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Moral Agency in Personal and Intergenerational Narratives of Transgression

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Moral Agency in Personal and Intergenerational Narratives of Transgression

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An abstract of
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Abstract

Moral Agency in Personal and Intergenerational Narratives of Transgression
By Natalie Merrill

Moral agency is the ability to understand one's moral experiences as based in goals, values, and beliefs, prompting actions with ramifications (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). Narrative is a tool for construction of moral agency; yet narrating transgression experiences is particularly challenging to a sense of self as moral, and therefore may provide opportunities for positive self-growth. Narrative abilities are formed in sociocultural environments which shape personal narratives and expose developing individuals to others' narratives. Because parents are actively engaged in socializing children's behavior and values, intergenerational narratives that parents tell about their own young experiences may hold a unique position as models of both narrative skill and moral agency. Thus, personal and intergenerational narratives of transgression from 74 emerging adult participants were examined. To measure moral agency, narratives were coded for commitment to moral obligations, intentionality in actions of transgression, and acknowledgement of wrongdoing/resolution. There were no differences between personal and intergenerational narratives on any dimension of moral agency or by gender. Intentionality in personal narratives was positively related to that of paternal narratives. Acknowledgement in personal narratives was positively related to that of maternal narratives. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

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Moral Agency in Personal and Intergenerational Narratives of Transgression

Narratives provide individuals an opportunity to construct a sense of self based on their previous experiences (McAdams, 2001). Morally relevant experiences described through narrative reflect the moral life and understanding of an individual. In particular, narratives of transgression experiences challenge moral identity, and narrative allows individuals to clarify how one can remain a good person even after one has done something wrong. The ability to understand one's morally-relevant experiences through explanation of intentions, goals, actions, and consequences, is conceptualized as moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). Yet, narratives, particularly narratives that carry moral weight, are formed in a social context, influenced by conversations and stories shared with family and friends (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Norris, Kuiack, & Pratt, 2004). Stories that parents tell their children of experiences from their youth, intergenerational narratives, are passed down through generations; one of the reasons parents do this is to pass down values (Pratt & Fiese, 2004), especially during adolescence, when constructing a moral identity becomes a critical developmental task (Erikson, 1968). Intriguingly, at least in Western cultures, parents frequently include intergenerational narratives of transgression as a way to teach moral lessons and values (Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001). To date, however, there is almost no research on the transgression narratives that adolescents either tell about themselves or know about their parents' youth. Thus, the purpose of this study is to compare personal and intergenerational narratives of transgression experiences for characteristics of moral agency and in relation to each other.

Narratives and Transgression

Bruner (1990, 1991) described narratives as the process through which individuals and societies understand and transfer a subjective reality. Narratives allow a person to create meaning from their previous experiences. "Coherent narratives move beyond a simple sequence to provide an explanatory framework for understanding how and why events unfolded as they did. This framework includes intentions, motivations, thoughts and emotions…" (Fivush, 2011, p. 564). Individuals use narratives to recount a series of events while explaining their role in the events as they unfold. Through narrative, individuals can take each other's perspectives (Fivush, 2011). Moreover, narratives provide an avenue to internally create a sense of self and openly convey and negotiate that sense of self with others (Linde, 1993). Thus, narratives are not only a way in which we explain what has happened in the past, but they are most importantly a way in which human beings come to understand one another.

Interestingly, narratives also provide a means by which a person may express moral agency. Moral agency is defined as "people's understanding and experience of themselves (and others) as agents whose morally relevant actions are based in goals and beliefs" (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a, p. 55). Moral agents commit to goals, responsibilities, and obligations, which are culturally situated (Bandura, 2006). Different cultures demonstrate overlap and diversity in terms of which actions and responsibilities are most valued and, to construct moral agency, individuals adopt these values as their own (Blasi, 2004; Haidt & Joseph, 2005; Weinryb, 1995). Furthermore, moral agents demonstrate intention and decision to act, based upon motivational goals and emotions (Pasupathi & Weinryb, 2010a). By understanding the goals and motivating factors in the

actions taken during an event, an individual is able to work out why they did what they did and create solutions for future problems. In contrast, to declare that one had no control over one's actions is to diminish one's sense of moral agency and likewise relieve oneself from responsibility for the consequences of the act. Long-term, such a non-agentic story remains incoherent in terms of the self (Bandura, 2006; Weinryb, 1995). Lastly, moral agents accept the external and emotional consequences of their actions (Pasupathi & Weinryb, 2010a). Reflection on consequent emotions, for example guilt, can bring about positive change as they may serve as a motivating force for individuals to behave differently in the future (Baumiester, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995).

Transgression Narratives and Moral Agency

Transgression narratives in particular have a number of interesting features that set them apart from other narratives. Transgression narratives are defined as stories about a time that a person did something that violated a rule or that they felt was morally wrong. Coherent narratives reflect continuity between the teller's actions and identity; when these elements conflict, as they do in transgression narratives, the teller finds it necessary to explain the discontinuity (Linde, 1993). Thus, narrating transgression experiences is particularly challenging in terms of representing identity because transgressions pose a threat to the identification of the self as a continuously good person.

Although moral agency is not the main focus of their research, Baumeister and colleagues have accomplished considerable work examining characteristics of personal narratives of transgression, describing what sets them apart from other narratives (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Baumeister et al., 1995; Leith & Baumeister, 1999; Shütz & Baumeister, 1999). In one study examining interpersonal conflict and

harm, Baumeister et al. (1990) asked undergraduate participants to provide both a narrative of a time in which someone made them angry (victim narrative) and a narrative about a time they made someone else angry (perpetrator narrative). These stories were then coded for presence or absence of a variety of content which included intentions, consequences, and perception of cause. The results revealed that happy endings, mention of apology, and mention of perpetrator regret were more common in perpetrator stories than in victim stories. Negative consequences, lingering anger, and relationship damage were more common in victim narratives than in perpetrator narratives. Interestingly, victim narratives were more likely to focus on the absolute incomprehensibility of the perpetrator's actions whereas the perpetrator narratives were more likely to portray their motives and intentions in a variety of ways, including attributing some provocation from the victim. Finally, the perpetrators were more likely to describe the victim's anger as an overreaction, and victim accounts were more likely to portray their anger as justified.

Not surprisingly, guilt is a common emotion associated with transgression narratives. To explore the role of guilt in narrative, Baumeister et al. (1995) asked undergraduate participants to write about a time when they angered someone and felt guilt or regret afterwards and another time when they angered someone but did not feel guilt. The narratives were coded for presence or absence of content including learning a lesson, the transgressor changing behavior, an apology being given, a confession given, the value of the relationship between actors in the story, high regard for the victim, and selfishness of the transgressor. The stories involving guilt were more likely to include lessons learned at the end, change in the future behavior of the transgressor, confession from the transgressor, apology, and admitting selfishness. The stories of guilt also tended

to involve situations in which the victim was someone with whom the transgressor shared a communal relationship (such as family or romantic partners). No-guilt stories more frequently included content about mitigating circumstances and self-justifying statements. (It is worth noting that reliability statistics are not included in this study and therefore the results of coding should be interpreted with caution.) The results of this study suggest that guilt may be related to how individuals come to interpret their role in a transgression experience and its consequences, as well as whether they do anything to make amends or prevent future occurrences.

To further explore the social component of guilt, Leith and Baumeister (1999) asked participants to describe an experience of interpersonal conflict, once in their own words, and then a second time from the perspective of the other person involved in the conflict. The participants also completed questionnaires on guilt-proneness as a personality trait and the narratives were coded for guilt content. The narrative task proved to be somewhat difficult for participants in that 28% were unable to tell the story from another's perspective. Using success in perspective changing as a comparison variable, the researchers observed that those who were able to change perspective had higher guilt-proneness and higher mention of guilt in their narratives. These results suggested a potential link between perspective-taking abilities and describing guilt in transgression narratives.

Finally, in a comparison of undergraduate participants' narratives of transgressions and happy events, narratives of transgression were found to be described as though the narrator took a more passive role, with shorter sentences describing the main actions of the story, fewer details, longer introductions, and more self-focused

emotion (Shütz & Baumeister, 1999). The authors' interpretation of these results was that in narrating transgressions, individuals divulge only the information that presents the narrator in the best possible light, given the circumstances. Thus, by emphasizing self-promoting aspects of narrative and by minimizing others' thoughts and feelings during the time of the event, individuals use narrative to control how others perceive them.

These studies make it clear that narratives of transgression experiences consist of complex interpretive information that individuals form from experiences that challenge their sense of self. In general, the interpretation of the data put forth by Baumeister and colleagues to explain the differences between transgression narratives and other types is that narratives of transgression "may contain self-serving distortions and rationalizations" (Baumeister et al., 1990, p. 1003).

However, Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010a) argue that what is more critical than possible distortion in transgression narratives is the narrative meaning-making process that individuals use to understand themselves as agents in the world. As discussed by Bruner (1991), narratives are not verifiable; the closest we can come to this is achieving "verisimilitude" and individuals convey something that seems as near to the "facts" of what happened as is subjectively possible. Narrative is a process of working out meaning, which can be a difficult challenge for some people (McLean & Mansfield, 2011). Yet, it is a process shaped by development and influenced by personal experience (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). As Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010a) point out, to emphasize narrative as a tool for excusing oneself from past behaviors, is to leave unacknowledged that narrative may also be a process that prompts future positive growth, particularly in the moral domain.

To explore whether and how working through difficult narratives might be linked to personal growth, Mansfield, McLean, and Lilgendahl (2010) examined narratives of transgression and trauma. Adults from a wide range of ages (18-71) completed an internet survey, writing about a time they defied their own moral code and another time when they felt significant psychological distress. Questionnaires assessing wisdom and well-being were also completed by participants. The narratives were coded for complexity, which measured the extent to which the narratives mentioned the combined elements of perspective taking, emotion, analytical reasoning, meaning drawn, and contextual information on a 1 to 5 scale. Resolution was coded based upon the extent to which the event was blatantly unresolved or seemed to end with a "solution." Growth in narrative was also coded based upon whether the narrator mentioned that the event had a lasting impact on the self or remained significant to the person even in the present. Trauma narratives and transgression narratives were not significantly different in amount of complexity, resolution or growth. Thus, in terms of narrative characteristics, these two narrative types were rather similar. However, the implications for identity and well-being were quite different between the two events. Traumas were self-reported to be more important to the self than transgressions. Yet, resolution in transgression narratives was positively related to well-being; growth from transgression was positively related to wisdom. Growth and resolution from trauma narratives were not significantly related to well-being or growth. This study suggests that although transgression experiences may be particularly challenging to individuals' sense of self, and even at face-value considered by individuals to be less important to the self, individuals may gain important psychological benefits from being able to work through them. Also, this study bears

important implications regarding the construction of moral agency. The limited research to date highlight that transgression narratives may be particularly interesting to explore further for the construction of moral agency. Thus, recent research has begun to consider how the ability to narrate transgressions develops, the sociocultural context in which it develops, and how, in particular, parents' stories may influence their children (Thorne, McLean, & Dasbach, 2004).

Narrative Development and Social Context

Individuals begin to develop narrative skills with the development of language but the ability to form a coherent narrative and the ability to use autobiographical reasoning do not mature until adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The ability to construct moral agency with narrative, then, which relies on the ability to provide interpretive content such as goals, intentions, and consequences of an action, likely is not fully developed until adolescence either. Consistent with this hypothesis, Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010b) first examined 8-, 12-, and 16-year-olds' personal narratives of a time they were with a friend and they felt badly. The information in these narratives was parsed into idea units that were then coded as "factual" or "interpretative" content. The interpretative content was subcoded as interpretations of the self or of others mentioned in the narrative. The results demonstrated that there were no differences between the age groups in the amount of factual information present in their narratives; however, the 16-year-olds had significantly more interpretative content, in both subcategories, than the younger participants.

To further explore age differences that may influence the ability to construct moral agency, the researchers conducted a second study, examining narratives from 5-, 7-

, 11-, and 16-year-olds of a time when the participants hurt another person (perpetrator) and a time when the participants felt hurt by another person (victim). The narratives were coded for content of facts, interpretations, actions, goals, and evaluations/thoughts. Across age groups, participants included more self-interpretations in the victim narratives than in the perpetrator narratives and more other-interpretations in the perpetrator narratives than the victim narratives. Yet, there were no differences for actions, goals, or overall amount of interpretation between the two narrative types. Age differences in this study were consistent with the first. Particularly, the 16-year-olds provided significantly more actions and thoughts/evaluations than the other age groups, and significantly more goals than the youngest group. Girls provided more elaborative narratives than boys overall. These findings suggest that although the participants from all age groups were able to provide actions and some evaluative content, the adolescents were the best at providing information about actions, goals, and evaluations, and therefore may have reached a point in development in which they are fully capable of constructing moral agency in narrative.

In order to examine how individuals gain the ability to create meaning from their previous experiences, it is important also to consider the sociocultural context in which individuals develop narrative skills (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). Parents especially play a major role in helping to shape a child's autobiographical memory and socioemotional understanding through reminiscing (Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993; Laible, 2004). Mothers who help their children elaborate more on their memories have children who subsequently remember more details of the event and later in life have a younger age of earliest memory (Reese, Haden, Fivush, 1993; Reese et al., 2010). Furthermore, Laible

(2004) found that high elaboration when mothers were reminiscing with their preschool children was positively related to the children's emotional understanding. Interestingly, Laible and Thompson (2002) found that the way mothers discussed past experiences of conflict with their 30-month-old children was related to the children's demonstration of conscience: mothers whose parent-child conversations of conflict had more references to emotions and had higher justification (*e.g.* clarification and reasoning, such as why a child should behave a certain way) and lower aggravation (*e.g.* threats, teasing, or "because I said so" explanations) in their conversations had children who were better able to resist playing with tempting, "off-limits" toys in a laboratory task. Also, mothers who used more justification or aggravation had children who were more likely to use the same strategies when discussing conflict. The same pattern was found regarding moral evaluations (*e.g.* "that was naughty") and event consequences, suggesting that children may model many of their parents' characteristics of talking about conflict. Thus, the way parents and children talk about past experiences, and particularly past experiences of a moral nature, may influence both the child's autobiographical memory and the child's developing moral understanding. Such conversations may lay the early foundation for children's developing sense of moral agency (Pasuapthi & Wainryb, 2010a).

Intergenerational Narratives as Moral Models

Although it is quite established that parent-child conversations influence children's autobiographical memory, more research is beginning to explore the use of intergenerational narratives, stories that parents pass on to children about events that happened when the parents were young, as a tool for parents and grandparents to strengthen relationships with their children and pass on family history and values (Norris

et al., 2004). Such stories may play a large role in demonstrating moral behavior, through stories of moral uprightness and transgression (Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001). From the time children are infants, parents are already telling their babies intergenerational narratives (Fiese, et al., 1995). Parents continue to tell their own stories as their children are developing narrative skills, and they are developmentally sensitive regarding the stories they tell. Parents are more likely to tell stories reflecting the role of the child as appropriate to the child's age group, for example, telling infants family stories of affiliation and preschoolers stories of achievement (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995). As individuals go through childhood and early adolescence, families continue to share conversations about their past experiences in daily family interactions.

According to Bohanek et al. (2009), in families with children ages nine- to twelve-years-old, about twelve percent of all talk during daily dinnertime conversations is comprised of intergenerational narratives and family history content. Considering other possible types of conversations that may occur at dinnertime (i.e. talk about everyone's day, food-related talk, general social interaction, etc.), and that families are participating in these conversations every day, this amount of family history discussion is quite substantial. Interestingly, parents also use family reminiscing at dinnertime to socialize children and help them understand which behaviors are acceptable (Sterponi, 2009). Therefore, daily conversations among family members are an important source for children to gain both family history information and behavior socialization (Arnold, Pratt, & Hicks 2004).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that intergenerational narratives may influence an adolescent's personal narrative as well. Arnold et al. (2004) have suggested that children incorporate their parents "voice" into their own narrative telling and that doing so may contribute to children's well-being. Fivush, Bohanek, and Zaman (2011) demonstrated how this becomes particularly apparent in the way that adolescents report their parent's intergenerational narratives differently by their own gender and which parent they are describing. They found that stories about mothers were more elaborative, more affiliative, and more emotional than stories about fathers as told through the eyes of their children. Interestingly, girls' personal narratives were also more elaborative and emotional than boys' personal narratives. Likewise, adolescent girls who used more emotion words, cognition words, and intergenerational content when describing their mother's intergenerational stories exhibited higher well-being, although this pattern did not hold up for boys and fathers (Fivush & Zaman, 2011).

Although intergenerational narratives remain a relatively new topic of research (Fivush, et al., 2011; Zaman & Fivush, 2010), even more sparse are the number of studies that have examined intergenerational narratives of transgressions at the psychological level of analysis (Miller et al., 2001; Thorne et al., 2004). Most parents in Western societies do tell narratives of transgression experiences to their children and adolescents and believe that these stories can be used as tools for teaching moral lessons (Miller et al., 2001; Thorne et al., 2004). Yet, little is known regarding what children take away from these stories and how these stories may contribute to an individual's sense of moral agency.

The following study is an exploration of the ways emerging adults portray moral agency through personal and intergenerational narratives of transgression experiences. Based on the theoretical and scant empirical work in this area, we examined three dimensions of moral agency. First, as described by Bandura (2006), moral agents personally commit to responsibilities and obligations and typically use these principles to guide their behavior. In narratives of transgressions then, the knowledge of and personal commitment to responsibilities and obligations would be reflected by individuals high in moral agency. Conversely, individuals low in moral agency would diminish their commitment to such ideals, either by neglecting any mention of them or by describing them as externally enforced rather than personally adopted (for example, "Her father did not allow her to go out at night."). Next, moral agents understand the motivations and intentions behind their actions (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). By understanding aspects of the internal experience, such as desires, emotions, and drives during an event, individuals can come to understand their actions more fully. Individuals high in moral agency accept that their actions were intentional in a transgression narrative, and further use the narrative to explore the internal motivations that influenced their decision to transgress. However, individuals low in moral agency, diminish their role in the event by blaming others or focusing on the external aspects of the event. In doing so, they detach themselves from responsibility and agency is undermined (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). Lastly, moral agents acknowledge the consequences of their actions and determine to somehow resolve their transgression in the future (Bandura, 2006; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). Individuals high in moral agency elaborate on the impact their actions had and do

not attempt to minimize these consequences. Such elaborations may include physical and emotional consequences to the self and others.

The main goal of this study was to examine both personal and intergenerational narratives of transgressions as told by adolescents. Because there is so little research on intergenerational narratives of transgressions, no specific predictions were made. Rather we focused on four main questions. First we were interested in how many emerging adults knew such stories about their parents and what kinds of transgression stories they knew. Next, we were interested in examining to what extent late adolescents and emerging adults interpret their parents as moral agents in stories, and how the amount of agency attributed to parents may compare to that described in their personal narratives. Also, we were curious to see if individuals differ in how they portray moral agency in the transgressions of their mothers and fathers. Given that females' narratives provide more elaboration and interpretive content, and that women may be more disclosing of guilt in transgression narratives, (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Baumeister et al., 1994), we expected to find gender differences in the way narratives were used to construct moral agency. A final goal of this study was to examine the potential relation between how individuals construct moral agency in stories about their parents' transgressions and how they construct moral agency in their own.

Method

Participants

Participants (n = 94) were recruited from introductory psychology courses for class credit. The students were given the option to volunteer for research studies or write a topical essay to achieve course credits. Of those who participated in this study, 22 were

excluded: ten did not report a story about their father, four did not report a story about their mother, one did not report a story for both parents and self, and seven did not follow directions. Thus, the final total of participants whose data were used for analysis was 72 (37 male; *M* age = 19.11). Descriptive characteristics of participants suggested a range of diversity in ethnicity, and a relatively high level of parents' education. Forty-seven percent of participants reported being Caucasian, 25% Asian, 10% African-American, 5.5%, Hispanic, and 12.5% other. The vast majority reported being from homes with both parents having at least some college education and many of the parents (39%) had some amount of post-college education. All participants signed informed consent forms approved by the Emory University Institutional Review Board. The larger study from which these data were drawn involved multiple narratives and questionnaire measures. Only those measures relevant for this study are described. The majority of participants used approximately 50 minutes to complete the task.

Procedure

Up to 10 participants signed up for a 60 minute session and filled out booklets independently in a classroom with a research assistant present. Included in the booklet were requests to write a story about personal and intergenerational transgression experiences. Instructions for the intergenerational transgression narrative writing were as follows:

Please read the instructions carefully and completely.

I would like for you to write a story about your father [mother] when he [she] was young. This story should be about a specific time your father [mother] felt that he [she]

had done something wrong. Though this narrative is not based on your own experiences please describe the event in as much detail as possible.

Do your best to include, what happened, where it happened, who was involved, what your father [mother] did, what he [she] was thinking and feeling during and after the event, and why he [she] views this event as a transgression. Try to be specific and provide as much detail as you can.

Instructions for the personal transgression narrative writing were as follows:

I would now like for you to write another story about your own personal experience. This story should be about a specific time when you felt that you did something wrong. Please do your best to describe the event in as much detail as possible.

As you write about your own personal experience please describe, in detail, what happened, where you were, who was involved, what you did, what you were thinking and feeling during and after the event, and why you view this event as a transgression.

Order of each narrative type was counterbalanced across male and female participants and the narratives were transcribed verbatim by research assistants.

Coding

Three independent dimensional coding schemes were developed to capture theoretically critical components of moral agency as discussed in the introduction: commitment, intentionality, and acknowledgement. Each dimension included a 1-5 scale, with one indicating lower levels of the dimension expressed and five indicating higher levels of the dimension expressed. Also, the dimensions were considered in terms of the main agent in the story, excluding information about other characters (or the participant when narrating parents' stories). Table 1 shows a summary of the coding scheme.

Based on Bandura (2006), commitment to moral obligations and behavioral norms captured the extent to which participants reported the story agent as adopting a positive responsibility or norm as a personal obligation (for example, "He was in charge of looking after his brother every day.") Scores ranged from one (no commitment) to five (mention of personal acceptance and internalization of an obligation as their own responsibility). Importantly, the commitment made must have been related to the transgression to contribute to the score. For example, a story that described the main character as a "dedicated student" but then went on to describe a quarrel with a sibling would be considered unrelated and only elements related to the transgression would be considered for commitment.

Based on Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010a), intentionality in transgression captured the extent to which the story agent was described to have made a deliberate decision to transgress, based in goals, beliefs, emotions, and other internal motivations. Scores ranged from one (unclear how the main character's role in the story committed a transgression) to five (a deliberate decision and plan were made in order to carry out the action and the motivations for rule-breaking behavior were described).

Also based on Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010a), acknowledgement and resolution in transgression was scored according to the extent to which the story agent acknowledged the wrongness of the transgression, accepted their responsibility for it as well as its consequences, and took or attempted to take future behaviors to resolve the situation. Scores ranged from one (no acknowledgement that the agent had done something wrong) to five (acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the part of the speaker, a

sense of regret or an elaboration on the personal reaction, inclusion of information about the consequences, and an attempt to resolve the transgression through future behavior).

Reliability

Two coders developed these three dimensions using 25 percent of the narratives. The coders then coded a distinct subset of 32 narratives for reliability, achieving Cronbach's alpha of .85 for commitment, .92 for intentionality, and .91 for acknowledgment and resolution. The remaining narratives were scored by one coder. Several sample narratives are shown in the Appendix to illustrate the coding.

Results

Results are presented in three sections. The first section describes the events the participants selected to narrate. The second section describes analyses of group differences between males and females in how they expressed moral agency in personal and intergenerational narratives, and the third section describes correlations among the moral agency dimensions both within each narrative and across the personal and intergenerational narratives.

Description of Events

Themes expressed in the narratives were developed from inspection of the narratives themselves, and fell into categories listed in Table 2. Because many of the narratives expressed more than one theme, these narrative categories are not mutually exclusive. Among the most common were the themes of breech of social contract, harm to others, and regret. Due to the open-ended nature of the narrative prompt, many participants narrated stories about events in which they felt that they did something wrong but were not, strictly speaking, transgressions. For example, regret was a theme

that emerged to describe personal decisions or life choices that were negative to the narrator in hindsight but were not actions of rule-breaking. Interestingly, the theme of harm to others was more frequent in the personal stories than in the intergenerational stories, and the theme of disobeying parents was more frequent in the intergenerational narratives, particularly mothers' narratives, than the personal narratives.

Group differences in Moral Agency across Narratives

The first set of analyses examined whether males and females differed in the expression of moral agency, as well as differences in the expression of moral agency between personal and intergenerational narratives. In order to examine this, a 2 (gender of adolescent) by 3 (narrative: personal, maternal intergenerational, paternal intergenerational) by 3 (moral dimensions: commitment, intentionality, acknowledgement) mixed-effect analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with gender as a between-subjects factor and narrative type and moral dimension as within-subject factors. As can be seen in Figure 1, the moral dimension mean scores were significantly different from each other, $F(2, 142) = 25.25$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$. There were no other main effects or interactions. Follow-up comparisons using the Bonferroni correction for familywise error revealed that commitment scores were significantly lower than intentionality scores, $t(71) = -5.86$, $p < .01$, $d = .69$, and lower than acknowledgement scores $t(71) = -7.27$, $p < .01$, $d = .86$. There was no significant difference between intentionality and acknowledgement scores, $t(71) = -.502$, $p = .62$, *ns*. Thus, participants told both personal and intergenerational narratives of transgression lower in commitment than in intentionality and acknowledgment.

Relations among Moral Dimensions and Narratives

Relations within narrative type. The second analysis focused on relations among the three moral agency dimensions within each narrative. That is, does an individual who tells a personal narrative high in commitment also tell one high in intentionality and acknowledgement? In order to examine this question, Pearson product moment correlations were computed among the three moral agency dimensions within each narrative type. These results are summarized in Table 3. As can be seen overall, intentionality and acknowledgement were both related to commitment, but not related to each other. This pattern is mainly reflected in the personal narratives, as only intentionality was related to commitment in narratives about fathers and these variables were not related for narratives about mothers. For narratives about mothers, acknowledgment and intentionality were related.

Relations between personal and intergenerational narratives. The third major question addressed was whether adolescents told personal transgression narratives that were similar in moral agency as the stories they told about their mothers and their fathers. Correlations between intergenerational narratives and personal narratives for degree of moral agency are presented in Table 4. Acknowledgment scores in personal narratives were positively related to those in maternal intergenerational narratives. Intentionality scores in personal narratives were positively related to those in paternal intergenerational narratives. Commitment scores in personal narratives were not related to intergenerational narratives, although maternal and paternal narratives were related in commitment and intentionality.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine personal and intergenerational narratives of transgression experiences for characteristics of moral agency. We were particularly interested in learning what kinds of stories parents are passing down, to what extent emerging adults interpret their parents as moral agents in stories, and how the amount of agency attributed to parents may compare to that of their own. Finally, we wanted to see if there were any relations between the way participants told their transgressions stories and the way they told those of their parents, in terms of moral agency.

First and foremost, it is important to note that the majority of participants in the study (76%) provided stories for both parents and described them in great detail. We were unable to assess whether those who did not report stories did not know stories or did not wish to divulge them. Yet, this supports findings from Thorne et al. (2004) that most parents are telling transgression stories to their adolescents and most adolescents remember important details from them. Furthermore, it confirms that conversations between parents and adolescents may carry moral weight in that these conversations are opportunities for parents to pass down stories about lessons learned and values from their own experiences (Pratt, Arnold, Pratt, & Diessner, 1999). The fact that so many emerging adults knew stories about transgressions of their parents demonstrates that these kinds of discussions are going on between parents and their children and that intergenerational narrative is one tool that parents are using as part of these conversations.

Next, the common themes of these stories that emerged shed some light on the moral lessons that parents may be passing down to their children through telling these

stories. For example, the high number of stories that were about disobeying parents (with the majority of these stories carrying negative consequences) suggests that parents may be using these narratives as a tool to bolster further support for the idea that parents' rules are important to follow. Also of note, the fact that stories about harm to others were quite frequent suggests that parents were attempting to teach lessons about concern for others; that regret in life decisions was another common theme suggests that many of these stories were cautionary tales, not simply regarding minor behaviors but also regarding major life choices.

Regarding the dimensions of moral agency, commitment scores were generally lower than intentionality and acknowledgment scores. It seems that participants were less likely to spontaneously include information about their moral obligations and personal responsibilities than they were to provide information about goals, intentions, decisions, consequences, and resolutions. It may be that the dimension of commitment was measuring the provision of contextual or background information, which may have either been assumed to be known by the reader or not considered as an essential component in order to tell and clarify one's role in the story. That is, when one is sharing a transgression story, there may be an assumption on the part of the storyteller that the listener will already know which rules and obligations have been violated, and thus calling attention to these may not be seen as a necessary component in explaining one's actions to others. In contrast, describing one's motivations, intentions, and decisions may not be assumed to be shared-knowledge and thus are necessary to explain one's actions; likewise, describing the consequences, personal responses, and resolution of such stories may be necessary to make the story coherent. Therefore, although commitment to moral

obligations and behavioral norms may be a characteristic of a person high in moral agency (Bandura, 2006), it may not be as vital to the interpersonal narrative process of constructing moral agency which we were trying to capture.

Importantly, intergenerational narratives and personal narratives did not differ in the expression of moral agency, nor did males and females differ. The scores represented the full range of each dimension of the coding scheme, on average scoring in the middle. Thus the lack of differences cannot be attributed to truncated range. Rather the patterns suggest that both types of stories carry moral meaning; parents' stories are just as rich in moral content as personal stories. Further, although studies have shown that young and mid-adolescent females typically use more elaboration and emotional content in personal narratives (Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, 2010; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b), suggesting a possible advantage in constructing moral agency and making meaning from intergenerational narratives, according to the present study, late adolescent males and females do not differ in the ability to construct moral agency.

In considering whether parents' stories may serve as models for emerging adults' own construction of moral agency, it is interesting that although stories did not differ in amount of moral agency, there were differential relations between the parents' stories and the adolescents' stories for each dimension. Specifically, those with higher intentionality in their narratives about fathers were more likely to have high intentionality in their own narratives. Also, those who had higher acknowledgement and resolution in their narratives about mothers were more likely to have higher acknowledgement in their own. Attempting to explain these findings is complicated. There were no mean differences in intentionality or acknowledgement between mothers' and fathers' narratives. Similarly,

because each dimension was not related across all stories, it does not appear that a general moral agency style was used to narrate all transgression stories. One possible explanation, however, may be that as children are hearing stories about their parents, they are more receptive to those aspects of the stories which are consistent with the gender role of the parent (Bem, 1981; Fiese & Skillman, 2000). Intentionality, which is the extent to which a person mentions and elaborates on goals, drives, and explicit actions, may be most reflective of the characteristic of autonomy, which is a stereotypically masculine trait. Likewise, acknowledgement and resolution, which emphasizes the emotional and physical consequences of the transgression for both the self and others, may be related to empathy, and therefore more readily received as a stereotypically feminine trait. Thus, although the participants did not incorporate moral agency differently according to their own gender, they may be picking up on different aspects of moral agency from their mothers' and their fathers' stories based upon gender schemas and using those elements as a model for their own construction of moral agency.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations to this study may hopefully serve as fodder for future questions for research. Although our sample was ethnically diverse, it is clear that the majority of the parents in the study were highly-educated, which may influence the kinds of values and stories they choose to impart on their children. It has been suggested by cross-cultural research that in some cultures, especially those who strongly value respect for authority, it is more appropriate to tell children stories about parents as moral exemplars and to tell transgression stories about other people in the family, such as parents' siblings, instead (Miller et al., 2004; Sandel, 2010). It is unclear how this may influence these children's

understanding of themselves as moral agents, but suggests that there may be multiple ways to use family narratives to pass down moral values, and that using parents' transgression narratives may be a method particularly prominent in Western societies.

Furthermore, we did not collect data from the parents themselves, and so we are unable to directly assess how the parents may have originally told the story and why the parents had chosen these particular stories to share with their adolescents. Although the main goal of this study was to observe the emerging adults' unique perspective on these stories, it would be beneficial for future research to compare moral agency in parents' original telling of the story and that of their children's' retelling.

Another potential limitation was that the prompt that was used to collect the narratives was quite open-ended and allowed for a wide variety of responses falling into the classification of "something you did you felt was wrong." Thus, many of the narratives collected were not transgressions in the strict definition of rule-violation. According to Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010a), transgressions of harm to others are the most challenging events to the concept of moral agency. Therefore, it may still be interesting to compare different kinds of morally-relevant experiences, as well as how they may be told differently for mothers and fathers.

Next, it may be particularly interesting to see how moral agency in narrative may be related to well-being. As suggested by Mansfield, McLean, and Lilgendahl (2010), working through narratives of transgression may provide individuals with an opportunity for personal growth in wisdom and overall well-being. It is a question for future research

whether knowing stories about parents' transgressions may also contribute to personal growth.

Future research should also consider different aspects of perspective-taking in transgression narratives. As suggested by Leith and Baumeister (1999), individual differences in personality may influence one's ability to take others' perspectives in transgression experiences. With our data, this may relate to amount of empathy for victims of transgressions as well as to the ability to take on the perspective of parents and others in telling the intergenerational narratives. As the developing children's sociocultural context may influence their sense of empathy and emotional understanding (Eisenberg, 2004), examining perspective-taking in intergenerational narratives may provide key insights into the development of moral agency.

Finally, this study was cross-sectional, exploring only those stories that emerging adults could recall at one time-point. Yet, it is clear that parents may be sharing these stories with children and adolescents starting at a young age and parents' efforts at value socialization may continue to have impact for years to come (Fiese & Skillman, 2000; Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, & Alisat, 2003). Longitudinal research on moral understanding and the meaning-making that occurs through narrative construction would be highly valuable for our understanding of how these processes develop dynamically over time.

Overall, these findings provide key insights into how parents' stories of transgression experiences may contribute to individuals' understanding of themselves as moral agents within a world of moral rules. Transgression narratives represent a

challenge to moral agency; yet, with parents as models, individuals can use the narrative form to work through such challenges, in a way that may promote future positive growth and restore moral identity.

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Table1

Moral Agency Coding Scheme

Commitment to moral obligations and behavioral norms	
1	No rules, responsibilities, obligations, or beliefs are mentioned.
2	A rule or expectation of behavior is held by *someone else* in the narrative other than the speaker. There is no indication that the protagonist usually complies with these expectations.
3	The speaker uses certain words that imply an acknowledgment of a social contract that has been breached (i.e. abandon, lie, steal, betray, bully, cheat, tricked). These words merit at least a 3 if no other rules, responsibilities, etc. are mentioned by the speaker.
4	A general principle or belief is mentioned by the speaker, which helps guide behavior within the community. This includes mention of family norms of behavior, if the protagonist usually goes along with it or agrees to do it, as well as generalized expectations of members within the family.
5	Personal rules, responsibilities, obligations, or expectations of behavior are mentioned and elaborated upon. The speaker must explicitly acknowledge the protagonist's role or responsibility.

Intentionality in Actions of Transgression	
1	Narrator does not make it clear that the main character's action(s) breaks a rule.
2	Narrator uses phrases such as "accidentally" or situational excuses in order to diminish the acknowledgement of having done something wrong or to diminish the consequences.
3	There are no words to diminish the act or its consequences. However, there is also no elaboration on a motivation or goal prompting the behavior.
4	A desire or goal motivates the rule-breaking behavior. This may include emotions as a motivating force. It is clear that a conscious decision was made to act. It is usually made explicit through the use of cognition words. OR – It is clear that a deliberate decision and plan were made in order to carry out the action. The plan is demonstrated by describing the steps necessary to conduct the action or background knowledge demonstrating premeditation.
5	A desire or goal motivates the rule-breaking behavior AND it is clear that a deliberate decision and plan were made in order to carry out the action. The plan is demonstrated by describing the steps necessary to conduct the action or background knowledge demonstrating premeditation. To receive a 5, the narrator must describe both desires/motivations and plan of action.

Acknowledgment and Resolution	
1	There is no acknowledgment of a turning point or realization that the transgression was wrong. There is no resolution of the situation or accepting of the consequences.
2	There is only acknowledgment by ***another person*** in the story that the transgression was wrong which is made apparent by a comment or punishment. This is externally regulated and the protagonist *does not take ownership or responsibility for the*

	transgression.
3	There is an acknowledgment that the speaker understands in the past or present that the action was wrong. This may include "I'm sorry" but little elaboration on feelings of regret.
4	There is acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the part of the speaker and there is mention of regret. There is elaboration on regret, which may include explanation of personal feelings and empathy for others (physical or psychological). There may also be elaboration on the consequences of the bad decision on one's future. However, there is no evidence that the speaker changes their future behavior or decisions as a result of the experience.
5	There is acknowledgment of wrongdoing, a sense of regret, and elaboration on reactions. This may include what self and others were thinking and feeling as a reaction to the transgression. There is a statement acknowledging how this has affected future behavior or decisions; (this may include further action taken to rectify the wrong, as long as there is an indication that internal reflection prompted the action).

Table 2

Themes in Transgression Narratives

	Personal	Father	Mother
Harm to Others	29	12	17
Regret	7	13	11
Breech of Social Contract			
Total	34	29	28
Cheat	7	0	1
Steal	6	5	5
Lie	10	4	1
Law Breaking	5	7	2
Disobey Parents	4	13	19
Other			
Total	18	20	19
Accidents	3	3	4
Worry Parents	5	1	0
School Misbehavior	3	6	6
Unclear	1	3	1
Other	6	7	8

Table 3

Relations between Moral Agency Scores, overall and separated by narrative type

		Commitment	Intentionality
Overall	Intentionality	0.42*	-
	Acknowledgment	0.26*	0.16
Personal	Intentionality	0.33**	-
	Acknowledgment	0.25*	0.15
Father	Intentionality	0.30**	-
	Acknowledgment	0.16	-0.02
Mother	Intentionality	0.14	-
	Acknowledgment	0.20	.26*

Note. Overall relations represent the correlations between the scores for each dimension averaged across the three narratives.
** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 4

Correlations between Intergenerational Narratives and Personal Narratives

	Commitment	Intentionality	Acknowledgement
Personal - Mom	-0.09	0.10	0.36**
Personal - Dad	0.03	0.24*	-0.03
Mom – Dad	0.23*	0.38**	0.18

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

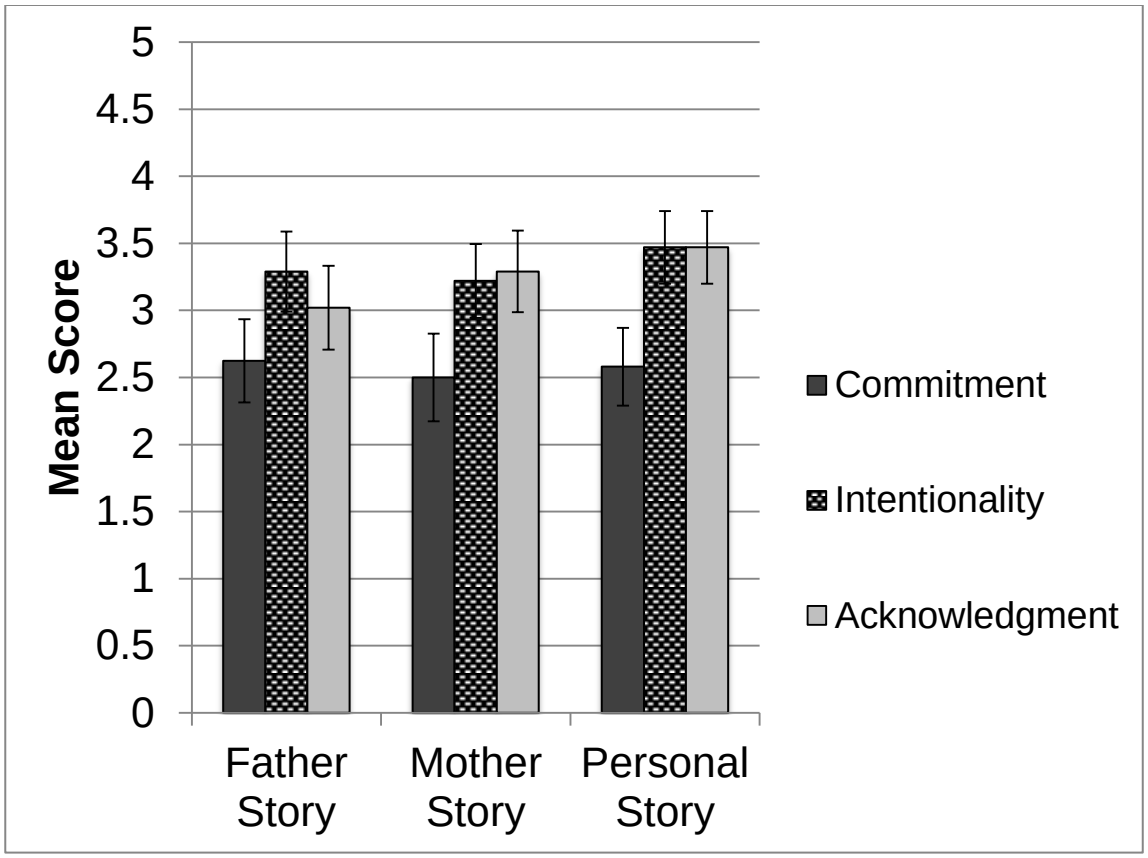

Figure 1. Means of each dimension of moral agency displayed for each narrative type. Error bars represent standard errors.

Appendix

Sample Narrative #1: High in Commitment, Intentionality, and Acknowledgment

Once when my father was young he abandoned his younger brother in the woods. He was in charge of looking after his younger brother every day and making sure that he was safe. However, on this day my father was very annoyed with his younger brother and decided to ditch him while they were playing in the woods about a mile away from their home. Only my father knew the way back home since his younger brother was too young to figure it out. My father got concerned an hour later when my brother never made it back home. He went out to look for him and found him alone and crying. He brought my brother back home and gave him something to eat. My father regretted abandoning my brother and vowed never to do it again.

Sample Narrative #2: High Acknowledgement, Moderate Intentionality, Low Commitment

Once when my mother was twelve years old, she was caught cheating in school. The teacher and principle (or headmaster) came to her house to tell her parents of the incident, as they knew my grandparents quite well. They informed them that she had copied the work of another student during an exam. Upon hearing the story my mother's parents were very upset. My grandfather told her she wasn't allowed out of the house for about 2 months and she was to complete all of the house chores alone for those two months.

Though this punishment was very severe, she felt especially bad for disappointing her mother, who was speechless after hearing the incident. She was very disappointed in my mother and just said she expected better from her. My mother still recalls this accident as she promised herself that day, that she never disappoint her mother like that again.

Sample Narrative #3: High in Intentionality, Low in Commitment, Low in Acknowledgement

I was in honors Pre-calculus as a sophomore in high school. Academic pressures mounted on top of me and I was growing weary of them. I had just torn my ACL and had a pain catheter in my knee/was on crutches.

I needed to do well on this final exam to do well in the class. No, I hadn't studied on my couch after surgery and I wasn't given any extra days to take the test. So I took it… and I cheated. I cheated and got an A on the test… The worst part was I hadn't felt bad at all. I felt like too much was working up against me and it was unfair. Whether it was right or wrong I balanced the scales.