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Telling Traumatic Events in Adolescence:  
A Study of Master Narrative Positioning

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In thinking about culture and the autobiographical self, we feel tugged in two directions. “Culture” presses us to consider how people are similar, whereas “self” presses us to consider the uniqueness of individual lives. How can such seemingly oppositional concepts be connected in ways that appreciate both personal experience and the press of larger communities? Furthermore, how can the link be made dynamically, so that personal history and cultural values can be viewed as mutually emergent, and contextually, in order to preserve the richness of actual moments when self and culture meet?

Our approach to this problem centers on salient episodes of having told self-defining memories to others. Self-defining memories, like all personal memories, concern specific and memorable past events (Nelson, 1993). Self-defining memories, however, are particularly vivid, emotional, and familiar, revealing “affective patterns and themes that stamp an individual’s most important concerns” (Singer & Salovey, 1993, p. 4). Self-defining memories are a central feature of the autobiographical self because they are essential for the development of the internalized life story, as well as for conveying one’s personal past to others. We begin by introducing the two vehicles with which we approached the problem, the concepts of positioning and of master narrative, and then proceed to tell the empirical story.

Positioning: Conveying the Point of a Self-Defining Memory

Researchers usually determine the meaning of an event narrative by examining content within the narrative. Although the meaning sometimes seems very clear, this is not always the case. To illustrate, consider the following event narrative from one of our informants, a 20-year old whom we will call Henry. Henry responded to a questionnaire that elicited self-defining memories (see Table 1). Here is one of Henry’s self-defining memories, which concerned an event that reportedly occurred when he was 11 years old:

[Event narrative:] When my father informed me that my uncle had died, we were working on a school science project. He answered the phone, told me that his brother had died, and that we should finish up the science project. Even though I was not close to my uncle, my tears streamed. My father told me that the long suffering from cancer was over, and that I shouldn’t feel sad. Then he asked me to hold a flashlight so we could finish the science project.

In the above memory narrative, Henry’s feelings about his father are not very clear. How did Henry feel about his father’s urging him not to feel sad? Why does he regard this memory as self-defining? Why is he telling us this story? These are the kinds of questions that a listener might ask of Henry.

In the last few years, we have found that the point of a story, or what Labov and Waletzky (1967) called the “evaluative component,” can become clarified when the story is told to another person. Interlocutors often demand meanings; sooner or later, they insist on knowing why the speaker is telling them the story. Although psychotherapists and ethnographers have

long understood that dialogue can help to clarify the meaning of events (e.g., Agar & Hobbs, 1982; Loewald, 1975), we came to this discovery only recently. Our discovery was prompted by survey findings that highly memorable events tend to be told soon after the event occurs and on multiple occasions thereafter, presumably to clarify the emotional meaning of the event (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991). Intrigued by these findings, we added another query to our self-defining memory questionnaire. We asked informants not only to describe a self-defining event, but also, if possible, to describe a specific episode in which they had told the event to someone else. We will henceforth refer to the latter narrative as the “telling narrative,” to differentiate it from the narrative of the original event, or the “event narrative.”

Henry’s telling narrative convinced us that addressing a story to a specific person can reveal and perhaps even promote the development of the point of the story:

[Telling narrative:] I told my friend [Joe] because we were comparing our distant relationships. I told him that I can’t take news like that with such a stoic nature. Joe felt the same way I did, and we concluded that we were different than our fathers. I told him 9 years later.

The point of the science project story was not clear in Henry’s event narrative, but seemed much more clear in his telling narrative, which was addressed to his friend Joe. In the telling narrative, Henry positioned himself as unequivocally rejecting his father’s edict not to feel sad, a position shared by his friend.

“Positioning” refers to the social and emotional stances that individuals take vis-à-vis real or imagined others (Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990). “Positioning” is a dynamic rendition of the more static concept of role. Positioning can occur between characters within a story, as well as between the storyteller and the audience (Bamberg, 1997). The positions that we pursue in this chapter concern emotional stances with regard to momentous events. For example, Henry’s position in the science project memory, as clarified in this case by the telling narrative, was one of sadness with respect to the death of a loved one. The position was endorsed by his college friend, but resisted by their fathers, who favored a more stoic position with regard to death.

### Master Narratives: Culturally Valued Positions

The fathers’ position that one should be stoic in the face of tragedy is an example of a “master narrative” (Boje, 1991). The term “master” conveys an essential feature of such positions: they are propounded by people who are granted some modicum of authority. Master narratives are not simply regarded as appropriate ways to experience the world; they are enforced in large and small ways. Master narratives are used by cultural stakeholders as strategies for the “management of sense-making” (Boje, 1991, p. 124). Consensus about the existence of a master narrative does not necessarily imply acceptance of the narrative. Tellers may resist the master narrative but in so doing, they thereby acknowledge the existence of the narrative in justifying their alternative position (Schiffrin, 1996). Master narratives thus function as cultural standards against which community members feel compelled to position their personal experience. The minimal criterion for identifying a master narrative is the perception that a particular emotional position is acceptable to, or resisted by, a valued audience.

Boje introduced the concept of master narrative in a study of how members of organizations constructed company stories to legitimate particular values and actions. Similar emphases on the pragmatic use of narratives for managing sense-making have been made in other cultural contexts, including studies of socializing physicians' case presentations (Hunter, 1986), kindergarten children's stories at sharing time (Michaels, 1991), and children's reporting of emotional events (Fivush, 1989). Studies of parental scaffolding of children's narratives have found ample evidence that parents teach young children what events are reportable and how to report them (Fivush & Reese 1992; Hudson, 1990; Nelson, 1993; Pillemer & White 1989). To the extent that particular positions are promoted by people who are deemed to have cultural authority, such as parents, teachers, or valued peers, the constructions count as master narratives.

The fathers of Henry and Joe did not invent the edict that their sons should be stoic. Rather, their fathers' stoicism exemplifies a cultural convention about how European-American males are supposed to deal with tragic events: keep a stiff upper lip and press on with the task at hand. Plentiful research has found that European-American parents encourage girls to produce more emotionally laden narratives than boys. The expression of sadness, in particular, is more emphasized for girls (Chance & Fiese, 1999; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987; Fivush, 1991), as are expressions of care and concern for others (Ely, Melzi, Hadge, & McCabe, 1998; Gilligan, 1982). For boys, emotion talk is minimized by focusing on details of the setting and action, and on pragmatic solutions (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Chance & Fiese, 1999). These findings crosscut a variety of parents and children in European-American culture, suggesting a shared value that emotional events should be managed pragmatically by males, and elaborately by females.

### Studying Master Narrative Positioning in Self-Defining Memories

As personality and developmental psychologists, we have been struggling to understand how enduring personal memories serve the emerging sense of self in concrete moments of social life. We were attracted to the dynamic and contextual affordances of the notion of positioning with respect to master narratives, but had to rely on our own devices to apply these concepts to self-defining event and telling narratives. We will first explain why we chose to study late adolescents, and a particular kind of self-defining event. We will then describe some of our findings with regard to master narrative positioning. A fuller account of the study can be found in Thorne and McLean (2001).

#### Why Study Late Adolescents

For cognitive, social, and emotional reasons, we expected that late adolescence is likely to be a prime time for struggling with master narrative positioning. By late adolescence, the cognitive capacity for abstract thinking is well developed, so that alternative interpretations of events can begin to be grappled with (e.g., Harter & Monsour, 1992; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Also in late adolescence, social networks begin to expand (Carstensen, 1995); and struggles with identity and intimacy become prominent developmental tasks (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 1993). Socio-culturally, the achievement of identity and intimacy can be viewed as pursuits of satisfying positions within a vast array of cultural values and practices (Thorne, 2000).

As adolescents tell their past to a broadening social network, they may come to recognize that the personal past can take on new meanings when viewed from alternative perspectives. Adolescence is also a highly emotional era that is packed with personal memories, a number of which may be considered self-defining (Rubin, Rahhal, & Poon, 1998; Singer & Salovey, 1993). Because highly emotional events are likely to be told to others soon after the events occur and on multiple occasions thereafter (Rimé, et al., 1991), the late adolescent era seemed ripe for capturing highly salient episodes of master narrative positioning.

### Why Study Life-Threatening Events

We had been collecting self-defining event and telling narratives from college students for a few years, and knew the general lay of the land in terms of events that were regarded as self-defining. Of the three self-defining events volunteered by our samples of 18-20 yr-old European-American college students, the majority concerned either relationship events (often conflicts with parents or peers), or life-threatening events. Because parent and peer relationships undergo important transitions in adolescence, we were not surprised that relationship events often emerged as self-defining memories. However, the relatively high incidence of life-threatening events was surprising because such experiences have not been given a prominent place in theories of adolescent development (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Harter, 1998).

Although developmental theories have not emphasized mortality as a salient adolescent concern, life-threatening events have been found to be very potent for those who experience them. Pillemer (1998, p. 31) characterized traumatic events as having a “big bang” quality, in which “the survivor’s life is abruptly and violently altered.” Traumatic events can have lasting emotional salience, so that their recollection years later can result in an emotional reliving of the event (Langer, 1991). Research with children has also documented the potency of frightening events. For example, Ely, MacGibbon, and Hadge (2000) found that children produced more extensive verbal narratives about their injuries and illnesses than about happier topics, such as trips and pets, and Terr (1990) found that children’s reactions to traumatic events showed an urgency to explain the cause of the event, evoking the questions “why” and “why me?”

If traumatic events are so potent for individuals, they should also be important for the culture at large, and prime candidates for emotional regulation by others, such as caregivers. Making sense of life-threatening events probably begins early in childhood, when caregivers try to comfort children who are afraid of drowning, dog bites, bee stings, hospitals, and death. Fear and sadness are potent emotions that need to be managed for the benefit of children and caregivers. Parents are thus likely to be concerned about how the child experiences the event, and may try to help the child to interpret the event in a satisfactory way. Statements such as, “You felt sad, didn’t you?” or “Don’t be afraid!” teach particular values and practices about how one is supposed to feel in the face of fear or sadness.

Because traumatic events were prominent in late adolescents’ self-defining memories, and because communities can be expected to deem such events important to manage, we chose trauma narratives as the lens for pondering the usefulness of the concept of master narrative positioning for understanding the development of the autobiographical self in adolescence.

### Features of Traumatic Event and Telling Narratives

Of the sample of 60 life-threatening events that were reported as self-defining, only 7 had reportedly never been told in the past. None of these reportedly non-told events involved the kind of physical or sexual abuse that might be likely to be silenced (Hanson, 1997). Several of the events involved deaths of family members or friends; one event was a physical assault in late childhood; another was a car accident involving several friends, and the other was a fall from a sixth floor window. The latter event could possibly have been a suicide attempt, but this was our inference. All of these non-told events reportedly occurred in the presence of family members or friends, with whom some discussion probably occurred at the time of the event. Of the remaining 53 events, a few seemed to be the kinds of events that might result in shame and self-silencing: being raped by a stranger at a party, and being pursued by a sexual pervert in a park. However, both events had reportedly been told to others on multiple occasions in an effort to find sympathy and understanding. For these women, silencing was vigorously resisted. We will return to such events later in the chapter.

For now, we want to emphasize that the large majority of traumatic events had reportedly been told at least once, and on multiple occasions. Furthermore, reminiscence about the traumatic event typically spanned the entire period of adolescence. The original events occurred on the average at age 13, the memorable tellings at age 16, and the reports were collected at age 19. The primary types of life-threatening events were deaths of loved ones, accidents (e.g., serious car wrecks and near-drownings), and physical attacks, including assault and rape.

### Emotional Positions in Traumatic Event Narratives

Informed by findings from gender socialization research and by examining the content of the traumatic event narratives, we identified three kinds of emotional positions with regard to traumatic events: I was tough; I was concerned for others; and I was vulnerable. The “tough” position is reflected in what has been termed ‘John Wayne discourse’ (Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, & Bamberg, 1996). This position focused on action rather than emotion, and conveyed courage and fearlessness in the face of events that might make others cower and shake. The Vulnerable position emphasized one’s own fear, sadness, and/or helplessness in the face of traumatic events. Concern for others, which we called the Florence Nightingale position, emphasized care and concern for the feelings of others. The categories were defined as mutually exclusive, and inter-rater agreement was acceptable, ranging from kappa of .82 to .93.

Gender socialization research, discussed previously, lead us to expect that the John Wayne position would more often be voiced by young men, and that positions of vulnerability and concern for others would more often be voiced by young women. For several reasons, however, we did not expect our findings to directly parallel empirical trends in gender socialization research. Most gender socialization research has studied samples of children rather than late adolescents. By late adolescence, gender roles may loosen as positions with regard to emotional expression are re-evaluated and realigned (Eccles & Bryan, 1994). In addition, our informants were enrolled at a politically liberal university founded on humanistic principles, a Zeitgeist that is still detectable today. Within this humanistic community, tough John Wayne discourse might not be a very popular position, or at least might not be as gendered as one might

expect in some other communities. Similarly, Vulnerable positions might be expected to be less gendered.

Findings with regard to gender differences in the three traumatic event positions are shown in Table 2. The only significant gender difference was that women voiced disproportionately more Florence Nightingale (FN) positions than did men. FN positions were particularly prevalent with regard to reporting deaths, and deaths were also significantly more often reported by women than by men,  $t(43) = 2.25, p < .05$ . Here is an example of an FN death narrative from an informant whom we will call Sue:

[FN event narrative:] I was in the seventh grade when a good friend called me up after school crying. Her 24-year-old brother had been in a car accident and was dead. Immediately I started crying and felt sick to my stomach. This was not only my first experience with death, but it was someone that was too young to die....This experience changed me in that I was much more honest with my feelings toward my friends and family. I remember my friend saying that she had told her brother she loved him just before he left that night and how glad she was she had gotten the chance to say it one last time. Now, even when I'm fighting with loved ones I always let them know I care about them because you never know what's going to happen.

It may seem strange that Sue chose the death of her friend's brother as a self-defining memory, but the personal significance of the event is apparent at the end of the narrative, when Sue casts the event as teaching her to be more open in voicing her care for others. Some other FN narratives about experiences with death also included comments on the deeper meanings of the experience, including a newfound awareness of the preciousness of life, and the importance of living each day as if it were the last.

We were also impressed that FN narratives tended to be punctuated with abrupt shifts between expressing one's own sadness, and expressing concern for others. The following narrative exemplifies such shifts. The narrative involved the death of the father of a best friend, whom we will call Dr. Schwarz and Ruth, respectively:

[FN event narrative:] I was at college when I got the call to learn that my best friend's father had passed away....I remember the feeling I got when I heard the voice on the other end of the line: "Dr. Schwarz has passed away..." I froze and all I could think about was how worried I was for Ruth. I couldn't imagine what I would do if one of my parents died. He had changed my life only months before he passed. I interviewed him for a class assignment and he told me all about the Nazi war camps and losing his whole family. It changed my life. I realized how cruel the world can be—then when he died I realized that people die. I had never known anyone to die, before and it was very upsetting to me. I was baking cookies with two of my close friends, just seconds before we were laughing and having a good time...then I got the call. I couldn't even stand up; I was in the fetal position on the floor bawling. I was so worried about her. I walked down to a nearby garden to pick a flower—it was El Dia de Los Muertos and I put a flower on the altar. I

learned a lot from Dr. Schwarz' death. I learned to seize the moment and most importantly to tell people when you love them, because death is not just something that happens in the movies. I learned that life is too short to hold grudges and that there is really no time to be mean to folks. [emphasis added]

Shifts from concern about self to concern for others were more apparent in women's traumatic event narratives than those of men and, as noted previously, particularly in narratives about deaths. The few men who did report deaths typically employed Vulnerability narratives, which focused on their own feelings of sadness. Henry's science project memory is a case in point. Henry reported that he cried in response to the death of his uncle. He did not say "I was concerned for my father, who had just lost his brother." But let us put ourselves in 11-year-old Henry's position: When Henry cried, his father told him not to feel sad and to get back to work on the science project. In this context, it is unlikely that Henry would have expressed concern for his father's feelings, since his father did not seem to want to talk about feelings. Even if Henry had wanted to express concern for his father's feelings, the position seems likely to have been rejected.

### Master Narratives in Listeners' Responses to Tellings of Traumatic Events

In concert with most master narrative literature, we pursued master narratives locally, in terms of the opinions of significant others with respect to the acceptability of a particular kind of story or position. After informants described each self-defining event (see Table 1), they were asked to provide a telling narrative in response to the following query:

Can you describe a specific episode in which you remember telling this event to someone else? If so, please describe that episode, including to whom you told the event, what led you to tell it, and how you and others reacted to the telling.

However, unlike some master narrative researchers, we did not use interviewers to probe informants further about their experience. The advantage of using an open-ended questionnaire is that it is less manipulative than an interview. The downside of using a questionnaire is that informants can more easily decline to answer. Although 53 of the events had reportedly been told in the past, only 35 of these event narratives were accompanied by a telling narrative that was codable. To be regarded as codable, the telling narrative had to indicate a clear audience response in terms of acceptance or rejection of the teller's emotional position.

Despite this attrition, the telling narratives suggested some interesting trends with regard to the composition of the telling audience, and their responses to particular traumatic positions. In the majority of cases (about 80% for both males and females), the memorable audience to whom informants had told their traumatic event was a peer rather than a parent. Because the memorable telling episode tended to occur around age 16, this finding supports prior findings that peer values are increasingly important by mid-adolescence (Burhmeister & Furman, 1987; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The memorable audience to whom one directed the story tended to be a same-sex audience, which also supports prior findings regarding the importance of same-sex peers in early and mid-adolescence (Bukowski, Sippola, & Hoza, 1999).

Although memorable episodes of having told the traumatic event tended to be addressed to same-sex peers, no gender differences were discernible in the listener's response to a particular traumatic position: males were as likely as females to accept particular traumatic event positions. We therefore collapsed across gender to examine listener responses. Overall, we found that positions of care and concern (FN) and toughness (JW) were accepted by at least 80% of the listeners, but positions of vulnerability were less often accepted (42%).

The greater acceptability of FN and JW positions seemed to pivot on their placing less burden on the audience because the tellers seemed to have at least partially resolved the trauma.

Florence Nightingale event narratives revealed some fear or sadness but also contained enough references to caring for others' feelings to suggest that the listener could respond without too much difficulty. For example, in the following telling narrative that accompanied the account of a friend's (Ruth's) father, Dr. Schwartz, the boyfriend provided comfort, and then the teller proceeded to the funeral:

[FN telling narrative:] On the way to get a flower I saw my boyfriend—I told him because I hadn't told anyone yet and I needed a shoulder to cry on. He was very concerned and loving. He hugged me and told me it would be all right and I should drive back for Ruth and go to the funeral. He made me feel better. People's reactions surprise me quite a bit. I expected people to say more, but when you say the word "death" people don't know what to do. [Emphasis added]

As was true of FN narratives, audience responses to John Wayne narratives were usually positive. However, JW narratives were never reportedly told in an effort to be comforted. Rather, JW narratives were told to entertain. JW narratives were highly detailed and action packed, and rarely referred to emotion, especially pain. For example, one event narrative provided an elaborate description of the setting and the difficulty of a mountain bike ride, culminating in a severely fractured arm. At no point did the informant use any words explicitly referring to his own feelings of pain or fear, as can be seen in this description of the accident:

[JW event narrative:] After about half-way down the 12-mile trail I was coming around a right turn going about 30 and there was a huge water bar across the trail, my front tire landed in it and stopped, and I kept going. My arm slapped the ground before I landed and that's when it broke. I knew it was broken the second it happened, before I even landed. I remember looking up at my arm and having it look like I had two elbows. The first thing when John rode up on me was "Oh shit, your arm's fucked up!" I had to walk half a mile of trail holding my arm while John rode ahead to call the ambulance and Al carried our bikes. Because of that day I now have two steel rods and 13 screws in my arm.

The telling narrative was exceedingly brief:

[JW telling narrative:] I told the other guys I worked with at the bike shop, and they were amazed. But it was more fun hearing John and Al's versions.

The reporter estimated that he had told the event on about 10 occasions; obviously, however, the event was told more often than that because his friends also told it to others, sometimes in the presence of the hero, who clearly appreciated hearing the recount. The detailed plot and the survival of the hero seemed to account for the positive audience response to the tough-it-out position.

JW narratives featured the self-aggrandizing motives that tantalized Labov and Waletzky (1967), whose classic study of responses to the question, "Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?" launched the study of personal narratives in sociolinguistics. Their claim that the stories elicited by this probe displayed large doses of self-aggrandizement holds true for the present study, because no tellers of JW narratives went to any lengths to apologize for the heroic tone of their rendition. The boisterous bravery of the narratives seemed almost like a protest in itself, a protest against displaying vulnerability, pain, or fear.

Vulnerability was the most risky traumatic event position in terms of audience response. More than half of the vulnerable event narratives were rejected by the audience, apparently because the vulnerability seemed inappropriate for the age of the teller, and/or placed too much burden on the listener. One case of peer rejection occurred in response to a story about being attacked by a dog at age 4. The event narrative was rife with expressions of fear and panic: "screaming at the top of my lungs... to this day I have a fear of large dogs." The telling event was actually a generic event and had reportedly happened about 10 times since:

[V telling narrative:] I always bring up the story if I am walking with a friend and we walk past a barking, hyper big dog. They always notice that I tense up so I get sucked into telling them why. I usually don't like to tell people because they usually tell me to get over it. But it is one of those memories that rises up ever time I am around a large dog.

Possibly, the reporter keeps telling the episode in hopes that somebody will offer him a solution, or at least sympathy. So far, he seems to have had no luck with audience acceptance; his peers seem to feel that he is too old to be afraid of large dogs.

Another rejected Vulnerability narrative concerned an account of almost being killed in a car accident: "I told my friends what happened but they didn't want to hear about the 'almost dead' part. It was too depressing. So I felt worse." This telling narrative was so sparse that it was not clear whether the audience's primary concern was for the friend or for the negative mood that the story induced. However, the narrative was sufficiently detailed to code the audience response as rejection.

Several informants described a series of serial rejections of Vulnerable narratives. For example, one case involved multiple rejected tellings of a story about being pursued by a pervert in a Tokyo park at age 11.

[V event narrative:] I'm finally pretty comfortable telling people about this event. It happened when I was in fourth grade—living in Tokyo, Japan....I walked to the park by myself and when I got there—a Japanese man showed me

a map and rattled off in Japanese asking for directions. He seemed to need my help. He asked me where the library was—and I told him that I didn't know. He insisted that I find it with him. I felt strange about the situation—and considered trying to duck away behind a bush as we walked deeper into the park. When we got to a bridge he knelt down to rest the map on his knees and take a closer look—but with one hand—he touched my vagina. I stepped back from him thinking that he had done it by accident—and he scooted forward. I stepped back again and he stood up and reached for me again. He continued to ask me for directions. I wanted to scream “tatsukete” (help) but could not remember the Japanese word for it. Instead I just ran away yelling “wakarimasen” (I don't understand).

The reporter estimated that she had told the event 5 times, after 4 years of silence:

[V telling narrative:] The first time I told this to anyone was four years after it happened. I told my best friend. I lied to her and told her that he had gone as far as unzipping himself. I guess I didn't think it was scary enough as it really happened. Since then, I've told my mother, two boyfriends, and another close friend as it actually did occur. Nobody really knows how to react to it—I usually end up teary eyed. It only comes up if somebody asks me directly if I've been sexually abused.

Unlike the bike accident JW narrative, which is easy on the ears, the above Vulnerability narrative is painful to hear and is still painful to tell. “Nobody really knows how to react to it,” and the reporter also does not know how to react to it except by crying. Perhaps she does not know how to react because no one has helped her to make sense of the traumatic event.

Although the majority of Vulnerable event narratives were resisted by the telling audience, 42% were accepted by the telling audience. Accepted Vulnerability narratives seemed to place less burden on the listener. In some cases, the burden seemed less because the reporter seemed to have resolved the trauma; in other cases, the burden seemed less because the audience had experienced a similar traumatic event and had responded similarly. Henry's science project memory, discussed earlier, expressed sadness at the death of an uncle, a position that was accepted by a friend who also felt that sadness was an appropriate response to death.

Overall, the findings suggested that audiences were more willing to accept traumatic positions of toughness or concern for the feelings of others than positions of raw vulnerability—unmitigated fear or sadness. Based on their greater likelihood of being accepted by audiences, we speculate that for this sample of European-American college students, John Wayne and Florence Nightingale positions constituted culturally dominant narratives, and that Vulnerable positions did not. Vulnerability was a more narrowly acceptable narrative—sometimes accepted by family members and friends, but not always. A number of informants commented that listeners don't know how to respond to feelings of fear and sadness, suggesting that there was no general script for managing vulnerability in this sample of late adolescents.

## Conclusions

We were surprised to find that life-threatening events were so prominent in late adolescents' self-defining memories, because developmental theories have not emphasized mortality as a salient adolescent concern. According to Eriksonian theory, adolescents are primarily concerned with identity, with unifying perceived disparities among who they have been, who they are now, and who they could be (McAdams, 1993). Viewed in this light, life-threatening events may promote awareness of the ultimate disparity, between life and death. When philosophical meanings were offered for life-threatening events, our informants referred to a newfound awareness of mortality, the preciousness of friends, family, and life itself, and the importance of living each day as if it were the last.

We were also impressed at the ease with which we could apply the socio-linguistic concept of positioning to identify emotional stances with regard to life-threatening events. Positioning seemed a felicitous concept to apply because we were studying how people made sense of highly emotional past events, and emotion drives both memorability and sense-making (Brewer, 1988; Rimé, et al., 1991). We found that traumatic event narratives primarily displayed three kinds of emotional positions: a concern for the feelings of others (the empathetic Florence Nightingale position, more often expressed by women, and with regard to death); a preoccupation with one's own fear or sadness (the Vulnerability position); or one's courage or bravery (the tough, action-packed John Wayne position).

Master narratives were more difficult to discern because culturally dominant positions were not readily apparent in narratives of having told the event to someone else. Episodes of having told the event to others typically recounted the response of particular peers, or in some cases, parents, but not the responses of larger communities. Because culturally dominant positions were not usually apparent in the telling narratives, we identified master narratives by majority vote: positions that were reportedly accepted by a large majority of listeners were considered to be master narratives. In focusing on the majority response to traumatic positions, we emphasized two essential features of master narratives: their regulatory force, and their prevalence in the community.

On the basis of the most prevalent listener response to each traumatic position, we concluded that the John Wayne and Florence Nightingale positions counted as master narratives, and that the Vulnerability position did not. Vulnerable narratives were more often rejected than accepted by listeners, who preferred Vulnerability to be interlaced with concern for others, or to be dismissed altogether in lieu of an action-packed plot. Tough and empathetic positions seemed to place less burden on listeners because the teller seemed to have resolved the crisis more successfully. Some communities seem to recognize the burden of vulnerability and have developed specialized agents, such as priests and psychotherapists, to handle it. In our study, the audiences who accepted Vulnerability positions seemed to do so on the basis of having experienced a similar kind of suffering.

The present findings were limited to a small slice of European-American culture and may not generalize to other age groups or to other communities. Older adults may not resonate to the

concept of a self-defining memory because forging an identity is not such a compelling issue. The concept of self-defining memories may also seem less compelling in cultures that do not emphasize personal event telling, such as Mayan and Japanese communities (Minami & McCabe, 1991; Rogoff & Mistry, 1990). Self-defining memories may make the most sense to European-Americans who are transitioning to adulthood and beginning to develop a personal life story.

However, we were pleased with the yield of the present findings, and the promise of the overall approach. As applied to self-defining memories, the concept of master narrative positioning allows for considerable agency with regard to acceptance or rejection of community values. The approach also places lived experience squarely at the center: individuals can be seen as continually striving to position themselves within the larger community in an effort to make satisfactory sense of their experiences. Examining how particular kinds of emotional positions are embraced or resisted within a community is a useful way of identifying the contours of the elusive creature that goes by the name of “culture.” Similarly, examining how individuals within the “same” culture gradually establish niches for making sense of deeply emotional experiences can reveal diverse possibilities for human development.

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Table 1

Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire


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A self-defining memory is a personal memory that has the following attributes:

1. It is at least one year old.
2. It is a memory of a specific event in your life that you remember very clearly and that still feels important to you even as you think about it now.
3. It is a memory that helps you to understand who you are as an individual and might be the memory you would tell someone else if you wanted that person to understand you in a more profound way.
4. It may be a memory that is positive or negative, or both, in how it makes you feel. The only important aspect is that it leads to strong feelings.
5. It is a memory that you have thought about many times. It should be familiar to you like a picture you have studied or a song (happy or sad) you have learned by heart.

To understand best what a self-defining memory is, imagine you have just met someone you like very much and are going for a long walk together. Each of you is very committed to helping the other get to know the "Real You." . . . In the course of conversation, you describe several memories that you feel convey powerfully how you have come to be the person you currently are. It is precisely these memories that constitute self-defining memories.

Task

On the next 3 pages, please jot down a caption or one-sentence summary for each of three self-defining memories that come to mind. Then describe each memory with enough detail to help your imagined friend see and feel as you did. Although these memories are anonymous and will only be identified by code name, please do not reveal memories that are so painful as to make you feel uncomfortable describing them.

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Note: Adapted from Singer & Moffitt (1991-192), p. 242.

Table 2

Average Frequency of Traumatic Event Positions

Traumatic position	Males	Females	<u>t</u> (43)
	<u>M</u> ( <u>SD</u> )	<u>M</u> ( <u>SD</u> )	
John Wayne	.37 (.60)	.27 (.67)	.51
Florence Nightingale	.16 (.38)	.50 (.65)	-2.06 *
Vulnerability	.37 (.50)	.62 (.64)	-1.41

Note: Each informant reported an average of 1 traumatic event narrative, and positions were coded as mutually exclusive. A fourth traumatic position, Existential Awe, was infrequent and is not reported here. Standard deviations are in parentheses. N = 19 males, 26 females.

\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.