes the circumstances surrounding the events in the account), structure (the extent to which the narrative contains structural elements), affect (the extent to which the narrative makes evaluations), and integration (the extent to which the narrative integrates information). Baerger and McAdams concluded that life story coherence is related to well-being. Depression had the strongest (negative) correlation with life story coherence, while happiness and satisfaction produced modest associations. These findings suggest that the more coherent the life story, the higher the level of well-being. The results of this study support the idea that well-being is associated with the ability to create and maintain an integrated and cohesive self.

Pennebaker and colleagues found similar results with their expressive writing paradigm, which asks participants to write about their deepest emotions and thoughts concerning stressful personal experiences for one to five consecutive days, for about 15 to 30 minutes per day (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). In their review of the expressive writing literature, Pennebaker and Chung (2007) found that individuals who disclosed their thoughts and feelings about a traumatic event and provided more coherent, causally connected narratives demonstrated significant declines in their physician visits following

the expressive writing study. In her meta-analysis, Frattaroli (2006) established that the use of causal connections and emotional disclosure is also beneficial for psychological health and emotional well-being. Therefore, narratives allow individuals to arrange and organize their experiences, thoughts, and emotions to better cope with everyday stressful experiences. The ability to create emotionally and causally coherent narratives influences our psychological and physical health in a positive way. However, even though narrative coherence has been linked to well-being in adults, this connection has yet to be established with children and adolescents. This is a critical gap in the literature as many theorists have argued that one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence is the creation of a healthy adult identity (Erikson, 1968).

Narrative Development in Adolescence

According to Erikson (1968) adolescents face the developmental task of forming a mature psychosocial identity, the identity they will maintain throughout adulthood. With the pressure to form a stable identity within one's community, gender identity, sexual orientation, occupational goals, and values are some of the perspectives adolescents work to resolve before they reach adulthood. Since adolescence serves as such a critical foundation for the entirety of the adult life, it is important to explore the developments and changes that occur during this stage.

Moreover, it is during adolescence that many of the advances necessary for the construction of a life narrative develop. As children move through middle childhood and into early adolescence they are increasingly able to simultaneously focus on multiple aspects of an event and to infer and deduct both physical and psychological connections between events (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The emergence of formal operations and

physical maturity, as well as the cultural demand to establish oneself within different communities mark the emergence of the life story in adolescence and possibly the beginning of narrative meaning making (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Although narrative coherence has been theoretically linked to the creation of identity and well-being, its role during childhood and adolescence has received very little research attention. In an extensive review of the literature, Habermas and Bluck (2000) suggest that children cannot provide coherent narratives because children and young adolescents are still developing the cognitive and socioemotional skills needed to produce them. Summarizing their review of the extant research, around the age of 3 or 4, children begin to structure and remember events without prompting from adults. Between the ages of 2 and 5, children begin to organize events in a more complex and integrated fashion and move away from linear and uniform sequencing. Subsequently, at the age of 5, children develop the ability to anticipate problems and their resolutions, instead of solely focusing on immediate circumstances. These few developmental markers illustrate that childhood involves a number of advances in narrative abilities. Habermas and Bluck conclude that by the end of childhood, individuals fully acquire the ability to construct causally structured and goal-oriented narratives. However, they propose that despite the numerous achievements acquired during childhood, children are still unable to construct fully coherent narratives as the social-cognitive abilities that arise in adolescents, such as temporal sequencing, a cultural concept of biography, causal coherence, and thematic coherence, are necessary for constructing a coherent life narrative. They posit that during adolescence narrative coherence is possible as the life story begins to develop and

adolescents are able and motivated to explain actions across situation and across time (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

In order to illustrate the development of narrative abilities across childhood and adolescence, Genereux and McKeough (2007) asked 10, 12, 14, and 17-year-old participants to first read a short story and then summarize the story, describe the two main characters, generate story morals, and answer multiple choice interpretation questions. These responses were then scored for both structural complexity and socio-psychological content. McKeough and Genereux found that there were significant changes with age concerning the overall structure of the narratives, with a clear shift from an intentional to an increasingly interpretive understanding of the short story. In other words, this study demonstrates a clear developmental trend as older individuals move beyond merely providing descriptive accounts of the short story to offering further insight into unique characteristics of the story as well as possible reasons for why certain events occurred. Despite the limited research on narrative development in adolescents, the literature completed thus far points to a clear developmental progression in the construction of narratives during adolescence.

Narratives and Well-being in Adolescence

As adolescents become better able to construct more coherent narratives, these narratives may become more instrumental in their well-being. Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, and Brewin (2007) observed the effects of expressive writing on 9 to 13 year olds, who were randomly assigned to either an emotional writing group or a non-emotional writing group. The children were asked to write for 15 to 20 minutes for three consecutive days and also to complete measures assessing well-being one day before the

writing intervention and again two months following. The essays were then coded by separating each narrative into propositional phrases, which include a subject and a predicate. Each phrase was then coded into one of ten mutually exclusive categories, such as Emotion, Explanation, and Coping. The use of explanations was the measure of narrative coherence in this study. Children who wrote more negative evaluations subsequently demonstrated higher levels of distress. The authors suggest that since no change in narrative content occurred during the writing period, children may be unable to create coherent narratives, which leave them with an incomplete framework to understand and cope with their stress. The authors also propose that narrating these negative events may only renew these experiences, causing heightened anxiety as children appear to have no coherent explanatory scaffold to alleviate distress. However, the participants in this study are in late childhood and early adolescence; it may be that older adolescents are able to benefit from narratives about their life events.

Using a somewhat older sample, Soliday, Garofalo, and Rogers (2004) examined the influence of expressive writing on positive functioning in eighth-grade students. The authors randomly assigned participants to either write about negative events or to write about nonemotional events for 3 consecutive days. The essays were then coded using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001), a computerized text-analysis program which counts words in multiple categories. In this case, coherence is conceptualized as the use of causal and temporal words. The participants also completed questionnaires about somatic symptoms, medical visits, distress, and positive functioning before, after, and two and six weeks prior to the study. The authors found that 20 to 50 days following the expressive writing exercises, the level

of psychological distress significantly decreased in the participants who wrote about negative events when compared to those who wrote about neutral topics.

In accord with this finding, Reese et al. (submitted) found that the organization and detail of the narrative, which are critical components of narrative coherence, corresponded with well-being in early adolescence. The authors used a newly developed measure of narrative coherence that conceptualizes coherence along three independent dimensions, context, chronology, and theme. School-age children, from 6 to 14 years old were asked to report events that were previously selected by their parents. The authors discovered an evident developmental progression as adolescents were able to construct more coherent stories on all three dimensions when compared to their younger counterparts. In addition, adolescents with a more organized and detailed life story reported higher levels of self-esteem and also higher levels of self-worth. Overall, the research suggests a developmental trend where adolescence marks the ability to construct more coherent narratives, and as this ability emerges, relations to well-being also seem to surface. However, to date, research has focused on relations between personal narratives and well-being. As discussed, intergenerational narratives may also be an important framework for adolescents. Thus a second major objective of this study is to examine coherence of both personal and intergenerational narratives in relation to adolescent well-being.

Intergenerational Narratives and Well-being

Family stories are believed to contribute to an individual's ability to organize stories, especially in adolescence. An abundance of research suggests that the way parents structure conversations about the past with their children has a pervasive impact

on how children construct their own life narrative (Nelson & Fivush, 2004, for review). In early childhood, children contribute little information to conversations. Parents therefore prompt, or scaffold, conversations in order to elicit responses from their children. Through this parent-guided interaction, children learn the skills for constructing coherent personal narratives (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). The majority of these stories seem to be shared past experiences of the family, whether a trip to the zoo that day or a vacation two years prior. Family stories initially serve to teach children how to construct a narrative, as parents guide them and promote reflection of actions and emotions. Subsequently, intergenerational stories provide a means of developing narrative skills and a foundation for adolescents to better understand themselves and the world around them.

In addition to their importance in narrative development, intergenerational narratives have also been linked to well-being in adolescents (Fivush, Bohanek, & Marin, 2010). While family narratives assist children in learning how to structure narratives, the approach parents assume in scaffolding emotional expression and explanation within the family narratives may be a critical factor of well-being (Bohanek, Marin, & Fivush, 2008). Previous research demonstrates that families who frequently share intergenerational stories have adolescents who are more knowledgeable about their family history, and who also display higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Fivush, 2007). Currently, the few exploratory studies completed point to the significant influence intergenerational narratives play in development. One of the aims of this study is to look at this influence in a systematic manner to further understand its impact.

Measuring Coherence

As reviewed here, there are discrepant results in the literature about whether and when adolescents can construct fully coherent narratives, and if and how narrative coherence is related to well-being in adolescence. The wealth of narrative coherence measurements makes it difficult to collectively evaluate different studies. Based on recent reviews of narrative coherence, coherence is conceptualized as multifaceted and involves separable elements (Fivush et al., 2008b). For this reason, the current study uses a more multidimensional measure of coherence than past studies, which usually tend to rely on an overall global coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In this study, coherence is assessed using the Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme (NaCCS), which assesses coherence along three separate dimensions: context (situating the event in time and place), chronology (placing actions in a comprehensible sequential order), and theme (maintaining the topic and providing a resolution) (Reese et al., submitted). Examining narrative coherence and its relationship to well-being will allow us to better understand how adolescents construct narratives and also how this developmental stage impacts adulthood narrative processes.

Purpose and Predictions

There are two major objectives in this study. The first is to examine narrative coherence in personal and intergenerational narratives. As virtually no research has addressed this aim, this is exploratory and no concrete predictions can be made. However, it is likely that individuals who are able to tell personal narratives coherently will also be able to tell intergenerational narratives coherently. The second objective of this study is to examine the relationship between narrative coherence and well-being. Past research suggests that an individual who is able to tell a highly coherent narrative will

also have high levels of psychological and emotional well-being. Also, since intergenerational narratives play such an influential role in development, it is likely the adolescents who tell coherent family stories will also have high levels of well-being. In this study, both adolescent self-report and maternal-reported measures of internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, anger) were used to measure well-being.

Method

The data included in this study are part of a larger study, which examines family narratives as well as adolescent identity and well-being. The participants and procedures relevant to this study are described.

Participants

The participants include 64 middle-class, two-parent families with an adolescent in either the eighth or tenth grade. These individuals were recruited through local institutions, such as schools, sports camps, and churches. There were 37 eighth graders (mean age = 13.57, ranging from 13 to 14 years; 20 males and 17 females) and 27 tenth graders (mean age = 15.52, ranging from 15 to 16 years; 13 males and 14 females). Forty-four of the participants self-identified as White/Caucasian and 17 as African-American. One participant self-identified as Indian, while two self-identified as mixed ethnicity. The families were generally traditional as 57 participants came from a traditional two-parent home (of these, 3 were adopted), and 4 came from a blended two-parent home.

The parents of this sample are highly educated. Out of the 63 mothers who noted their level of education, three reported having a high school degree, 16 reported having

an incomplete college education, 28 reported having a college degree, and 16 reported completing their post graduate education and earning a degree. Out of the 61 fathers who noted their level of education, two reported completing some high school, 4 earned high school degrees, 11 reported completing some college, 26 reported earning their college degree, and 18 reported completing their post graduate degree.

Adolescents were the primary participants for the current study. Mothers provided fully informed consent, as approved by the Emory University Institutional Review Board, and adolescents were asked for assent. The mothers of this study received $25.00 at each of the two home visits as compensation for their participation in the study, while adolescents received two movie tickets at the first home visit and a $25.00 gift certificate at the second home visit. The narrative and questionnaire data used in this study were collected at the first home visit.

Procedure

Families were visited at home by one of eight female research assistants. On the first visit, adolescents were asked to provide positive and negative personal narratives as well as stories about their parents' childhoods.

Adolescents' Personal Narratives. Adolescents were asked to give two positive and two negative personal narratives using the following prompt: "I want you to think about a really positive (negative) event in your life that you remember; a time when you were really happy, excited, or proud (angry, sad, or scared). It may have happened recently or many years ago." At the end of this narrative, the adolescents were prompted for more information with, "Is there anything else you would like to add?" (Note that both positive and negative events were elicited in order to insure a wide range of

emotionally significant experiences, but emotional valence was not considered in this study; I return to this issue in the discussion).

Adolescents' Parent-Childhood Narratives. Adolescents were also asked to narrate two stories about their mother's childhood and two stories about their father's childhood with 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 their provided response appeared general, the adolescents were prompted with, "Can you tell me everything you know about that specific incident?" At the end of the narrative, the adolescent was then asked, "Is there anything else you would like to add?" The second mother-childhood story and the two narratives about the father's childhood were elicited using the same prompt.

Questionnaire Measures

After the narratives were collected, adolescents and mothers completed a packet of questionnaires regarding individual and family life. The current study includes the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 2001). The Youth Self-Report measure is used to determine the presence or absence of internalizing (e.g., anxiety or depression) and externalizing (e.g., acting out) behaviors in children. The internalizing and externalizing scores are calculated separately. The internalizing scale incorporates 31 items that combine for a total internalizing score, and the externalizing score is calculated from the

sum of 32 items. Each item in the scales is scored from 0 (the item is not true of the child) to 2 (the item is *very true* or *often true* of the child). Lower scores indicate low occurrence of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, while high scores suggest more frequent and/or severe internalizing or externalizing behaviors. Examples of items reflecting internalizing problems include "I cry a lot" and "I would rather be alone than with others." Sample items indicating externalizing issues include "I disobey my parents" and "I get in many fights" (as cited in Bohanek & Fivush, submitted).

In order to measure internal consistency, Achenbach and Rescorla (2001) calculated Cronbach's alphas for each scale. The internalizing and the externalizing scales both achieved $\alpha = .90$, indicating a strong internal consistency. The overall 1-week test-retest reliability Pearson's *r*'s for internalizing and externalizing scores are .80 and .89. Of the 64 adolescents who completed the narrative portion of the present study, 28 males and 27 females completed the Youth Self-Report. The number of participants in analyses with this measure will vary correspondingly.

The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 2001), the parent-reported version of the Youth Self-Report, was also used in this study. This measure is a 113-item questionnaire and follows the same format as the Youth Self-Report, but, in this measure, parents score the presence or absence of their child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. In order to measure internal consistency, Achenbach (2001) calculated Cronbach's alphas for each scale. The internalizing scale achieved $\alpha = .91$ and the externalizing scale achieved $\alpha = .92$. The overall 1-week test-retest reliability Pearson's *r*'s for internalizing and externalizing scores are .90 and .94. Fifty-seven mothers in the

current study completed the Child Behavior Checklist. The number of participants in analyses with this measure will vary correspondingly.

Coding

The tape-recorded narratives were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy before coding. Narratives were coded using a structural coherence coding scheme, developed by Reese et al. (submitted). Coherence is defined along three independent dimensions each coded on a 4-point scale from 0 (no inclusion) to 3 (high inclusion), described in detail in Table 1:

1. Chronology includes the level of sequential organization of the events in the narrative.
2. Context involves any information included in the narrative that situates the events in place or time.
3. Theme is the extent to which the narrative focuses on a specific topic.

Reliability

Adolescents' Personal Narratives. Three coders independently coded each narrative for the three dimensions of narrative coherence. For chronology, 40% of the narratives were coded. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficients for chronology were .75, $p<.001$, .84, $p<.001$, and .78, $p<.001$ between each pair of coders. For context, between 25% and 30% of the narratives were coded. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficients for context were .84, $p<.001$, .83, $p<.001$, and .80, $p<.001$. For theme, 41% of the narratives were coded. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficients for context were .83, $p<.001$, .87, $p<.001$, and .85, $p<.001$. The remaining transcripts were coded by one of these coders.

Adolescents' Intergenerational Narratives. Two coders independently coded each narrative for the three dimensions of narrative coherence. For chronology, 20% of the narratives were coded. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient for chronology was .92, $p < .001$. For theme, 28% of narratives were coded. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient for theme was .79, $p < .001$. For context, 20% of the narratives were coded. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient for context was .80, $p < .001$. The remaining transcripts were coded by one of these coders.

Results

The results are presented in four sections. In the first section, I discuss the types of narratives told by the adolescents in this study. In the second, I examine possible gender and grade differences in how coherently adolescents narrate stories of themselves and stories of their parents' childhood experiences. Next, I analyze the relationship of the coherence dimensions (chronology, context, and theme) within each of the narrative types (personal, maternal intergenerational, and paternal intergenerational) as well as the use of the dimensions across the narrative types to explore the coherence dimension similarities across narrative event. Finally, I explore the relationship between narrative coherence and the maternal and self-reported well-being measures.

Description of Narratives

Overall, adolescents narrated a wide range of diverse stories that fell into several broad, but not mutually exclusive, categories. For the adolescents' personal narratives, 69 stories (26%) were about achievements, including academic and sport successes, 41 (15%) were about a death or illness, 36 (14%) were about an accident or mishap, 27 (10%) were about a hardship endured, 26 (10%) were about animals or pets, 18 (7%)

were about family relationships, commonly family vacations, 16 (6%) were about peer relationships, 16 (6%) were about fights or arguments, 15 (6%) were about a failure, usually academic or sports related, one narrative was about being punished, and one story could not be placed in any of the above categories (as cited in Bohanek & Fivush, 2008). For the intergenerational narratives, 94 stories (39%) were about family relationships, including both positive and negative family interactions, 75 (32%) were about accidents and illnesses, 42 stories (18%) were about achievements, including career and academic successes, 34 stories (15%) involved peer relationships, both positive and negative, 17 stories (7%) were about animals or pets, and seven stories (3%) could not be categorized, such as stories about wearing bifocals and having big cheeks (as cited in Zaman & Fivush, submitted).

Narrative Coherence

The first set of analyses examined coherence by event type, age, and gender. Three independent 2 (Gender: Male, Female) by 2 (Grade: Eighth, Tenth) by 3 (Event Type: Personal narrative, Intergenerational narrative for mother, Intergenerational narrative for father) mixed model ANOVAs were conducted with grade and gender as the between subjects variables and event type as the within subject variable. Across analyses, there were virtually no gender or grade differences, thus Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations for the three coherence dimensions by event type collapsed across age and gender.

The ANOVA on chronology had no main effects and no significant interactions. This indicates that the adolescents, regardless of their gender or grade, told narratives that

were equally chronologically organized across personal narratives, maternal intergenerational narratives, and paternal intergenerational narratives.

For theme, there was a main effect of event type, $F(2, 112) = 20.42$, $p < .001$, but no main effects were found for either gender or grade and there were no interaction effects. This indicates that the coherence dimension of theme did not differ in regard to the gender or the grade, but theme was influenced by the type of narrative told. A follow up t-test was performed, indicating that adolescents provided more thematically coherent narratives about themselves than about their mothers, $t(62) = 4.06$, $p < .001$, and that adolescents told more thematically coherent narratives about their mothers than their fathers, $t(60) = 6.44$, $p < .001$.

For context, a main effect of gender was found, $F(1,56) = 4.36$, $p < .05$, but there was no main effect of event or grade, and no interactions. A follow up t-test was performed indicating that regardless of narrative type or grade, girls (M = 1.64, SD = .50) were contextually more coherent than boys (M = 1.36, SD = .41), $t(58) = -2.35$, $p < .05$.

Coherence Correlations within and across Narrative Type

In order to explore narrative coherence in more detail, I first looked at coherence dimensions within each event type. Essentially, do adolescents who tell more chronologically coherent narratives also tell more thematically and contextually coherent narratives for each event? In order to examine this question, I conducted Pearson's correlations and compared the coherence dimensions to one another within a particular event type (See Table 3). In personal narratives, adolescents who told stories with high levels of chronology also exhibited high levels of theme and context. This was also true for the paternal intergenerational narratives as adolescents who were high in chronology

also had high levels of context and theme. However, for intergenerational stories about the mother, the dimensions were not related to each other. Therefore, while the coherence dimensions varied together for personal narratives and for paternal intergenerational narratives, the coherence dimensions were not related in the maternal intergenerational narratives.

I also examined the relationship of coherence dimensions across narrative type (See Table 4). For chronology, there was a relationship between the level of chronology for the maternal and paternal intergenerational narratives, but there were no relations between the level of chronology for the personal story and either of the intergenerational narratives. Therefore, even though how adolescents chronologically organize their personal stories does not relate to the organization of their intergenerational stories, how adolescents chronologically organize stories of their mother's childhood and stories of their father's childhood do correspond to one another. For theme, there was a significant relationship between the personal narrative and the maternal intergenerational narrative, but no correlation was found between the personal narrative and the paternal intergenerational narrative or between the paternal and maternal intergenerational narratives. Context, on the other hand, showed relationships between personal narratives and maternal intergenerational narratives as well between the intergenerational narratives, but did not show a relationship between personal narratives and paternal intergenerational narratives.

Relationship with Well-being

The Youth Self-Report and the maternal Child Behavior Checklist were used in this study to measure adolescents' well-being. Table 5 shows the means and standard

deviations of the measurements as well as the correlation between the self reports. The correlation is not significant. For the Youth Self-Report, the internalizing and externalizing scores correlate to one another, $r(53) = .39$, $p < .01$, which has been established in the literature. This suggests that individuals who score high on internalizing behaviors will also score high on externalizing behaviors. For the maternal Child Behavior Checklist, the internalizing and externalizing scores were also related to each other, $r(55) = .71$, $p < .001$, which indicates that individuals who score high on internalizing behaviors will also score high on externalizing behaviors.

In order to explore the relationship between narrative coherence and the adolescent's self-reported well-being, I conducted Pearson's correlations and examined adolescent-reported internalizing and externalizing behavior scores for each coherence dimension across each narrative type. Few correlations achieved significance (See Table 6). However, adolescents who told more chronologically coherent narratives about their fathers' childhood experiences showed a lower internalizing behavior score. Also, the correlation between high levels of context in adolescents' personal narratives and low levels of internalizing behavior, although not significant by traditional levels of significance, did approach significance ($p < .10$).

I again conducted Pearson's correlations and examined the mother-reported internalizing and externalizing behavior scores for their child for each coherence dimensions across each event type (See Table 6). The maternal-reported measures of well-being highly correlated with personal narratives as chronology, theme, and context were significantly related to internalizing behaviors, and chronology and context were significantly related to externalizing behaviors. This suggests that adolescents who told

stories that were more chronologically, thematically, and contextually coherent also showed lower levels of internalizing behaviors, while individuals who told more chronologically and contextually coherent narratives demonstrated lower levels of externalizing behaviors. There was also a significant correlation between theme in the maternal intergenerational narratives and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. This indicates that adolescents who told more thematically coherent maternal intergenerational narratives also demonstrated lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors according to their mothers. Correlations between externalizing behaviors and chronology in the maternal intergenerational narratives as well as between internalizing behaviors and context in the maternal intergenerational narratives, although not significant by traditional levels of significance, did approach significance ($p < .10$). There were no significant correlations between the narrative coherence of the paternal intergenerational narratives and well-being.

Discussion

Adolescence serves as the foundation for our adulthood self as individuals resolve the necessary developmental markers to form their adult identities. However, little is known about the development of the adolescent identity and the narrative components that facilitate its formation. Virtually no research has examined the influence of narrative coherence in adolescent storytelling, especially when the adolescent is retelling intergenerational stories of previous generations. There is also little research concerning the impact narratives have on adolescent well-being and the research that does exist is controversial. Thus, my study had two major objectives. The first was to examine narrative coherence across the different narrative types, personal narratives and

intergenerational narratives about the parents' childhood experiences. The second objective of this study was to explore the relationship between narrative coherence and adolescents' well-being.

In terms of examining narrative coherence across event type, the results indicate that adolescents were able to tell more thematically coherent personal narratives than intergenerational narratives and also more thematically coherent maternal intergenerational narratives than paternal intergenerational narratives. The theme dimension incorporates the ability to elaborate and to make causal connections within a narrative. Therefore, it is understandable that adolescents would be able to provide more thematically coherent narratives about themselves as they know more details about their own experiences than their mother's or father's experiences. Past research illustrates that mothers have a more elaborative narrative style than fathers (Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, submitted; Fivush et al., 2010) and that adolescents are able to provide more elaborative narratives for maternal intergenerational narratives than paternal intergenerational narratives (Fivush et al., submitted). The results of the current study correspond with these previous findings as adolescents are able to construct more thematic, or elaborative, narratives about their mother's than their father's childhood experiences. This finding suggests that adolescents may recount stories of their parents' childhood in a similar manner to the way they are first told these stories. Therefore, adolescents seem to echo the more elaborate details in their mother's stories and the fewer elaborations in their father's stories.

The interpretation that mothers provide their adolescents with more elaborate stories is further reinforced by two other findings in this study. Firstly, the coherence

dimension of theme produced a significant correlation between personal narratives and maternal intergenerational narratives, but not between personal narratives and paternal intergenerational narratives or between the intergenerational narratives. While adolescents are able to provide highly elaborative stories about their own experiences since they experience them first hand, adolescents may also be able to more elaborately report stories of their mother's childhood experiences since these narratives were most likely initially disclosed in a more highly elaborative fashion. On the other hand, adolescents may not be able to recount stories as elaborately for their father's childhood experiences as they were initially not provided with sufficient detail.

Secondly, the context dimension of narrative coherence, which entails providing a place and a time within the narrative, produced a significant relationship between personal narratives and intergenerational narratives about their mother's childhood experiences. Since mothers, and women in general, are able to tell stories in a more elaborative and detailed manner than their male counterparts (Fivush et al., submitted; Fivush et al., 2010), it is likely that adolescents are able to situate their mother's story more easily than their father's as they are provided with more detailed information. Therefore, their firsthand account of their own experience involves the same levels of detail that their mothers provide them when recounting intergenerational stories. While how adolescents narrate maternal and paternal intergenerational narratives differently may be an effect of parent gender and how they are told the stories, this difference may also be a result of the different relationships adolescents have with each parent. Paterson, Field, and Pryor (1994) found that during early and middle adolescence, individuals are more prone to utilize mothers for support and proximity, which also leads to a higher

quality of affect toward the mother. Adolescents may be able to recall more detailed narratives about their mother's childhood than their father's as they are more likely to seek out conversations with their mother.

However, while parent gender differences may influence how the adolescent retells their parents' childhood stories, the amount of detailed information provided by both parents may be more similar than the literature proposes. In the current study, the context dimension produced a correlation between the intergenerational narratives, suggesting that time and place were used to the same extent in the intergenerational narratives. Buckner and Fivush (2000) analyzed parent-child stories about a shared activity as well as narratives about the parents' own childhood with 40 and 70 month-old children. The authors found few differences between how mothers and fathers report their own childhood experiences. This corresponds with our finding that maternal and paternal intergenerational stories were similarly contextually coherent. Future research may want to focus more closely on the differences and similarities of these types of narratives.

Despite the extensive literature on gender differences in narrative construction, very few gender differences were found concerning the intergenerational and personal narratives. However, gender did play a role in the context dimension as females provided more contextually coherent narratives than their male counterparts. Since context involves providing the place and time of the narrated event, these results correspond to the literature, which asserts that beginning in childhood and continuing throughout adulthood females tell more detailed narratives than males (Fivush & Buckner, 2003, for a review). Females more readily provide details, such as place and time, than males, which may account for their higher context coherence scores in this study.

Chronology also had higher means than context and theme. According to Habermas & Bluck (2000), adolescents achieve the milestone of coherently sequencing events within a narrative during their early adolescence. Impressionistically, this may account for the higher mean scores of chronology across each narrative event (personal, maternal intergenerational, and paternal intergenerational) as adolescents may have newly mastered this developmental goal and may be able to more proficiently organize the actions in their stories. Current analyses are examining these possibilities.

I also examined how coherence dimensions are related to one another within each of the narrative types. Adolescents who told chronologically coherent personal narratives also told personal narratives that were thematically and contextually coherent. This was also true for the narratives about their father's childhood experiences as adolescents who told chronologically coherent paternal intergenerational narratives also told paternal intergenerational narratives that were contextually and thematically coherent. Therefore, for personal and paternal intergenerational narratives, coherence dimensions varied together. However, while the coherence dimensions significantly correlated within the personal and paternal intergenerational narratives, coherence dimensions were not related within the maternal intergenerational narratives. Since adolescents experience the events in their personal narratives first hand, it is understandable that they would be able to create a coherent narrative across all coherence dimensions. However, it is unclear why coherence dimensions vary together for paternal and not maternal intergenerational narratives as the literature suggests mothers promote more coherent narrative structuring. Peterson and Roberts (2003) interviewed parents and children separately about a highly salient event, a child's trip to the emergency room. When comparing mothers' stories to

fathers' narratives, the authors found that mothers provided more cohesive and more coherent narratives than fathers in terms of providing causal and conditional connections between the story's events. Since mothers are generally more elaborative and coherent than fathers in narratives, it is puzzling why coherence dimensions vary together for personal narratives and narratives about fathers' childhood experiences, and not for mothers' childhood experiences; there is no clear interpretation of these results.

The next aim of this study was to examine how each coherence dimension functions across the different narrative events. How adolescents chronologically sequenced the events in their mother's and father's childhood stories were related to one another, while how the adolescents chronologically organized their personal narratives did not correspond to either of the intergenerational narratives. This suggests that adolescents may be able to more sufficiently organize events within their own stories than the stories of their parents' childhoods because they are more knowledgeable about their own stories. This may also indicate that personal narratives and maternal and paternal intergenerational narratives are structured differently, as adolescents do not chronologically structure the intergenerational narratives in the same manner as their personal narratives.

In terms of my second objective, this study found that personal and intergenerational stories about mothers' childhood experiences were more strongly correlated with well-being. These results correspond to literature that suggests that more coherent personal narratives are related to higher levels of well-being. Although this relationship has only been concretely established in adults (Pennebacker & Chung, 2007: Frattaroli, 2006; Baerger & McAdams, 1998), the literature concerning children and

adolescents seems undecided. While Fivush et al. (2007) found that expressive writing was detrimental to the well-being of 9 to 13-year-olds, Soliday et al. (2004) discovered a positive effect of expressive writing on eighth-graders' physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. The results of the current study seem to suggest that the self-disclosure of older adolescents may be beneficial for adolescents' well-being if it is done so in a coherent manner. Since high levels of chronology, context, and theme were correlated with lower levels of internalizing behaviors, and high levels of chronology and context were related to lower levels of externalizing behaviors, telling more coherent personal stories seems to correspond to higher levels of well-being.

While the current results suggest it is important to know your own stories, the results also indicate that knowing your mother's stories is also important. Specifically, adolescents who were thematically coherent in their maternal intergenerational narratives demonstrated lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Fivush et al. (2010) examined how families continue to reminisce about shared past events as their children grow older and how this process may influence the child's well-being. The results indicated that mothers elaborate more than fathers, suggesting that mothers play more of a role in helping construct the shared past. The authors also discovered that higher levels of maternal elaboration and evaluation about facts of negative events were related to lower levels of adolescents' internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The authors proposed that mothers who help adolescents to create more coherent, detailed narratives of stressful life events augment their child's level of well-being. These results closely resemble the results of the current study as the thematic nature of the maternal intergenerational narratives relates highly to well-being. Since mothers tend to elaborate

more in their own narratives, adolescents may mirror this tendency when recounting maternal intergenerational narratives. This, in turn, may promote higher levels of well-being as they are able to tell a thematically coherent story.

What might be surprising about the relationship between narrative coherence and well-being in this study is that virtually no correlations were produced between the coherence dimensions and the adolescent self-reported levels of well-being, while multiple relationships emerged between the narrative coherence dimensions and the maternal reported well-being of the adolescent. Past research indicates that multiple informants, such as mothers, fathers, and teachers, often contribute different reports of a child's behavior (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987, as cited in Bohanek, Fivush, Zaman, Lepore, Merchant, & Duke, 2009). However, mothers may be considered more accurate than other informants (Phares, 1997, as cited in Bohanek et al., 2009). It seems puzzling as to why the mothers' report would be considered better than a self-report. However, adolescence is a time of personal turmoil as individuals cope with the difficulties of forming an identity. Mothers may be able to provide a broader perspective than adolescents to their actions and may offer more objective observations. However, why the maternal report, and not the self-report, related to well-being is unclear and future research should explore the relationship between maternal- and self-reports further.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

I must acknowledge some limitation of the study. All of the families who participated in this study are middle-class, two-parent, dual-earner families with high-functioning adolescents, and future studies should examine a more diverse population. This study also focuses on participants in later adolescence. Therefore, future research

should also examine narrative coherence in early adolescents. However, this study did incorporate a racially and socioeconomically diverse population, which provided more varied results. The current study was a correlational study, which means it addressed effects from a single point in time. Future research should focus on the direction of the relationship between coherent narratives and high levels of well-being to discern which factor is potentially causing the other. This study also combined positive and negative personal narratives into an overall personal narrative category. It may be important to separate the two in future studies.

This is the first study in the literature to examine narrative coherence and its influence on well-being in adolescent narratives, especially concerning intergenerational stories. The findings indicate that intergenerational stories and personal stories are important for adolescents' well-being and possibly their emerging identity. These provocative findings assert that narratives are an important area to study as how we construct stories of both the self and others appears to contribute to our psychological and emotional well-being.

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Appendix A

High Coherence Scores for Personal Narrative

Ok so I was home alone, it was the day before my birthday actually, and I was home alone my parents were both at work and I had my dog, 130 lbs., and I went downstairs, and I hadn't eaten anything all day, so I was going downstairs to get lunch, and my dog was by the door. And he has a dog aggression, so he hates other dogs, and there were two dogs in my yard and he wanted to go out and hurt the dogs I guess. So he was waiting at the door, and I thought he had to go um to the bathroom, I thought he had to go, I thought he had to be let out, so, 'cause he hadn't barked or anything so I didn't think there were dogs, so I put his leash on and I wrapped it around my wrist, and I opened the door. And he bolted out the door and the leash pulled me and my head and my hand went through the um side light window, it's leaded glass, the glass the thick, and then um my head bent the lead in it, then my dog like, I don't know the leash came off of my hand and I went back inside and I was like "Oh man that's going to be a bruise." (laughs) 'Cause I didn't really feel it, and I was like "oh man that could have been serious I hope I'm not bleeding or anything" and then I put my hand up to my face and I was like "Uhh" 'cause there was blood all over. I ran and I looked in the mirror and there was um, and there was a big cut on my forehead, and so I took the phone and I realized there was blood all over my hand too, 'cause there were cuts all over my hand too, and so I called my mom and she didn't answer her cell phone, and then I called my dad but I think I dialed the wrong number, 'cause he said later no missed calls showed up. And then I called my neighbor. Everyone is always like you should have called 911, well I didn't, I wasn't thinking, so I called my neighbor, and she thought I was overacting, I was like

"uhh I cut myself and I think you need to come over here and help me" and she's like "Calm down, maybe you should come over here." And I was like "No, no could you come here." So she came over and she was like "oh!" and she got a hold of my dad and she and another neighbor who has four boys of her own came and they helped me get calmed down and stuff, and then my dad got home 20 maybe 30 minutes later, and took me to the hospital, and I remember I just kind of, I waited in the hospital for a long time, doctors and nurses would come in and out, I had to get my jaw x-rayed because I hurt my jaw, and they had to see if there was anything wrong there and there wasn't, I needed ten stitches in my head and ten stitches in my hand, and so um, yea. And then I was there pretty much the rest of the day and I came home at dinnertime and watched Ferris Bueller's Day Off, and all these people started calling me. 'Cause my friend, it was my friend's mom who had come over so she knew about it, she was walking her dog and told everyone she saw the whole story, so then the next day was my birthday.

Scores:

Chronology: 3

Theme: 3

Context: 3

Appendix B

Low Coherence Scores for Personal Narrative

Well, I really thought I did really bad on it ‘cause it’s really hard and I didn’t know much. But um when I got my scores back I was like, “These aren’t my scores.” So, yeah, it was really cool to see how much…that I can like to go to college with my scores now. (Unintelligible) bad college (unintelligible). Yeah, I thought it was really… but I actually did do good.

Scores:

Chronology: 1

Theme: 1

Context: 0

Appendix C

High Coherence Scores for Maternal Intergenerational Narrative

Well, my mom had a wacky childhood. Um she lived in rural New Jersey about somewhere mid-north. It's about an hour away from Manhattan. And she…well, when she was a teenager she um apparently sounded a lot like her…my mom…my mom's…my grandmother…her mom. Um and so her boyfriend, I think, called the house asking for…well…who he's intending to call…my mom. But my grandmother answered the phone And she goes, "Hello." And he said, "Hey Kim…" and he like asked 'er out on a date and she goes, "Why thank you. Would like to talk to Kim?" (Laughs) And she gives it to my mother and my mother starts freaking out (laughs). It eventually got all straightened out, but it was a really bad point for my mom and, of course, the guy. But I just thought that was really funny. And um…oh…oh uh, she had a younger brother… And my grandmother likes to tell that one 'cause she finds it hilarious 'cause he starts on this rant of, "Oh, I really like you, etc….you want to go out on this date or something?" And like he starts flattering…and she's like, "Why thank you. I'm so flattered, but would you like to talk to Kim?" (Laughs) She just thought it was so funny. Just that my grandmother finds it hilarious and my mom doesn't find it too hilarious. So, you know, that's really all I remember. I'm not sure if he was her boyfriend or not or if like he was just starting to date 'er or something. I don't know. But it was some relationship. Well, it kinda relates now, because apparently I kinda sound like my mom on the phone. That's a little unnerving because of that story. I'm worried that some guy will call and my mom will answer and it will be like, basically, a replication of that or something like, "The Women of the Taylor family are doomed…" (laughs). I don't know.

Scores:

Chronology: 3

Theme: 3

Context: 3

Appendix D

Low Coherence Scores for Maternal Intergenerational Narrative

When my mom was a kid her and her two sisters they would always watch… Well, it was her and one of her other sisters, they used to watch Garfield all the time. Garfield is one of their favorite characters. She used to draw Garfield all the time. She had a scrapbook with Garfield on it. Well, basically, I believe she said something about my m…my aunt collected…collected Garfield and stuff and my mom drew it and drew big posters of 'im on the wall. But I don't think anything specific about it. But she just really liked Garfield a lot.

Scores:

Chronology: 0

Theme: 1

Context: 1

Appendix E

Paternal Intergenerational Narrative

Um…he went to a boarding school in Italy I think it was. And um he was…he was a DJ at… 'cause it was a boys boarding school and there was a girls boarding school near them, so they had a party every weekend with both of the schools. And he was the DJ at one of them.

Scores:

Chronology: 1

Theme: 1

Context: 1

Table 1

Coherence Coding Descriptions

Global Code	Score	Description
Chronology	0	The events of the narrative are unordered.
	1	Few events in the narrative are ordered in a comprehensible manner.
	2	About half of the events in the narrative are ordered in a comprehensible manner
	3	The majority of the events in the narrative are temporally organized and easy to follow
Theme	0	The events of the narrative do not center on an apparent topic.
	1	The events of the narrative center on a specific topic, but with little elaboration or causal connections.
	2	Increasing elaboration and causal connections between the events of the narrative.
	3	The narrative ends with a resolution and/or connection to some larger life event or self-description.
Context	0	The events of the narrative are never situated in time and place.
	1	General mention of either place (e.g., “at the mall”) or time (e.g., “one time”).
	2	Specific mention of either place (e.g., “in New York City”) or time (e.g., “during Thanksgiving last year”).
	3	Specific mention of both place and time.

Table 2

Means (and Std. Devs.) for Coherence Dimensions across Event Type

Coherence Dimension	Personal Narratives	Maternal Intergenerational Narratives	Paternal Intergenerational Narratives
Chronology	2.05 (.67)	2.10 (.85)	2.03 (1.02)
Theme	1.92 (.49)	1.60 (.55)	1.39 (.50)
Context	1.61 (.63)	1.47 (.69)	1.43 (.69)

Table 3

Correlations within Narrative Type

	Within Personal	Within Maternal Intergenerational	Within Paternal Intergenerational
Between Chronology and Theme	.45**	.14	.28*
Between Chronology and Context	.59**	.02	.28*
Between Theme and Context	.39**	.36**	.16

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 4

Correlations across Narrative Type

	Between Personal and Maternal Intergenerational	Between Personal and Paternal Intergenerational	Between Maternal and Paternal Intergenerational
Chronology	.12	.11	.56**
Theme	.37**	.18	.16
Context	.31*	.12	.33*

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5

Means (and Std. Devs.) and Correlations for Youth Self-Report and Child Behavior Checklist

	YSR	MCBCL	*r*
Internalizing	53.49 (8.34)	48.75 (9.12)	.21
Externalizing	49.60 (8.15)	47.32 (9.17)	.21

Table 6

Correlation between Well-being and Coherence Dimensions across Event Type

Coherence Dimensions	Personal Narrative		Maternal Intergenerational Narrative		Paternal Intergenerational Narrative	
	Internalizing	Externalizing	Internalizing	Externalizing	Internalizing	Externalizing
			Youth Self-Report			
Chronology	-.15	.08	-.21	.04	-.30*	.03
Theme	.03	.12	.04	-.05	-.09	.05
Context	-.26	-.15	-.10	.00	-.15	-.02
			Maternal CBCL			
Chronology	-.30*	-.28*	-.08	-.22	-.01	-.09
Theme	-.28*	-.18	-.30*	-.31*	-.04	-.02
Context	-.29*	-.32*	-.26	-.12	.04	.02

*$p < .05$.