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Exploring the Relations Between Emotion Regulation within a Narrative Context and Adolescent Well-being

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Psychology

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Abstract

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In this study, I examined the relations between emotion regulation within narratives about negative events and adolescent socio-emotional well-being. Narratives allow individuals to reflect on and create meaning from their past experiences (McAdams, 1992). Therefore, examining emotion regulation within narratives allows researchers to understand the mechanism by which individuals incorporate emotional events into their lives. Although previous research in adult populations has consistently shown that emotional expression and well-being are related (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007), research in children and adolescent populations has yielded mixed results (Reynolds, Brewin, & Saxton, 2000; Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, & Brewin, 2007). Interestingly, Bohanek and Fivush (in press) found that, in adolescence, the effects of sharing a negative emotional event might be gender based. In this study, I re-analyzed the narratives initially examined by Bohanek and Fivush (in press), and developed a new coding scheme that captures the emotional intensity and coping strategies used in the narratives. Girls produced narratives higher in emotional intensity than boys, and expressed a greater number and greater variety of coping strategies in their narratives. However, there were no relations between the narrative variables and emotional adjustment. Possible explanations for these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Robyn Fivush, my advisor, as well as the other committee members, Dr. Sherryl Goodman and Dr. Christine Ristaino, and all the members of the Family Narratives Lab for their help and support on this project.

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Exploring the Relations Between Emotion Regulation within a Narrative Context and Adolescent Well-being

Emotion regulation (ER) helps all humans to manage the emotional events in their lives. Recent research suggests that one important way that individuals regulate emotion is through creating more expressive narratives of emotional experiences (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). In this study, I explore how emotion regulation, within the context of narratives, relates to adolescent well-being. I begin by discussing the literature on the development of emotion regulation in childhood and adolescence, focusing specifically on four general concepts and their relations to ER: language, effortful control, gender differences, and coping strategies. In addition, I explore the implications of maladaptive emotion regulation for externalizing and internalizing problems. I then examine emotion regulation within the context of narrative writing and sharing, by first exploring the research on adults and then turning toward the literature on children and adolescents. For adults, I look specifically at the expressive writing paradigm and for children I focus on the implications of the limited and mixed research on this subject. I conclude with a more detailed description of a study conducted by Bohanek and Fivush (in press), which provides a basis for the current study.

Thompson (1994, p. 27-28) describes emotion regulation eloquently in the following definition, “emotion regulation consists of the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one’s goals.” In essence, emotion regulation (ER) is the mechanism by which we manage which emotions to display, decide when to express them, and control how these emotions are expressed. The

capacity for emotion regulation develops throughout childhood and adolescence. As described in Thompson's definition, young children depend primarily on external forces to regulate their emotions (Izard & Malatesta, 1987), but over time, children learn how to self-regulate their emotional state. By adolescence, children are not only able to self-regulate effectively, but are also able to manage their emotions in diverse and flexible ways.

Development of language and emotion regulation. This transition from the need for extrinsic regulation to self-regulation is related to the development of speech. In toddlerhood, when children are first beginning to speak, they are able to develop basic internal processes for regulating their emotions, but still depend primarily on external sources for emotional regulation. Grolnick, Bridges, and Connel (1996) conducted a study in which two year olds were exposed to a stressful event; toddlers were either shown an attractive gift (i.e. a toy or a snack) but could not access it until after a delay period, or the toddlers were exposed to a situation in which they were separated from their parents. They then observed how the toddlers' regulated their emotions during the stressful delay period. Out of six possible regulation strategies, such as active engagement or focus on frustration object/search for parent, symbolic self-soothing (i.e. self-regulation through language use) was used the least. The authors suggest that while self-soothing through language does not seem to be a particularly useful strategy for young children in emotionally stressful events, toddlers' use of emotional vocabulary does aid the caregivers in identifying the emotional state of their child and allows them to react appropriately to soothe their child (Grolnick, Bridges, & Connel, 1996).

Looking at early childhood, Jachimowicz (2010) investigated the relationship between language competency and emotion regulation in preschool children between 48 and 60 months using the Preschool Language Scale. Expressive language was significantly correlated with parental report of child's positive emotion regulation, with children's ability to tell narratives with an emotional resolution, and with children's use of verbal conflict resolution. This suggests that even at a young age, children can resolve emotional conflicts through the use of language, and perhaps, even more specifically, through the use of narrative.

While children at this age are able to resolve a narrative, they still lack the capacity to completely regulate their emotions independently. Cole, Armstrong, and Pemberton (2010) suggest that children in their preschool years are unable to self-regulate on their own effectively because they have yet to fully develop emotional language competencies and emotion regulation capacities. Therefore, they are not mature enough to integrate these two processes that are necessary for emotional self-regulation. They further explain that parents' use of emotion language in conversations with their children may help children to become better skilled at emotion regulation. These conversations are particularly helpful if they are geared towards teaching the child how to self-regulate (e.g. asking the child how they would handle this situation) rather than simply solving the problem for the child.

In examining language development and emotion regulation in middle childhood, Zeman and Shipman (1996) noticed a gender difference when examining the expression and regulation of negative emotion in a sample of second and fifth graders. They found that girls were likely to use verbal means to express and regulate their emotions whereas

boys tended to rely on more aggressive methods (i.e. stomping around or hitting something) to manage their negative emotions. This suggests that girls may be socialized to use language as a means for regulating their emotions, whereas boys may rely less on language and more on alternative aggressive techniques, an idea I discuss in more detail below when discussing gender and emotion.

As children grow older, research shows that there is an increase in adolescents' abilities to discuss their emotions with others (Kopp, 1992). This suggests that by adolescence, there is a desire to share emotional events with others, which is made easier by a mature emotional vocabulary. This is particularly important for my current study because, as the research shows, the mastery of emotional language seems to be linked with better emotion regulation. Therefore, it is important to look at emotion regulation through the context of narratives because it acts as a mechanism for adolescents to put their emotions into language.

Effortful control and emotion regulation. Effortful control is an important aspect of ER because it allows individuals to consciously manage the ways they are regulating the emotional events that happen to them. This first begins to develop in early childhood with the development of display rules. Display rules are culturally specific rules that instruct a person on how to regulate their emotions in a given social context (Saarni, 1989). For example, children might learn that if they exaggerate their pain after an accident, they will receive more sympathy and special treatment from their parents. This involves effortful control because children are actively working to exhibit one emotion in the face of another.

Kochanska, Murray, and Harlan (2000) define effortful control as "the ability to

suppress a dominant response to perform a subdominant response" and state that children become more proficient at effortful control over their emotions over time. In fact Kochanska and colleagues (2000) developed a task to measure five different components of effortful control: delaying, slowing down motor activity, suppressing or initiating activity, lowering voice, and focusing attention. They found that there were significant improvements in children's abilities to effortfully control their behavior between 36 and 48 months. Further improvements have been shown to occur during the preschool years on other tasks such as the day-night task (Diamond, Prevor, Callender, & Druin, 1997) or the Luria's peg-tapping task (Diamond & Taylor, 1996), both of which require the child to inhibit one action in favor of another. This ability to inhibit one emotion in favor of another emotion is crucial for regulating emotion for a negative event. It allows children to cope with the negative emotional events by substituting the negative emotions associated with the situation for a more positive emotion. For example, a child may substitute a feeling of disappointment in not receiving the gift they wanted for their birthday, with a feeling of appreciation and excitement about the gifts they did receive. The child essentially substitutes a positive emotion for a negative emotion, allowing them to look at the situation in a more positive light.

Deficits in effortful control have been linked to both externalizing and internalizing problems. Xu et al. (2009) conducted a study examining temperament and reactive and proactive children in 401 Chinese children. They found that both reactive and proactive aggression (aspects of externalizing problems) were negatively related to effortful control. Interestingly, they suggest that these two different types of aggression interact with a child's use of effortful control in different ways. Proactive aggression can

be defined as aggression that is calculated and intentional and is often associated with conduct problems and acting out in class. In contrast, reactive aggression is an aggressive emotional reaction to a scary or frustrating event. The authors suggest that when children have high levels of effortful control, even when confronted with disruptive or frustrating stimuli, they can appropriately cope by properly managing their levels or arousal and reactions rather than resorting to reactive or proactive aggression techniques. However, those that are unable to properly use effortful control lose their temper and act aggressively when confronted with these negative events. Thus, a higher incidence of aggression is linked with lower use of effortful control.

In addition, internalizing problems have been negatively correlated with parent-reported effortful control and attention in middle childhood (Lemery-Chalfant, Doelger, & Goldsmith, 2008). Rumination is a key problem in internalizing behaviors; the inability to substitute the ruminating thoughts for another, more positive thought might be due to a deficit in effortful control. For example, instead of continuing to ruminate and think about getting a bad grade on a test, the child could instead turn the situation around, and use it as a motivator to do better on the next test. If a child is not able to do this, and instead continues to ruminate on the poor grade and thinks of themselves as a poor student, they might be having trouble mastering their effortful control capabilities. However, Eisenberg and colleagues (2005) suggest that mastery of effortful control capacities may help prevent internalizing problems because it promotes flexible and adaptable behavior for confronting challenging behaviors.

By the time they enter adolescence, children have developed a greater effortful control over their emotions and can employ diverse and flexible coping strategies

(Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Therefore, adolescents' abilities to use effortful control to regulate their emotion should allow them to display adaptive behavior that ameliorates externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

Gender differences and emotion regulation. When examining emotion by gender, it is generally thought that girls are socialized to express more emotion than boys. There is also research to suggest that there are gender differences in children's abilities to regulate emotion. In a study investigating the factors that influence a child's decision to display or suppress an emotion, 192 children were presented 12 stories that depicted either a sad, painful, or frustrating scenario (Zeman & Garber, 1996). Through individual interviews, researchers observed how children reacted to different stories, and whether they expressed or suppressed their emotional reaction. They found that males were socialized to suppress emotions such as sadness while females suppressed emotions associated with anger. In another study investigating children's expression of negative affect, Zeman and Shipman (2006) found that girls, more so than boys, reported feeling better after expressing sad or painful emotions and believed that it was good to show their feelings. Similarly, another study found that when given various stressful scenarios there were gender differences in how adolescents coped with the events (Young & Zeman, 2003). They found that girls were more likely to substitute one emotion for another, but boys tended to neutralize their emotional expression.

These gender differences could be explained by how girls and boys are socialized. In general, parents talk more about emotions with girls than boys. In particular, they tend to discuss anger emotions more often with boys (Fivush, 1989) and sadness more often with girls (Fivush, 1989; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Therefore, from

a young age, children are socialized to process, regulate, and exhibit emotions differently. This gender difference seems to be, in part, socially adaptive, in that boys' abilities to neutralize their negative emotions is linked to better peer acceptance by boys and girls, and girls' abilities to substitute their emotions is linked to better peer acceptance by other girls (Young & Zeman, 2003). Thus, these gender differences in emotion regulation seem to be not only socially acceptable, but also socially supported, in that boys and girls are expected to express and regulate emotions differently.

Coping strategies and emotion regulation. Coping is an integral part of self-regulation, particularly in times of stress (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997; Compas, 1998). Children's ability to use diverse and flexible coping strategies allows them to better deal with negative or stressful events. In addition, research shows that difficulties with coping can be linked to negative well-being.

Seeking support from others and withdrawal are the basic coping strategies evident in even very young children (Gunnar, 1994). As children progress to early childhood, they continue to cope when confronted with a distressing event by utilizing coping strategies such as distracting themselves or thinking of the situation in a more positive way (Denham, 1998). However, children who experience an intense negative emotion have difficulty distracting themselves and inhibiting their feelings about the distressing event (Eisenberg et al., 2005). In fact, children at this age that have trouble with self-regulation for negative emotions are more likely to be anxious or fearful, to have difficulties with social interaction with peers and teachers, and to act aggressively when irritated (Eisenberg et al., 2005). By adolescence, there is a great increase in meta-

cognitive skills that allows adolescents to respond to stressful events effectively with appropriate coping strategies. (Compas, et al., 2001).

Compas and colleagues (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies on the relation between coping strategies and symptoms of psychopathology. Twenty of those studies allowed the children or adolescents to self-select a stressor of their choosing, while several other studies assessed how children cope when given a hypothetical statement. When looking at the relationship between coping strategies and internalizing and externalizing behaviors, Compas et al. (2001) found many interesting results. Firstly, problem-focused support (e.g. seeking out others for advice or help with a problem) was related to fewer internalizing symptoms, whereas disengagement coping (e.g. withdrawal) and emotion-focused support (e.g. seeking out others to calm or soothe emotions) were related to more internalizing symptoms. For externalizing symptoms, disengagement coping seemed to be related to fewer symptoms, whereas emotion-focused support was associated with more symptoms. The use of coping strategies such as problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and positive reappraisal were associated with better adjustment later in life. On the other hand, poor coping strategies such as avoidance, withdrawal, wishful thinking, self-blame, and self-criticism were related to a poorer prognosis later in life. The authors suggested that perhaps emotion-focused support was related to higher internalizing and externalizing symptoms because "this involved a disengagement with the stressor or the emotions, negative cognitions of the self, and unregulated release or ventilation of negative emotions" (Compas et al., 2001). In essence, emotional modulation, which is modulating emotions when necessary or

sharing when appropriate, and emotional expression, which is seeking social support, seem to be the best strategies for long-term psychological health.

Emotion in adolescence. Adolescents often experience more frequent and intense emotions than other age groups (Silk, Steinberg, & Sheffield, 2003). Nevertheless, during adolescence, there are significant developmental milestones for emotional functioning. Adolescents have a better understanding of emotions and how it relates to social context and cultural norms (Fischer & Bidell, 1998). They have also developed the capacity to assess the cause and effect of emotions (Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006). In essence, adolescents have become better able to self-regulate their emotions and regulate and cope with emotions in diverse ways.

Adolescents have a wide fluctuation of emotions (Larson & Richards, 1994) and they need to learn to manage their emotions effectively for adaptive socio-emotional well-being (Hartel, Zerbe, & Ashkanasy, 2005). It is particularly important when children are faced with a negative event, that they learn how to regulate their emotions in a functional manner particularly because negative emotions typically arouse a greater level of emotional intensity than positive emotions (Plutchik, 1993). When regulating high levels of emotional intensity, some may resort to using strategies of over-controlling their emotions, which might lead to internalizing problems, whereas others may have difficulties controlling the intensity of their emotional expression, which can lead to externalizing problems (Plutchik, 1993).

Emotion regulation and externalizing and internalizing problems. If a child lacks control over their emotions, they might lash out aggressively, but if a child is over controlling their emotional expression they may ruminate on negative thoughts

obsessively. If adolescents cannot resolve and incorporate negative events into their life story, it may negatively affect their overall well-being. The role of maladaptive ER in the development of internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, anger, substance abuse) problems has been extensively studied (Zeman, et al., 2006). There seems to be a different pattern of maladjustment for internalizing and externalizing problems. The key ER deficits implicated in externalizing problems seem to be high levels of emotional intensity coupled with poor self-regulation techniques (Zeman, et al., 2006). Interestingly, children with self-regulation problems not only are more prone to negative emotions but also have difficulties regulating such emotions and inhibiting behavior when emotionally aroused (Zeman, et al., 2006). In fact, measures of self-regulation are consistently negatively related to externalizing problems (Eiden et al., 2009; Hill, Degnan, Calkins, & Keane, 2006).

The key deficits in ER associated with internalizing problems seem to be an over-control of emotions, an attentional bias toward negative stimuli, and poor emotional awareness and understanding (Garnefski, Kraaij, Van Etten, 2005). Both depressed and anxious children seem to lack emotional understanding and thus use maladaptive strategies to manage their emotions such as worry, sadness, or rumination (Zeman et al., 2006). In a study investigating emotional regulation in children with anxiety, researchers found that anxious children, in comparison with controls, had greater negative emotional intensity and a greater difficulty in reappraising a negative emotional situation (Carthy, Horesh, Apter, & Gross, 2010). Females in particular during adolescence show an increase in levels of rumination where they fail to resolve their emotional problems, and

this obsessive thought pattern has been linked with depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008).

In fact, gender differences in the development of emotional problems such as depression and aggression emerge in adolescence. Girls begin to report a higher rate of depressive symptoms than boys in mid-adolescence (Nolen-Hoeksema & Hilt, 2009) whereas boys begin to show higher rates of aggressive behaviors than girls during early adolescence (Nichols, Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Botvin, 2006). This gender difference seems to suggest that emotional problems vary by gender in important ways during adolescence.

Exploring emotion regulation in a narrative context. Adolescents are found to experience their emotions as intensely personal and as core to who they are (Haviland, Davidson, Reutsch, Gebelt & Lancelot, 1994). Personal narratives are an essential mechanism by which individual's gain an emotional identity. Narratives are a socially and culturally constructed technique for analyzing past events (McAdams, 1992). Language allows one to engage in reflexive processing whether through oral language or written. Narratives in particular allow individuals to create meaning from their past because rather than simply summarizing a specific event, narratives allow individuals to reflect on and work through their experiences.

In adult populations, expressive writing has been shown to improve academic performance, lead to better physical health with less reported visits to the doctor's office, and relate to better emotional well-being (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Pennebaker 1990). The expressive writing task involves asking participants to write for at least fifteen minutes a day over a period of three days. They are asked to write about an emotionally

charged topic or event. Sometimes a specific emotion is identified and other times, little direction is given to participants detailing what to write about. There is evidence of both behavioral and health-related changes as a result of using the expressive writing paradigm. For example, professionals who had been laid off from their job obtained new jobs more quickly after writing about emotional events (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994). As far as health outcomes, university staff members who wrote about an emotional topic had fewer sick days from work than controls who did not write (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007).

When analyzing the effectiveness of the paradigm, Pennebaker used the LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry Word Count) coding scheme. This is a text analysis program developed by Pennebaker and Francis (1996) that analyzes the use of emotional words and cognitive processing. Research using this coding scheme shows that adults who tell narratives that disclose emotion, use causal-explanatory language (because, therefore), and use words that show emotional reflection (think, understand) show better outcomes for this intervention. Therefore, both emotional disclosure and developing insight or explanations in the narrative are critical for well-being in adults. After examining many different populations across a variety of settings, Pennebaker (1990) concluded that the expressive writing paradigm is shown to be effective across a variety of ages in adult populations ranging from college students to older adults. Participants also report this task to be easy to complete and to be beneficial and meaningful for them.

To analyze Pennebaker's conclusion, Frattaroli (2006) conducted a meta-analysis on 146 previous studies and found that experimental disclosure was in fact beneficial with an effect size of 0.075. She also identified several moderators to this effect:

participants with health problems, participants with a history of trauma, participants who disclosed in a private setting, having more male participants, paid participants, having follow up periods of less than 1 month, having disclosure sessions that lasted 15 minutes, asking participants to discuss previously undisclosed topics, giving participants direct questions, detailing whether participants should switch topics, and not collecting the products of disclosure all yielded higher effect. They also found that emotional disclosure was more effective for psychological health outcomes dealing with emotions (anxiety, depression) rather than cognitions (body image disorder).

Internal State Language. While narratives allow individuals to create meaning from their experiences, much of this meaning-making derives from the use of internal state language or language that indicates reflective thought about past emotional events (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). Use of internal state language indicates that the individual is reflecting on, evaluating and interpreting the emotional events disclosed in their narratives (Bruner, 1987). Higher use of this type of language has been linked to better well-being in adults. Research shows that adults who use more cognitive processing words, such as "think" and "understand" and more emotion words in their narratives of stressful events show higher levels of physical and psychological well-being (Pennebaker, 1990; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). This suggests that in some ways, narratives are part of the emotional regulation process.

Internal state language is particularly important for deriving meaning from negative events. Interestingly, research has shown that both adults and children use a greater number of reflective words (e.g., think, understand) in narratives of negative events than positive events (Baker-Ward, Eaton & Banks, 2005; Bauer, et al., 2005). For

children, age seems to be a critical factor in the benefits of narrative meaning-making. Research shows that children younger than 14 actually show lower levels of well-being when using internal state language in their narratives (Fivush, et al., 2007). However, by early adolescence, children seem to benefit from using internal state language in narratives about stressful events (Soliday, Garafolo, & Rogers, 2004). Children younger than 14 may not have developed mature narrative and emotion regulation skills yet (Compas, Campbell, Robinson, & Rodriguez, 2009), and instead, at earlier ages, the use of internal state language raises anxieties that children are not able to resolve on their own within their narratives. However, by adolescence, children have developed the emotional and cognitive capacities to create meaning from these emotional events.

Children's narratives and well-being. While there seems to be a large amount of support for the effectiveness of the expressive writing paradigm in adults, research on this task in children has yielded mixed results. The expressive writing paradigm states that it is effective to just express emotions, but perhaps this is because people who express their emotions are more likely to cognitively process the emotion (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010), something young children might not have the capacity to do yet.

Reynolds, Brewin, and Saxton (2000) conducted research on children ages 8-13 in four different schools and examined how writing was beneficial for general functioning within the school environment. They used the LIWC to analyze their results and concluded that whereas adults resolve and cope with the emotion over the course of their writing, children lack the emotional depth to do this at this age (8-13 years-old). They suggest that instead, children are simply ruminating over the negative situation. While both adults and children seem to use more cognitive processing words in narratives about

negative events compared with positive events (Baker-Ward, Eaton, & Banks, 2005), this coding scheme fails to capture the emotional intensity of the narrative, such as the power of using more emotionally charged words (e.g. depressed v. sad). Taking this into account, Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, and Brewin (2007) re-examined the narratives collected by Reynolds et al. They developed a new coding scheme that examined children's explanations and emotional expressions as a measure of their cognitive processing, description of people, objects, and events, stressful events that children wrote about, and strategies to cope with the stressors that children may have identified in their narratives. Interestingly, they found that the more children wrote about problems, the lower their well-being.

In contrast, Soliday, Garofalo, and Rogers (2004) examined the effectiveness of writing on reducing distress and improving functioning in eighth graders, ages 13-14. Using the LIWC coding scheme, they found that the benefits of writing became apparent over time, similar to adult interventions. They suggest that their results differ from Reynolds because they examined an older, more restricted age group. However, their effect sizes were small.

Bohanek and Fivush (in press) also researched early adolescence, ages 13-16, using a new coding scheme that examined the use of internal-state language. They found that the effects of sharing negative events might be gendered based. They observed that males that generated a more complex understanding of emotions and used more internal state language had higher well-being, but no relationship between internal state language and well-being was found for girls.

Thus relations between narratives and well-being are complicated during adolescence, a key developmental period for the development of emotion regulation. In order to explore these relations in more detail, I re-analyzed the corpus of narratives initially analyzed by Bohanek and Fivush (in press), looking at these same adolescents and narratives in a new way. More specifically, I developed a new coding scheme different from the LIWC that looks at emotional intensity and coping strategies. Also, unlike many of the studies done on coping, I asked participants to self-select an event to talk about. This is important because it allows the adolescent to select a real stressful event that is relevant and meaningful to their lives.

Hypotheses. My major objective was to investigate relations between emotion regulation within a narrative content (the emotional intensity exhibited in the narratives and coping strategies used) and measures of adolescent well-being. I predicted that adolescents who disclosed a greater intensity of emotions coupled with the use of coping strategies would show higher levels of social and emotional well-being, conceptualized as fewer internalizing (anxiety, withdrawal) and externalizing (aggression, anger) behaviors. However, based on the literature, I thought there might be age and gender differences in these relations. Younger adolescents may not be able to create meaning and reflect on their narratives as frequently as older adolescents, and also they may not yet have developed the social and emotional skills needed to effectively interpret and evaluate their emotional events. As far as gender differences, I predicted that females would not only provide more emotional narratives than males, but also display greater intensity of emotion and use more coping strategies in diverse and flexible ways in their narratives. However, predictions about gender differences in relation to well-being are less clear.

On the one hand, females might show stronger positive relations between emotion regulation in the context of narrative meaning-making and well-being than males because of their higher use of emotional intensity and coping strategies, but, on the other hand, males who are particularly good at regulating their emotions within their narratives might show better socio-emotional development and well-being.

Method

Participants

The data for this study are part of a larger research project exploring how adolescents' interpersonal narratives relate to their families' history and narrative style. It should be noted that the adolescent personal narratives collected in this dataset were used in the Bohanek and Fivush (in press) study, and I will be examining the same adolescents and negative narratives for my study. Families with an adolescent between the ages of 13 and 16 were recruited through fliers displayed at summer camp programs and private schools. Only families with English as their first language were eligible to participate in the study.

Once parents had indicated their interest in participating in the project, a research assistant contacted the family to coordinate two home-visits. Families were told that I was interested in how parents and their children remember and discuss shared past events. Sixty-four middle class, two-parent families were recruited into the study and completed at least some of the narratives and well-being measures. Within this sample, 44 families identified themselves as White/European Americans, 17 as African Americans, 1 as Asian, and 2 as mixed ethnicity. As far as family structure, 56 of the

families had a traditional household (3 of these children were adopted) and 5 were blended families.

Overall, the parents were highly educated. Sixty-four mothers reported information on their educational levels with 3 reporting a high school degree, 16 reporting some college education, 28 reporting a college degree, and 17 reporting a post-graduate degree. For fathers, only 62 reported information on their educational levels with 2 reporting some high school education, 4 reporting a high school degree, 11 reporting some college education, 26 reporting a college degree, and 19 reporting a post-graduate degree.

Sixty-four adolescents were recruited as part of this study. There were 37 eighth graders with an age ranging from 13 to 14 (mean age = 13.57) with 17 females and 20 males. There were also 27 tenth graders ranging from age 15 to 16 (mean age= 15.52) with 14 females and 13 males. All of the mothers signed full informed consent as approved by the Emory University Institutional Review Board prior to participation in the study, and families were compensated with $25.00 for participating in the study at each of the two home visits. In addition, adolescents signed a consent form, and were given two movie tickets for their participation at the first home visit and a gift certificate for $25.00 at the second home visit. At the first home visit, all the narrative data were collected and at the second home visit, the well-being questionnaire measures were administered.

Procedure

Narrative data collection. First, the mothers of each family that expressed interest in the study were contacted for a brief phone interview. During this conversation, the

mother was told that we were interested in looking for two-parent families with an adolescent in the eighth or tenth grade. The mother was also informed that the adolescent would be asked to share various stories while being tape-recorded, but that any information used to identify the family would be kept confidential. Finally, the mother was assured that if the adolescent or the family wished to withdraw from the study at any time they would be free to do so.

Then, one or two of eight female research assistants visited the families in their homes to collect the narrative data. During the first home visit, a research assistant and adolescent sat in a quiet place in the home and the adolescent was prompted to recall and narrate two negative personal events using the following prompt: “I want you to think about a really negative event in your life that you remember; a time when you were really angry, sad, or scared. It may have been recently or many years ago. Please name only memories of specific events.” After the adolescent chose their two events, the research assistant asked them to recall their narrative with the following prompt, “Can you tell me everything you remember about (name the previously identified event)?” When the adolescent finished narrating each event, the research assistant asked once if there was any additional information the adolescent wanted to add to their narrative. At the end of the narration, adolescents were asked to provide some follow-up information about the age at which the event occurred and why this event was important to them. There was no time period restriction for when the event had to occur, but more than 90% of the events had occurred within the previous year. Data from one male adolescent was unable to be analyzed due to inaudible tapes and he was removed from the analyses. Therefore, 32

males and 31 females completed the negative event narratives and an overall total of 63 adolescents were used in my analyses.

Well-being data collection. At the second home visit, which usually occurred within two weeks after the first home visit, adolescents were asked to complete a packet with questionnaires regarding their individual and family life. While emotional regulation has been defined in a variety ways in the literature, for this study I define emotional regulation by maternal and adolescent report of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Adolescents who are better able to regulate their emotions would show lower levels of both internalizing (e.g., withdrawal, anxiety, and depression) and externalizing (substance abuse, aggression, and anger) behaviors than children who had difficulties regulating their emotions. To measure these internalizing and externalizing behaviors, I used both the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991) and the Youth Self-Report (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). I used both a maternal report and adolescent self-report in order to get a complete picture of the adolescents' internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) is a parental report that measures a child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. For my study, only the mothers filled out the CBCL for their child. It is commonly used by clinicians to measure children's psychological well-being. The CBCL provides an internalizing (e.g. depression and anxiety) total score and externalizing (e.g. aggression and substance abuse) total score separately. Thirty-two items are summed to create the total internalizing score and thirty-three items are summed to create the total externalizing score. The items are scored on a scale from 0-2 with 0 indicating not true, 1 indicating sometimes true, and 2 indicating very true. Some examples of items used to measure internalizing behavior are as follows:

"Complains of loneliness," "Feels worthless or inferior," and "Easily embarrassed." Some examples of items used to measure externalizing behavior are as follows: "Disobedient at home," "Argues a lot," and "Commits vandalism." A higher score indicates greater internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems and a lower score indicates fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Of the 63 adolescents that participated in the study, 57 mothers filled out the Child Behavior Checklist for their child. The CBCL has strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha calculated for each scale with the internalizing scale $\alpha = .90$ and the externalizing scale $\alpha = .93$ (Achenbach, 1991). Achenbach also reported a one week test-retest reliability Pearson's r for the internalizing scores as .89 and the externalizing scores as .93.

The Youth Self-Report (YSR) is a child self-report measure used to assess internalizing and externalizing behaviors. For this study, I am only interested in the internalizing and externalizing scales of the YSR and thus my discussion only includes the items and scoring for these scales. For scoring, internalizing and externalizing are calculated separately, with 31 items summed to create a total internalizing score and another 32 items summed to create a total externalizing score. Each item is scored from 0-2, with 0 indicating not true, 1 indicating sometimes true, and 2 indicating very true for the child. The following are some sample items for measuring internalizing problems: "I would rather be alone than with others" and "I cry a lot," and externalizing problems, "I get in many fights" and "I disobey my parents." Higher scores indicate frequent internalizing or externalizing behaviors, and lower scores indicate few internalizing or externalizing problems.

The Youth Self- Report has strong internal consistency with Achenbach and Rescorla (2001) reporting a Cronbach's alpha for both the externalizing and internalizing scale of $\alpha = 0.90$. As further reported by Achenbach, the test-retest reliability Pearson's r for the internalizing scale is .80 and the externalizing scale is .89. Of the 63 adolescents that participated in the study, 28 males and 27 females completed the Youth Self-Report measure.

Coding

The tape-recorded narratives were transcribed verbatim and then checked for accuracy prior to coding. Two different coding schemes were used in this study, one to measure the intensity of the emotion within the narrative and the other to measure coping strategies. Research exploring narratives and emotional well-being in adults typically use the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) developed by Pennebaker, which counts the use of emotional language in the narrative. However, as previously discussed, I developed my own coding scheme that is better suited to capture children's narrative expression that a simple word count might not capture. I developed this coding scheme from the emotional regulation and coping literature (Compas, Connor-Smith, & Saltzman, 2001; Fivush & McDermott Sales, 2006).

The emotional intensity coding scheme is based on a scale from 0-3 with 0 indicating no emotional intensity expressed in the narrative and 3 indicating high emotional intensity. Specifically, a 0 indicates that either no emotion is present in the narrative or only positive emotion exists. A score of a 1 indicates that negative emotion is present but is described simply through a flat description or downplayed by the use of positive emotions. A score of a 2 indicates that negative emotion is present and repeated

several times often accompanied by interpersonal conflict and direct quotations. Finally, a score of a 3 indicates the presence of negative emotion that is highly elaborated on and expressed through interpersonal conflict, the presence of other peoples' emotions, and the use of highly intense words such as 'horrified' or 'chaos'. For a more detailed description of the emotional intensity coding see Table 1.

For the coping strategy coding scheme, both a quantitative and descriptive code were assigned to each narrative. For a descriptive analysis of the coping strategies, I examined what types of coping strategies adolescents used in their narratives. Below are the different coping strategies used throughout the narratives:

1. Problem solving: This refers to efforts to change the problem situation by changing the self or the environment and identifies plans to address the problem situation in the future. (e.g. "We looked up the vet's phone number.")
2. Cognitive restructuring: This involves attempts to view the situation in a different way. This can be either thinking of the situation in a more positive light or modulating and downplaying the emotion. (e.g. "I understand now that it was out of love." "I got used to that. I cared, but it wasn't that bad.")
3. Problem-focused support: This involves using other people, such as parents or friends, as resources to assist in seeking solutions to the problem situation. (e.g. "I could call my mom and tell her about it.")
4. Emotion-focused support: This involves actively seeking out others or desiring to seek out others, such as parents, friends, or even animals, to listen to feelings or provide understanding to help the child be less upset. (e.g. "I visited 'im probably once a week in the hospital.")

5. Distracting actions: This involves efforts to avoid thinking about the problem by engaging in distracting stimuli. (e.g. “I came in and watched a movie.”)
6. Avoidance: This involves efforts to avoid thinking about the problem, including the use of fantasy or wishful thinking, or imagining that the situation was better. (e.g. “So I went in my room and um.. I think I slept and that’s all I remember about that day.”)

For a more detailed explanation of the qualitative coping strategy coding see Table 2.

For the quantitative coding scheme, each narrative first received a coping strategy total score where the number of coping strategies used within the narrative was summed. Then, the number of different coping strategies used within the narrative was calculated as well.

Reliability

Two researchers developed both the emotional intensity and coping strategies coding schemes. Then, the two researchers coded each narrative independently and then discussed discrepancies in their ratings to decide on the final code. The Cronbach's alpha for emotional intensity was 0.94. The inter-rater reliability for the coping strategies coding scheme was as follows: problem solving was 0.58, cognitive restructuring was 0.72, problem-focused support was 0.32, emotion-focused support was 0.64, avoidance was 0.67, distraction was 0.60, and no coping was 0.46. It should be noted that some of the reliability coping codes are low because there was a low frequency of certain coping strategies. Furthermore, all discrepancies between the raters were discussed and a final code was agreed upon.

Results

First, I provide a general description of the narratives. This is followed by descriptive statistics on the narrative and adolescent well-being measures. Gender differences are also further explored. I then present a series of correlational analyses conducted to examine the relations between adolescent well-being and narrative content, specifically the emotional intensity and degree of coping strategies within the narratives.

Description of events. There were seven broad themes evident throughout the adolescents' narratives about negative events. 22 females and 19 males described death/loss, 10 females and 10 males described family conflict, 7 females and 9 males described academic struggles, 3 females and 4 males described peer conflict, 10 females and 15 males described an accident/injury, 6 females and 7 males described a hardship (e.g. moving, divorce, friend with cancer), and 4 described a narrative that falls into the category of other (e.g. fear of dark, getting braces). As can be noted, there seems to be great similarity in the kinds of themes both males and females described in their narratives. Most of these narratives described a death/loss, a family conflict, an accident/ injury, or a hardship.

It should be noted that while the adolescents narrated two different experiences about negative events, there was a strong correlation between the emotional intensity across the two narratives, $r(60) = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$. Because emotional intensity was coded on an interval scale, an average emotional intensity score for each participant was calculated. In contrast, coping strategies were coded as sample frequencies. Therefore, the number of coping strategies used across both narratives was summed to create a total number of coping strategies score. Similarly, the number of different coping strategies used across both narratives was summed to create a total number of different coping

strategies score. Both of these combined scores across the two narratives will be used for analyses. In addition, in examining word count, the total word count was averaged across the two narratives in order to gain a sense of the average length of the narratives that adolescents shared.

Age and Gender differences in narrative content. The first set of analyses examined between group differences in the narratives as a function of gender and grade. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of the narrative variables differentiated by both gender and grade. I first conducted a 2 X 2 (gender X grade) factorial analysis of variance to explore the relation between gender and grade and the word count of the narratives. Results indicated that there was a main effect for gender, $F(1, 59) = 3.73$, $p < 0.059$. Thus, girls ($M= 291.53$, $SD= 35.50$) are telling longer narratives than boys ($M=194.26$, $SD= 35.77$). There was no significant main effect for grade and no significant interaction. There is some controversy in the literature as to whether the length of the narrative is important or whether it needs to be controlled for in the analyses. In an effort to be transparent, I analyzed my data both ways. First, I examined the relations between narrative content and gender and grade without controlling for word count, then I re-examined the data while controlling for word count. Both sets of findings will be presented.

A 2 X 2 (gender X grade) factorial analysis of variance tested the relation between the gender and grade of the participant and the emotional intensity in the narrative. Results indicated a significant main effect for gender, $F(1,59) = 4.87$, $p < .031$. As hypothesized, girls displayed greater intensity of emotion within their narratives ($M= 1.87$) than boys ($M = 1.39$). However, there was no significant main effect for grade or

for the gender X grade interaction. In addition, a 2 X 2 ANCOVA with word count controlled for revealed no significant main effects or interactions.

I then explored the relations between coping strategies and gender and grade. In order to gain a sense for the types of coping strategies adolescents used in their narratives and the frequency of use, I summed the total number of coping strategies used at least once in the narratives. 18 adolescents used problem solving at least once in their narratives, 26 adolescents used cognitive restructuring at least once in their narratives, 8 adolescents used problem-focused support at least once in their narratives, 14 adolescents used emotion-focused support at least once in their narratives, 6 adolescents used avoidance at least once in their narratives, and 5 adolescents used distraction at least once in their narratives. Adolescents seem to be using problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and emotion-focused support in particular to cope with negative emotions. Problem-focused support, avoidance, and distraction seem to be used less frequently to cope with negative events. These frequencies are displayed by gender and grade in Table 4.

A 2 X 2 (gender X grade) analysis of variance was conducted again to explore the relations between gender and grade and the number of total coping strategies in the narratives. There were no significant main effects for gender or grade, but the gender X grade interaction approaches significance at $F(1,59) = 3.39$, $p < 0.071$. In addition, a 2 X 2 (gender X grade) analysis of variance was conducted to examine the relation between gender and grade and the total number of different coping strategies used in the narratives. There were no significant results; however, both gender $F(1,59) = 3.181$, $p < 0.080$ and the gender X grade interaction $F(1,59) = 3.81$, $p < 0.056$ approach

significance. These interactions are depicted in Figure 1. A 2 X 2 ANCOVA with word count controlled for revealed that were no main effects or interactions.

To further examine these findings, a series of follow-up t-tests were run. The first set of t-tests examined the age effects for males and females independently, and the second set of t-test examined gender effects at each age level independently. Looking first at age differences for boys only, results show that when comparing the means for the total number of coping strategies for younger (M= 0.95) and older boys (M= 2.92), the difference approaches significance with $t(30)= -1.98$, $p = 0.057$; however not for the number of different coping strategies used. This suggests that over time, boys express a greater number of coping strategies when faced with a negative situation, but not necessarily a greater variety of coping strategies. In contrast, for girls, there were no significant results when comparing the means for the total number of coping strategies for younger (M= 4.35) and older girls (M= 2.21) or the total number of different coping strategies. This suggests that the use of coping strategies in girls remains relatively stable over time.

The next set of t-tests examined the gender differences at each grade level (e.g. comparing younger boys with younger girls). In looking at gender differences for 8th graders in the number of total coping strategies, the difference between the mean for boys (M=0.95) and girls (4.35) is significant at $t(35)= -2.066$, $p = 0.046$. This suggests that girls at this age might be more capable of using coping strategies to deal with negative events than are boys. In addition, the total number of different coping strategies used is significant at $t(35)= -3.047$, $p = 0.004$, suggesting that girls might also be able to use a variety of coping strategies in more flexible ways than do boys. However, there were no

significant results when examining the gender differences between 10th graders and the total number of coping strategies as well as the total number of different coping strategies. This suggests that while girls tend to slightly decline over time in the number of coping strategies they use, boys tend to improve dramatically.

In addition, I examined the relations among the narrative variables by running a series of Pearson correlations, as shown in Table 5. For the overall sample, the correlation between emotional intensity and total number of coping strategies is significant with $r(60) = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$. The correlation between emotional intensity and total number of different coping strategies is significant with $r(60) = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$.

Since I obtained results indicating gender differences in emotional intensity expressed and coping strategies used, I further examined these relationships by gender, as shown in the bottom two panels of Table 5. In exploring the relations between emotional intensity and total coping strategies for boys, there were no significant results. In addition, in comparing the relations between emotional intensity and total number of different coping strategies there were no significant results. In contrast, when exploring the relations between emotional intensity and total number of coping strategies for girls, there were significant results with $r(29) = 0.40$, $p < 0.05$. This suggests that girls who are expressing intense emotions are also using coping strategies to deal with these negative emotions. In addition, in comparing the relations between emotional intensity and total number of different coping strategies for girls, there were significant results with $r(29) = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$. This suggests that girls that are expressing intense emotions are also using diverse coping strategies within their narratives to deal with these negative events.

Narratives and well-being. The next set of analyses focused on relations between the narrative variables and well-being. To place these analyses in context, I first present descriptive data on the well-being variables.

Age and gender differences on well-being. The means and standard deviations on the well-being measures are shown on the lower half of Table 3. 2 X2 (gender X grade) factorial analysis of variances were conducted to examine the relation between grade and gender on well-being looking at the Youth Self-Report Internalizing Scores, Youth Self-Report Externalizing Scores, Maternal Report CBCL Internalizing Scores, and the Maternal Report CBCL Externalizing Scores. There were no significant results, indicating that adolescent well-being remains stable across gender and grade differences. In addition, I examined consistency across the well-being measures through a set of Pearson correlations, as shown on Table 6. Interestingly, while Maternal Internal and Externalizing scores were strongly correlated with $r(54) = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$ and Youth Report Internalizing and Externalizing scores were strongly correlated with $r(49) = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$, the maternal reports and youth reports were not correlated.

Narrative content and well-being. To analyze the relations between the narrative content and the well-being measures, a set of Pearson correlations were conducted, and are displayed in Table 7. There were no significant results between the narrative content (i.e. emotional intensity, total coping strategies, total different coping strategies) and the well-being measures (i.e. YSR and CBCL). I further analyzed these relationships by gender because previous literature indicated that there were gender differences when examining the relations between narrative content and well-being measures (Bohanek & Fivush, in press). There were no significant results between the relations of narrative

content and well-being for boys. When examining the relations between the Youth Self Report Internalizing Score and emotional intensity for girls, the correlation is significant with $r(25) = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$. In examining the other relations among girls, there were no significant results. This suggests that, overall, the emotional intensity expressed and the coping strategies used in the narratives do not relate to adolescent well-being.

Discussion

In this study, I explored adolescents' narratives about negative events, and examined the relations between these narratives and adolescent well-being. Narratives allow individuals to reflect on and create meaning from their past experiences (McAdams, 1992). Thus, examining emotion regulation within narratives allows researchers to gain a unique insight into the mechanism by which individuals incorporate emotional events into their lives. Negative emotions typically arouse a greater level of emotional intensity than positive emotions (Plutchik, 1993); therefore, it is interesting to examine negative emotions within the context of narratives because it allows us to see how adolescents regulate and cope with these arousing events. When examining adolescents' emotion regulation abilities, I found gender differences in both the length and the emotional intensity of the narratives. Furthermore, there was a unique gender and age difference for the use of the coping strategies within the narratives. However, when examining emotion regulation and well-being, I only found an association between emotional intensity and internalizing problems for girls.

Age and gender differences. I hypothesized that older adolescents would display greater emotional intensity and more diverse coping strategies in their narratives than younger adolescents. Similarly, I also hypothesized that girls would display greater

intensity in their narratives and use more diverse coping strategies than boys. I found more gender differences than age differences. Specifically, I found that when given the opportunity to tell a narrative about a negative emotional event, girls tended to tell longer narratives than boys. In addition, girls also displayed a greater amount of emotional intensity in their narratives than boys.

There are a variety of reasons that might help to explain these differences. First, perhaps boys simply are not as emotionally mature as girls. Specifically, girls might benefit from communicating and sharing their emotional experiences with others. Research has shown that females are more interested in sharing the negative emotional events in their lives than males (Cross & Madson, 1997), and females have been shown to have more confidence in expressing negative emotions than boys (Blier & Blier-Wilson, 1989 as cited in Cross & Madson, 1997). Second, perhaps girls recognize the benefits of expressing their intense emotions. This idea supports previous research that has found that girls tend to verbally express and regulate their emotions more than boys (Zeman & Shipman, 1996) and also that girls feel better after sharing a negative event with others (Zeman & Shipman, 2006).

In addition, girls might simply be more emotionally expressive than boys. In reading through the negative narratives, many girls would portray the events in a highly emotional way, using a variety of emotional vocabulary, expressing a sense of drama or interpersonal conflict, and describing the event in such a way that the whole narrative built up to an intensely negative event. This talent at emotional expression and portraying an emotionally intense story might be a result of socialization that girls receive from an early age. Parents talk more about emotions, particularly negative ones such as sadness,

more with girls than boys (Fivush, 1989; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Therefore, early in life, girls are talking about and hearing about emotions more than boys, allowing them to have the opportunity to learn how to effectively and confidently incorporate emotion into the stories they tell. Moreover, in a college sample, women were more likely to engage in "troubles-talk (sharing emotional problems) than men (Basow & Rubenfield, 2003). Whereas men tended to avoid conversations about conflicts and focused on topics that would enhance their dominance, women viewed this opportunity as a chance to enhance their connections with others. Thus, not only is emotional sharing a part of girls' socialization at an early age, but also it seems to be beneficial for women to share their emotions to enhance social connections.

I also looked at gender differences in coping strategies within the narratives, a topic that has been previously unexplored, but is important to understand how adolescents regulate the negative emotional events in their lives. When examining total number of coping strategies, older boys tended to exhibit more coping strategies than younger boys, but this finding only approached significance. However, there were no differences in older and younger boys when examining different coping strategies used. Thus, boys are beginning to express a greater number of coping strategies over time, but they are not employing a variety of different coping strategies. Girls' use of coping strategies remained relatively stable over time, although it did slightly decline.

When comparing girls and boys at each grade level, the results revealed that 8th grade girls use a greater number of total coping strategies and a greater number of different coping strategies than boys, suggesting that at this age, girls are using coping strategies in much more diverse and flexible ways than boys. As adolescents got older,

these gender differences in uses of coping strategies disappeared. This suggests that while girls remain relatively stable over time, boys increase over time in their ability to effectively and flexibly use coping strategies.

Females are more advanced in their understanding of emotion and emotion regulation than boys (Brody & Hall, 1993). This emotional maturity in females is particularly evident in the current study when comparing younger girls to younger boys. By early adolescence, it seems that girls' ability to cope with negative emotions has developed and remains stable throughout early adolescence. However, boys seem to be just beginning to understand how to effectively regulate their emotions and they improve in their ability to use coping strategies dramatically over time.

It is also important to examine the relations between emotional intensity and coping strategies used. In general, there was an association between emotional intensity and total number of coping strategies used as well as emotional intensity and total number of different coping strategies used. This indicates that those expressing intense negative emotions were also regulating these emotions using a variety of diverse coping strategies. Since I obtained results indicating gender differences in emotional intensity expressed and coping strategies used, I further examined these relationships by gender. For girls, there was a significant association between emotional intensity and total coping strategies used as well as emotional intensity and total different coping strategies used. This suggests that girls who are expressing higher emotional intensity are indeed coping with it through the expression of regulatory strategies more so than boys. Thus, as previously suggested, girls seem to have the desire to express more emotional intensity in their narratives, but also seem to be emotionally mature enough to cope with these events

in effective regulatory ways. Of course, it is also possible that the ability to express coping strategies allows for the expression of greater emotional intensity. Thus, there are a variety of ways to explain these age and gender differences in coping. Perhaps girls are faced with more emotional conflicts (i.e. interpersonal conflicts) at an earlier age than boys, and must therefore learn to effectively cope with adverse events earlier in life. One study found that girls were more hostile in their interactions with their parents than boys and they argue that girls' earlier pubertal and social development might be causing greater parental conflict at an earlier age than boys (Conger & Ge, 1999). Adolescence is a time of parental and adolescent conflict, and if girls are experiencing this earlier, they might develop effective coping strategies during early adolescence to regulate negative emotional events in their lives.

Another possible explanation for these gender differences is that boys tend to use alternate means to cope with negative events in their lives, such as aggressive techniques (i.e. stomping around) (Zeman & Shipman, 1996) or neutralizing their emotional expression (Zeman & Shipman, 2006). Perhaps boys do not fully understand effective means to cope with adverse events in their lives until later in adolescence. They recognize that acting out aggressively or ignoring the problem is no longer working and must learn how to seek out emotional support or think of the situation in a more positive way.

In contrast, in examining the types of coping strategies expressed, it seems that 8th grades girls are expressing more coping than any other grade or gender pairing examined in this study. In fact, 8th grade girls have the highest amount of coping for each coping strategy, including avoidance and distraction, which were relatively rare in the narratives.

Thus, in early adolescence, girls might be experimenting with their use of coping strategies. Perhaps, they are trying a variety of strategies to see which ones are the most effective.

Importantly, there were no significant gender or age differences when controlling for word count. There has been debate as to whether word count should be controlled for in analyses of narrative data. On the one hand, some argue that because females share longer emotional narrative, they must logically include more emotions and reflection within their stories (Bauer, et al., 2005). However, I would argue the length of the narrative is interesting and important in and of itself. Rather than suggesting that the length of the narrative is making girls express more intensity and use more coping strategies, Fivush et al. (in press) posit that the expression of the variables is actually what is driving narrative length. In order to include high levels of emotional intensity and diverse and flexible coping strategies, a longer narrative is necessary. It simply takes more words to build up high intensity and to explain multiple coping strategies. In fact, since participants are given no time constraints when instructed about the task, it is particularly interesting that females provide longer narratives than males (Fivush et al., in press). This suggests that females believe it is important to share and talk about the emotional events in their life. Thus, by controlling for length of the narrative, the research is removing a variable of interest and importance.

Narrative content and well-being. I also hypothesized that emotional intensity, total number of coping strategies, and total different coping strategies would be related to adolescent well-being. However, this hypothesis was not strongly supported. Although my sample was variable, with a wide range of scores on the well-being and coding

measures, I did not find many relations between emotion regulation and adolescent well-being. However, girls who expressed higher levels of emotional intensity in their narratives did show higher levels of internalizing problems. This must be interpreted with great caution as only one correlation among many was significant, but it suggests that girls who are expressing a lot of emotions within their narratives might also be having internalizing problems. One possible explanation for this is that sharing these negative emotions allows the girls to ruminate on these negative situations. In fact, according to the coding scheme, a high amount of rumination and repetition of negative emotions is given a score of high emotional intensity. Therefore, perhaps examining the way girls talk about negative emotional events in their lives reveals that they are actually ruminating a great deal on these negative events. In fact, during adolescence, girls exhibit greater levels of rumination than boys, causing them to obsessively think about and focus on the negative events in their lives. This has been linked to internalizing problems, specifically depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Furthermore, one reason I may have found few relations between narratives and well-being might be because of the way the narratives were coded. According to the expressive writing paradigm literature, expressing emotion is an integral part of benefitting from the expressive writing task. Furthermore, the coping strategy literature also shows that use of specific coping strategies is linked with higher and lower well-being. The coding schemes were developed around these two principles; first, analyzing the degree of emotion adolescents include in their narratives about negative events, then, looking at the coping strategies used for emotion regulation. However, my coding scheme does not include a category to capture the amount of reflection or meaning derived from

this event. The coping strategy coding scheme attempts to capture this variable, particularly with the cognitive restructuring variable, which captures how adolescents look at the negative emotional event in a more positive or negative way. However, I did not include an additional separate coding scheme to capture the cognitive and reflective process. Rather than simply looking at how adolescents tell stories about negative events, future research may also want to examine how adolescents incorporate and make sense of these events in their life story. Perhaps this insight into how children are explaining and reflecting on these negative events is integral to the emotion regulation process.

In looking back at previous studies, many included a category to assess the reflection and explanatory process. Narratives allow individuals to create meaning from their past because they allow for the opportunity to reflect back on, explain, and create meaning from their experiences. Pennebaker (1990) found that adults who both expressed emotion and used explanatory and reflective language within their narratives during the expressive writing task had better outcomes. Therefore, it is not simply emotional disclosure that is important but also developing insight or explanations in the narrative that is critical for well-being.

The LIWC coding scheme, while counting for use of emotional words, also examines the amount of cognitive processing language in the narratives (Francis & Pennbaker, 1994). Research using this coding scheme shows that adults who tell narratives that disclose emotion, specifically using causal-explanatory language (because, therefore), and using words that show emotional reflection (think, understand), show better outcomes for the expressive writing intervention. In the Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, and Brewin (2007) study, they developed a new coding scheme that measured

children's expression of emotion, but also included a coding variable to analyze participants' use of explanations in their narratives. Interestingly, they found that the more children ages 8-13 wrote about negative events, the worse their well-being, suggesting that at this young age, children were simply ruminating on these negative situations. Furthermore, Bohanek and Fivush (in press) developed a coding scheme related to internal state language that captured adolescents meaning making within narratives. They observed that males that exhibited a more complex understanding of emotions and used more internal state language had higher well-being, but no relation between internal state language and well-being was found for girls.

While these prior studies found mixed results on the relations between emotion regulation and well-being, they also each explored these relations using a coding scheme that examined the reflection and explanation occurring within the narratives. I extended this research by developing a new coding scheme, but perhaps this scheme did not fully and effectively capture the cognitive processing happening in the narratives. Perhaps understanding the way adolescents reflect on and incorporate these events into their life story would have helped me better explore the relations between emotion regulation and well-being. Future research could expand upon this coding scheme to include a calculation of explanatory or reflective language, which might be key for creating meaning within narratives of emotional events.

My study did make several contributions to the field because it examined the relations between emotion regulation and well-being in an age group, early adolescence, that had previously yielded mixed results. I developed a new coding scheme to examine both emotional intensity and coping strategies used within the narrative context,

something that has previously been unexplored. Along with that, I found unique gender and age differences in how adolescents describe and cope with negative events in a narrative format; therefore, expanding upon previous gender differences and contributing new insights to the field. Furthermore, while most of the previous research has asked participants to respond to pre-selected negative scenarios, I asked the adolescents in my study to choose two negative events that are real and meaningful stressors to them. The new methodologies, coding schemes, and unique findings all helps build upon previous research and provides further direction for study by replicating and expanding upon these methodologies and coding schemes.

There are several limitations to the study. First, since I wanted to focus on a specific developmental period, early adolescence, because of the mixed results in the literature for this age group, the sample only contains a limited age group. Future studies should perhaps look at a sample with a wider range of ages. Second, the adolescents in this study were well adjusted; the participants had experienced few traumas and severe stressors. It might be interesting to examine emotion regulation and its relations to well-being in a more diverse sample, particularly with those who have experienced a severe trauma. Furthermore, our data were not longitudinal; in the future, it would be interesting to examine how children's emotional intensity and use of coping strategies changes over time and how that relates to well-being. Finally, similar to most studies, there were only females conducting the interviews with the adolescents. Some research suggests that both boys and girls talk more to females than to males (Snell, Belk, Flowers & Warren, 1988 as cited in Fivush et al., in press), but this needs to be further examined.

During the period of adolescence, children have a wide fluctuation in their emotional state (Larson & Richards, 1994). Therefore it is particularly important that they learn to effectively regulate their emotions to maintain a healthy socio-emotional well-being. It is still unclear how narrative emotion regulation and well-being in adolescents relate, but future research should continue to examine this issue, particularly focusing on further understanding the role of age and gender in this process.

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Table 1

Intensity Coding

Code	Description	Example
0	**No Emotion in Narrative** Negative emotion is not included in the narrative. Mention of physical pain only receives a 0. When emotion is described in background information, it is ignored.	"And then, she went into the hospital, and my whole, grandparents and everybody were there, and then my aunt passed that morning. I think so, that's basically what I remember about it, but yeah."
1	**Low Emotional Intensity** Negative emotion or event mentioned but simply through a flat description. If emotion is downplayed or modulated by the use of positive words it also receives a 1. If a narrative only mentions others' emotions, but excludes the child's own, it should receive a 1. Furthermore, if a narrative only mentions positive emotion, it also receives a 1. If emotion was modulated during the event in the event but now is affecting the individual, the downplay of the emotion is ignored.	"And then we were at R.E.I., my dad and my brother and me, and my cousin called she was like, "Oh, well, he's probably gonna die today." So I was like, "Oh, okay." 'Cause I didn't…I mean I cared, but like it wasn't that bad 'cause he lived in Chicago so I don't see 'im that much."

2	**Moderate Emotional Intensity** Negative emotions are mentioned more than once during the child's story. The negative emotions are intensified through the use of modifiers such as "I was really angry." However, the negative emotion does not need to be explicitly stated to receive a 2. Narratives that reveal interpersonal conflict and make use of direct quotation that creates some build up in the narrative to an emotional event also receive a 2.	"And the second match we had, the kid like wasn't very good. I just kept like messin' everything up so I was really mad. I kept goin' in for a shot and like I wouldn't finish it and he just like, I don't know, like bulldogged me and so I got really mad. And so the match ended and he won. And I was just really mad."
3	**High Emotional Intensity** Negative emotions or events are described and elaborated on. In addition to intensifiers like "really," use of words that imply emotional intensity such as "chaos" or "horrified" should receive a 3. Use of direct quotes, large amounts of interpersonal conflict, rumination and repetition should receive a 3. The child's whole narrative is a build up to the highly intense emotional event. If a narrative mentions other peoples' emotions as well as the child's own it should also receive a 3.	"And my dad just didn't care; he shouted at me and I think he even threatened to whup me or somethin' if I didn't act right… And I was like, "This is not cool, snappin' at me and…" And I mean I ran upstairs and I like…like cried. I was just on my bed cryin' and my

	mom came up there and consoled me and stuff like that. So she had to talk to my dad and he came in and I was still real mad. When I think about it I'm just like "What kind of dad snaps at their kid on their birthday? That's so not cool."

Table 2

Coping Strategy Coding

Code	Description	Examples
Problem Solving	This refers to efforts to change the problem situation by changing the self or the environment and plans to address the problem situation in the future. Child is expressing direct action aimed at solving the problem. This includes actions on the part of the child independently or as a part of a group. This also includes re-doing an action to get a different result.	"We looked up the vet's phone number." "I'll be taking it (driving test) over tomorrow."
Cognitive Restructuring	This involves attempts to view the situation in a new way. This can be positive restructuring or downplaying emotions.	"I didn't understand it at first, but now I understand he did it 'cause, hopefully, it took whatever was in me out of me so that I wouldn't be a troublemaker or something like that or be someone bad when I grow up. So I understand that it

		was out of love." "I got used to that. I cared, but it wasn't that bad."
Problem-focused support	This involves using other people, such as parents or friends, as resources to assist in seeking solutions to the problem situation. This includes seeking advice, information, or direct assistance, but not emotional support. Different from problem solving in that instead of actually doing the action themselves, child seeks out others to complete problem-solving action.	"I had to tell Tom I had to go so I could call my mom, tell 'er about it."
Emotion-focused support	This involves actively seeking out others or desiring to seek out others, such as parents, friends, or even animals, to listen to feelings or provide understanding to help the child	"I held Sugar (pet) because I was upset about Velvet." "I held him and just cried over him for a couple of minute." "We made 'em dinner and stuff

	be less upset. Emotion-focused support sometimes expressed through description of seeking out physical contact. Self-soothing is also included as emotion-focused support.	and brought it over to their family. And I visited him once a week in the hospital."
Distracting	This involves efforts to avoid thinking about the problem by engaging in distracting stimuli.	"Jason and I came in and watched a movie and just sat around."
Avoidance	This involves efforts to avoid thinking about the problem, including the use of fantasy or wishful thinking, or imagining that the situation was better.	"So I went in my room and um… I think I slept." "I like ran off to my room."

Table 3

Means (and Standard Deviations) for all narratives

Gender	**Girls**		**Boys**	
Grade	**8th**	**10th**	**8th**	**10th**
Word Count	316.81 (320.99)	266.25 (132.93)	135.39 (60.79)	253.13 (166.22)
Emotional Intensity	1.85 (0.82)	1.89 (1.02)	1.32 (0.92)	1.46 (0.86)
Total Number of Coping Strategies	4.35 (7.27)	2.21 (1.85)	0.95 (1.19)	2.92 (4.21)
Total Number of Different Coping Strategies	1.76 (1.35)	1.29 (0.83)	0.70 (0.73)	1.33 (1.50)
YSR Internalizing Score (Child Report)	52.00 (9.43)	55.46 (7.43)	54.39 (7.24)	51.40 (10.01)
YSR Externalizing Score (Child Report)	49.07 (8.63)	48.92 (7.49)	50.72 (9.15)	49.20 (7.39)
CBCL Internalizing Score (Mother Report)	49.80 (9.82)	46.46 (10.48)	49.84 (9.15)	48.10 (6.44)
CBCL Externalizing Score (Mother Report)	45.33 (7.46)	47.69 (11.56)	48.53 (9.78)	47.50 (7.58)

Table 4

Frequency of coping strategies used at least once in the narratives.

Gender	**Girls**		**Boys**		
Grade	**8th**	**10th**	**8th**	**10th**	**Total**
Problem Solving	7	4	4	3	18
Cognitive Restructuring	9	8	4	5	26
Problem-focused Support	4	2	1	1	8
Emotion-focused Support	4	4	2	4	14
Avoidance	4	0	1	1	6
Distraction	2	0	1	2	5

Table 5

Correlations between narrative content

	Emotional Intensity	**Total Coping Strategies**	**Total Different Coping Strategies**
Emotional Intensity	–	–	–
Total Coping Strategies	0.24*	–	–
Different Coping Strategies	0.35**	0.79**	–
Boys			
Emotional Intensity	–	–	–
Total Coping Strategies	-.17	–	–
Different Coping Strategies	0.04	0.89**	–
Girls			
Emotional Intensity	–	–	–
Total Coping Strategies	0.40*	–	–
Different Coping Strategies	0.55**	0.79**	–

Table 6

Correlations between well-being measures.

	YSR Internalizing	**YSR Externalizing**	**Mother CBCL Internalizing**	**Mother CBCL Externalizing**
YSR Externalizing	0.39*	_	_	_
Mother CBCL Internalizing	0.21	0.11	_	_
Mother CBCL Externalizing	0.08	0.21	0.71*	_

Table 7

Correlations between narrative content and well-being measures

Narrative Variables	Youth Self-Report		Mother CBCL	
	Internalizing	**Externalizing**	**Internalizing**	**Externalizing**
Emotional Intensity	0.17	0.17	0.04	0.00
Total Coping Strategies	0.04	-0.09	-0.14	-0.14
Different Coping Strategies	0.02	-0.11	-0.09	-0.18
Boys				
Emotional Intensity	-0.02	0.17	0.17	0.16
Total Coping Strategies	-0.05	-0.22	-0.09	-0.15
Different Coping Strategies	-0.05	-0.16	0.07	-0.04
Girls				
Emotional Intensity	0.34*	0.22	-0.03	-0.09
Total Coping Strategies	0.16	0.11	-0.16	-0.12
Different Coping Strategies	0.10	-0.03	-0.20	-0.28

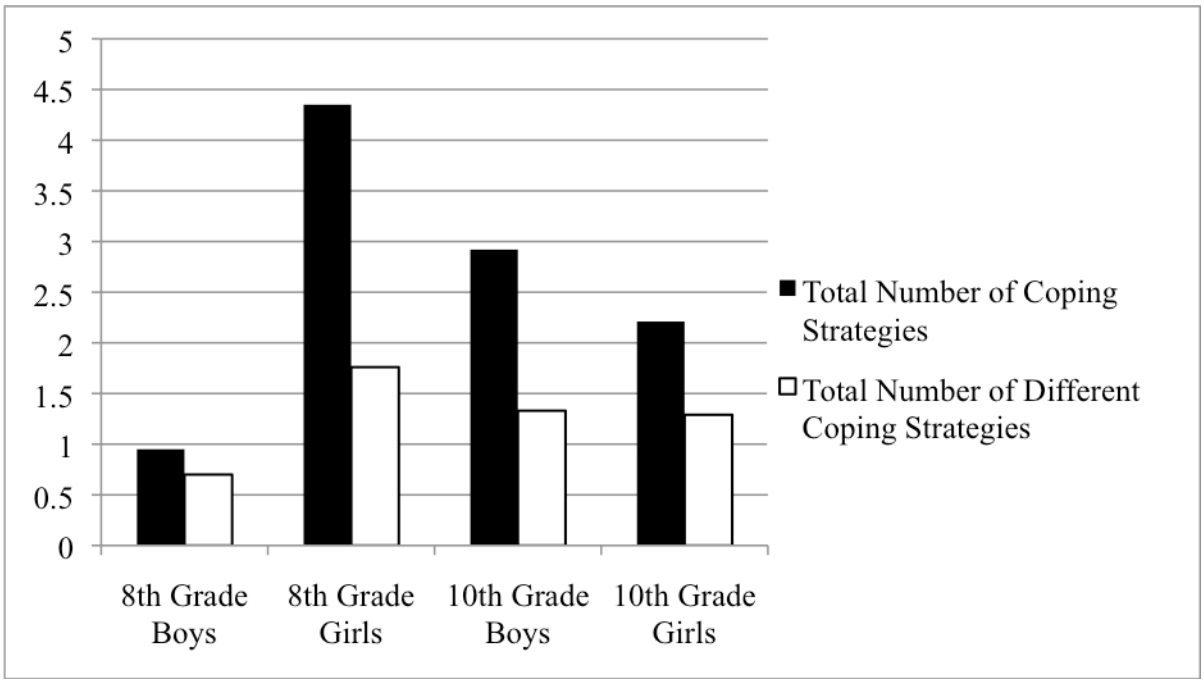

Figure 1

Means for total number of coping strategies and total different coping strategies used across narratives

Appendix A

Sample Narrative of an 8th grade Male with Codes

Um I was driving it and then um I had drove it past one of them gutter hole things and I tried to back up. But it was on a steep hill and it was still rolling and I tried to pull it back and then the uh battery had died so I couldn't control it. So it was rolling and it fell in the sewer so I couldn't save it. And by the time I got there, I tried to run after and get it; it had already fell in there. So that was the end of it. And I could hear it hit the ground through the sewer. It went clunk and I was mad. But I didn't feel responsible 'cause like… 'cause I didn't purposefully do it, so… That's before I got a new car, so… I eventually got a new car so that was just it.

Event: Remote Control Tire Falls Off

Gender: Male

Grade: 8th

Emotional Intensity Coding: 1

Coping Strategy Coding: Total= 2 (Problem Solving & Cognitive Restructuring), Total Different= 2

Appendix B

Sample Narrative of a 10th grade Male with Codes

Well, I'm usually good at making friends at first. Well, it was actually our first time we were into a house. Before, we lived in an apartment so there was more people and stuff. But, since it was a house, it was much different because I'm not as close to everybody as you are in an apartment. But as I would go down to make new friends with 'em, it had rained, like I said, but instead of just um being polite or whatever at first, they just went ahead and threw the ball at me for no apparent reason because, basically, they're not like nice people anyway 'cause he was like kind of person that would like tease his sister very easily with no cause. So, basically after I wiped my face off and everything from the ball, we had went over there and complained or whatever. And as we were complaining, um we fixed it and everything. But then I had to start school again, which is like right across the field behind some houses so, of course, I was in the same grade as his sister. So of course… And we became friends and we had to deal with her brother still, so it was easier 'cause she was in the same grade and the same classes and I made new friends as the classes went along. And I found out that the more people going to a local school can um gain more friends in the area, which means you can go outside and play with 'em instead of havin' somebody drive you to their house in Marietta. So it was pretty (unintelligible).

Event: Hit by Sponge Ball from Boy in Neighborhood

Gender: Male

Grade: 10th

Emotional Intensity Coding: 0

Coping Strategy Coding: Total= 2 (Problem Solving & Cognitive Restructuring), Total Different= 2

Appendix C

Sample Narrative of an 8th grade Female with Codes

Yeah um that's… I'm told by those parent people that um summer… the summer between first and second grade I went on a well growth spurt where you know instead of just eating one or two Oreos I ate three or four. You know I grew a little bigger than what you are supposed to be at that age. I wasn't hugely over weight but I would say like five or ten pounds over-weight. And as I know it kind of stayed the same. You know it was fine because you can still be cute and pudgy in the third grade, but it wasn't so good in the fourth grade. I wasn't enormous but I was bigger than most girls well bigger. I was taller than any girls probably about four eight. And I weighed 96 pounds. I wasn't a balloon yet so it wasn't anything like that. So it was purely under control. So… but it never really bothered me I mean we bought a treadmill and I walked on it for like five minutes cause I could never stand it. And it never bothered me at all I mean once there was this incident where a girl called me fat and I got upset. But everybody else… all my friends… everybody was like don't worry about it. And um… then when we moved here and you it is the first two weeks we had moved here and they put a scale in our bathroom. So I got on the scale one day and I was a little surprised that it was 4 pounds away from 100. A little surprised and I was like that can't be right I am ten years old. I can't weigh 100 pounds that would be wrong. So I remember realizing that and being very upset and working out like a maniac after that. Ok?

Event: Moving to Atlanta and talking about weight issues

Gender: Female

Grade: 8th

Emotional Intensity Coding: 2

Coping Strategy Coding: Total= 7 (1 Problem Solving, 5 Cognitive Restructuring, and 1 Avoidance), Total Different= 3

Appendix D

Sample Narrative of a 10th grade Female with Codes

Um getting… the competition squad is very like difficult and squad to learn because cheerleading is… a lot of people think you just have to smile and look really cute. It has so many details that you have to practice, the hand structure and everything like that. And I hadn't practiced recently and um I was like I just broke down because I was trying to get the cheers together and my team was like, "Why can't you get it?" and everything like that. Um first of all, I was already late. (Laughs) So that's like… Our coach is very, she's very demanding. And it's not that she's a negative demanding, it's just like she wants the best and she expects it. And it's not negative in any way. So um we got there and then they… Our coaches… The actual… She's the administrator of the cheerleading squad. But um our actual coaches had changed the performance routine again! So we had to learn like something… I had to learn something totally different again, so I was trying to catch on with it and the girls were like… because we were missing one of our xxxx, we were missing one of our teammates. So I had went in her position and that can mess up like a whole dance routine if you do that. So I went inside the other girl's position that she's supposed to be in and my other teammate was like, "Gosh, you can't remember that? You've got (unintelligible) there." And then I remember I was like, "Shut up." Because it had like… when you're under… I had the PSAT the next day. I was like… My mom was like you need to be studying and all that and the last thing on my mind was like, "If I take one more instep, that's gonna be her position." That was like the last thing on my mind. That was so xxxx and then I was like… I just broke down and (unintelligible) like sick of everything and that was…But then I have… like my coaches

are really, sick of everything and that was…But then I have…like my coaches are really, really supportive and they're like, "You know we're here for you and pray if you want it and we know you can do it." And that's… when you have supportive routine coaches that… that makes everything a hundred times better. So (unintelligible).

Event: Stress of Cheer Competition Practice

Gender: Female

Grade: 10th

Emotional Intensity Coding: 3

Coping Strategy Coding: Total= 1 (Emotion-focused support), Total Different= 1