
Personal Memory Telling and Personality Development

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Abstract

Although personal memories have been appreciated by psychologists for nearly a century, their significance for personality development has tended to be relegated to internalized representations of early childhood experiences. Recent research, however, suggests that adolescence and early adulthood are the most memorable parts of the life span and perhaps the broadest period of memory telling. This article integrates recent work in cognitive and developmental psychology into a framework for studying how and why tellers proffer and make sense of momentous emotional events, and how families and friends collude in self-making. Promising areas for future research include individual differences in readiness for memory telling, gendered ecologies of memory telling, the developmental significance of parents' stories, and reconciling personal memories and personality traits. Personal memory telling is not just for fun and entertainment, but can also drive social and emotional development in concrete moments of social life.
When I was 5, I lived down the road from an old man who didn't like my dog. He would say horrible things about her and I would become enraged. So I propped nails against his tires but he came out and discovered me. He chased me away and I got into a lot of trouble for standing up for my dog. I told my friend in high school about this event and she flipped out and said I was a "nasty little kid." I thought this was wrong and argued about it with her. I told her that it was only in protection of my family and she said, "Well, what kind of a family is a dog?"

19-year-old male

What do personal memories do for personality? In this article, I argue that the telling of personal memories is not merely for fun or entertainment, but can also drive personality development in concrete moments of social life. I begin by identifying three unique features of personal memories that have emerged in recent research on autobiographical memory. Extending the work of Dan McAdams (1995), I contrast these features of personal memories with those of personality traits. I then advance an agenda for exploring the unique role of personal memories in personality development. This agenda focuses on co-participation in memory telling during a highly formative period of personality and personal memory development: adolescence and early adulthood.

I will use the terms "personal memory" and "personal story" somewhat interchangeably. Personal memory has been defined as the subset of autobiographical memory that involves the recollection of specific emotional events from one's past, events which are enduring aspects of the self-concept (Nelson, 1993). A personal story is the narrative representation of a personal memory. Narratives usually describe location, action, people, and thoughts, and often take the form of stories. The telling of personal stories is often associated with a high degree of vividness so that the teller, and sometimes the audience, relives the past experience (Brewer, 1988). I distinguish between the memory and the story because 'memory' carries more freight of being internalized; memories may be ruminated upon or otherwise kept to oneself. This article draws heavily from personal memory research but emphasizes the telling of personal memories, which tend to emerge as stories.

Personality Traits, Motives, and Personal Memories

McAdams (1995) has attracted considerable attention by proposing that the most frequently studied level of personality, the trait, is insufficiently personal, conditional, and developmental. Traits such as extraversion are readily assessed in people and chimpanzees because they are summary terms for act trends that are publicly observable and pervasive across situations. In addition, some traits are substantially heritable or present at birth, and show considerable stability across the life span (McCrae & Costa, 1990). Citing such genetic and biological evidence, Cantor (1990) referred to personality traits as things that people "have."
However, knowing that someone is an extravert does not reveal much about a person. There are millions of extraverts in the world, and no two extraverts share exactly the same motives or life experiences. Although extraverts can routinely be found associating with groups of people, their relational motives vary. Some extraverts desire close and intimate contacts with others, while other extraverts prefer to control or compete with others (Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998). Compared to traits, motives offer more specific information about what people desire or want to do.

A third level of personality is much more personal than traits and motives, and more cognitively complex, for it requires the capacity to make sense of lived experience both at one point in time and across the life span. This level, the life story, reveals how people construct meaningful accounts of their lives, selecting from a myriad of experiences those events that are the most important, and linking the events into a coherent and personally meaningful life story. Recognizing that the process of making sense of one's life is an interpretive feat (Bruner, 1987), McAdams (1995) referred to life stories as things that people "make".

Although life stories have long been recognized as crucial windows into personality (Adler, 1937; Murray, 1938), systematic studies of life stories have only begun to emerge in the last decade with the turn toward narrative in the social sciences. McAdams' work is widely recognized for appreciating the identity-making functions of life stories, and for elaborating their components. With regard to components, McAdams (1988) viewed very important, specific personal memories as the smallest units and basic data of the extended and developing life story. The story form that often structures personal memories facilitates their serving as basic data for the life story because stories are an efficient and memorable way of organizing events (Mandler & Johnson, 1977).

Although the term "story" suggests an arbitrary construction of events, longitudinal studies have shown that the basic story lines of memorable events tend to be stable across time. Stability in basic story line has been found in longitudinal studies of "flashbulb memories," or memories of vivid, culturally significant events such as where one was when John F. Kennedy was shot (e.g., Brown & Kulik, 1977; Christianson & Safer, 1996; Pillemer, 1984). More recently, stability in basic story line was found in a longitudinal study of personal memories. Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw (1998) solicited 16 important or problematic personal memories from each of 46 young adults during open-ended interviews. Six months later, informants were recontacted and reinterviewed. A different interviewer was used for the second session, and informants were told that it didn't matter whether or not they repeated any memories from the prior interview. Of the events that were selected for telling both times, 71% showed the same basic story line from one telling to the next in terms of what was wanted from whom and what happened at the end. This stability in basic story line, although not perfect, was remarkable because an identical story line required a precise matching among 7 categories of significant others, 7 motives, and 3 outcomes--a very low probability of chance concordance.

It is important to note that stability in basic story line refers to what basically happened during the original event--not implications or larger meanings. For example, the basic story line of the childhood event that introduced this article can be summarized as "I tried to stand up for my dog, who was abused by an old man, and I got into a lot of trouble." This basic story line can be expected to be quite stable across tellings, but what it means to the teller may change with the telling. For example, the young woman's reaction to the dog story seemed to take the young man by surprise, for she interpreted the story as meaning he was a nasty little kid, a meaning that he did not intend and that must now be reckoned with as he ponders the meaning of the story. For now, suffice it to say that findings of story line stability suggest that the basic "facts" of personal memories--what happened--tend to anchor in memory and can potentially serve as foundations for the extended, developing life story. In this sense, personal stories are not only things that people make, but also things that people have, perhaps somewhat like people "have" traits.
Nonetheless, personal stories are more contextual and personal than traits. In the next section, I will identify some recently documented features of personal memories that suggest their unique role in human development. Most of these features have been identified by cognitive psychologists. Although much of this research has not yet filtered into personality and social psychology, I have imported these findings because I think they are enormously useful for understanding the developmental affordances of personal memories.

### Three Felicitous Features of Personal Memories

Studying traits is a relative breeze for researchers because traits tend to be reliably and widely exhibited across time and place. Not so with personal memories. Personal memories are not about typical events, but about atypical, rare events. Furthermore, personal memories are not evenly distributed across the life course; the landscape of personal memory has got a bump. Even worse, memorable events are not visible unless one chooses to tell them, and what gets told is hard to predict. In an effort to make lemonade out of these lemons, I will discuss each of these features in turn.

**Personal Memories are about Atypical, Emotionally Disruptive Events**

Traits, by virtue of being summary terms of one's typical conduct to date, signify the kinds of routines that are counterpoints to the disruptions that characterize personal memories. A recent set of diary studies nicely demonstrates the atypicality of memorable events. Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, & Betz (1996; see also Thorne, 1998), asked 6 college students to keep a written diary of two events per day for periods ranging from 18 to 30 months. Students were periodically tested for the memorability of these events. Event memorability was found to decline dramatically over the first 300 days, and then to bottom out. Only about 3% of the events were rated highly memorable after 300 days, an average of about 1 event every 3 weeks. Clearly, personal memories that endure for at least one year to achieve some kind of "permastore" are rare events.

Why do we remember atypical events? To answer this question, it is instructive to examine the kinds of events that get remembered. Specific events that get remembered are about equally distributed among positive and negative outcomes (e.g., Thorne, 1995), ranging from memories of abuse, illness, and death of loved ones, to falling in love, the birth of one's first child, and one's first drug experience (e.g., Robinson & Taylor, 1998). All of these events disrupt everyday routines and are highly emotional, features that are widely recognized as crucial for event memorability (e.g., Linton, 1978; Brewer, 1988). Furthermore, many memorable events depict "first time" experiences, which are presumably more emotional, unusual, and surprising than are subsequent similar experiences, such as one's third kiss.

Rehearsal also enhances event memorability. The more emotionally disruptive the event, the more likely it is to be rehearsed both covertly, and overtly shared with others. In a recent study of six European samples, Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, and Boca (1991) found that the more emotionally disruptive the original event, the more likely it was to be rehearsed privately as well as shared with others. Furthermore, the majority of highly disruptive events were likely to be shared with others initially within a day of the event occurring. The authors speculated that sharing highly emotional events helps to disambiguate their meanings by assessing others' reactions to the events (Festinger, 1954). Meanings are not automatically attached to emotional events, but develop over time through reflection, sharing, and comparing with other experiences.

The high probability of sharing disruptive events with others soon after the event occurs suggests that "personal memories" is a misnomer, because most memories are not kept to oneself. However, neither are most memories told widely; instead, the telling audience is likely to be close friends and family (Rimé et al., 1991). Perhaps a better term is *intimate memories*, because this
term targets the telling audience more accurately than does personal memories, which suggests that memories are kept to oneself. In any event, findings that personal memories tend to be shared primarily with close friends and family suggests that the developmental context for personal memories is much more focused than that of traits, and thereby lessens the terrain that researchers must tread in order to locate and observe a representative sampling of the phenomenon.

In sum, the highly emotional nature of memorable events has some unique advantages for understanding personality and self development. Because personal memory tellings are usually restricted to close friends and family, the phenomenon traverses a more circumscribed territory for researchers than does traits. In addition, personal memory tellings provide crucial windows for understanding how people mutually participate in interpreting and narratively regulating important emotional experiences.

Personal Memories Cluster in Adolescence and Early Adulthood, not Pervasively Across the Life Course

Whereas the atypicality of personally memorable events has been recognized for the last 20 years, the age-related "bump" in their life span distribution is a relatively more recent recognition. Personal memories are not randomly distributed across the life course; rather, the landscape of personal memory has got a bump between ages 10 and 30 (e.g., Rubin, Rahhal, & Poon, 1998). The comparatively high density of personal memories for events that occurred between ages 10 and 30 is a very robust phenomenon in later life; it has been found with adults ranging in age from 45 to 80, and with methods ranging from memory priming using single words, requests for vivid autobiographical memories (reviewed in Rubin et al., 1998) and studies of event-age clustering in autobiographies (Mackavey, Malley, & Stewart, 1991).

Rubin et al. (1998) advanced several complementary explanations for the greater density of events between ages 10 and 30. One explanation concerned age-developmental peaks in some aspects of cognitive functioning. A second explanation derived from life span studies of socio-emotional networks (Carstensen, 1995). Highly emotional events, as previously discussed, are particularly likely to be told to others, and adolescence is an intensely emotional period of development. Freeman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Larson (1986) found more dramatic hour-to-hour mood fluctuations in a late adolescent sample than in a sample of adults. Recognizing the high emotionality of the adolescent period, clinical psychologists have now developed a special Adolescent version of the MMPI to take into account the "tendency for normal adolescents in a temporary state of turmoil to score like adult psychopaths on the original MMPI" (Aiken, 1997, p. 317). The disproportionate clustering of vivid emotional memories during adolescence and early adulthood may not only reflect a higher base rate of highly emotional experiences during this age period, but also a higher frequency of emotional event telling. This possibility is suggested by recent work by Carstensen (1995), who found that socio-emotional contacts are broader for adolescents and young adults than for other age groups. Although family members and friends appear to be the primary audience for personal memory telling across the life span, a wider array of family and friends is likely to participate in memory telling during adolescence and young adulthood than during other age periods.

A third explanation for the disproportionate clustering of personal memories between ages 10 and 30 concerns the developmental tasks of this age period, which center on the formation of identity and intimacy (Erikson, 1968; Fitzgerald, 1996). Identity is partly achieved by sorting through the events of one's life to understand who one is and where one is going, and intimacy is partly achieved by sharing one's personal past with significant other people. Many memorable events occurring between ages 10 and 30 concern first time experiences, first jobs, first loves, which reflect the kinds of explorations that seem foundational for the formation of identity and intimacy (Robinson & Taylor, 1998).
The high density of memories between ages 10 and 30 has important implications for personality psychology because it directs attention to self-making in adolescence and young adulthood. Research on personality and personal memory has tended to focus on early childhood memories, often working from an Adlerian perspective (Adler, 1937). Some time ago, Kihlstrom and Harackiewicz (1982) questioned the assumption that early memories have a privileged status in personality development. More recently, Josselson (1997) voiced somewhat similar concerns in her longitudinal study of early memories of women interviewed between college and mid-life. Josselson observed that her participants regarded their early childhood memories as emotionally distanced and disconnected from later life experiences. In addition to being more numerous and more representative of the life course, "bump" memories have also been found to be more elaborated and motivationally diverse than early childhood memories, and much more narratively enriched (Thorne, 1995).

**Personal Stories Show a High Turnover from One Telling to the Next in Young Adulthood**

In our previously discussed cross-time study of personal memory telling in a young adult sample (Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998), we expected to find a considerable number of twice-told tales across 6-months time. Instead, we got an exceedingly high turnover rate. Only 12% of the events at Time 1 were also chosen for telling at Time 2. Furthermore, this high turnover rate held for different kinds of memories, including earliest memories, high points, and low points. At least in the identity/intimacy era, we do not have "an" earliest memory or a core set of later memories that we choose to tell when we are asked to describe meaningful events in our lives. Rather, we choose from a relatively large repertoire of memorable events, and are unlikely to choose the same events for telling each time.

It is important to note that the high turnover in the repertoire of events that were told each time produced quite different aggregated themes from one telling to the next. We found no significant correlations for significant others in the events—that is, a person might tell mostly events involving parents at Time 1 and mostly events involving friends at Time 2 (Thorne et al., 1998). Other elements of the basic story line, motive and outcome, showed somewhat more stability across time. The most stable aggregated motives involved themes of wanting to avoid other people, and of wanting to help other people. Positive and negative aggregated outcomes were also somewhat stable from one telling to the next. For example, people who primarily told memories about positive outcomes at Time 1 continued to do so at Time 2, albeit by offering an almost entirely different set of events at each time. However, the significant cross-time stabilities were very modest in magnitude, averaging \( r = .30 \), suggesting that aggregated themes will also shift so that each audience gets a quite different display of overall trends in motives and outcomes. Although systematic, large sample, long-term longitudinal studies of personal memory are still rare, Josselson's (1997) findings suggest the possibility of less turnover in mid-life, or more consolidation of a core set of stories.

The present focus is on the most densely formative period of personal memory telling, adolescence and early adulthood. Although the role of personal memories in personality development is a nascent field of inquiry (Pillemer, 1998), the peak period of personal memory making and telling seems a good place to embark. In the next section, I advocate a proximal, situated focus on what develops during memory telling.

**Personal Memory Telling and Proximal Personality Development**

*Proximal development* refers to teachable moments in which some kind of learning takes place through social activity (e.g., Rogoff & Mistry, 1990). "Self" and "personality," in the sociocultural approach to human development, are derivative of social transactions during joint activities. When the social transactions involve personal memory-telling, what develops is a joint
product of personal, interpersonal, and cultural values, which jointly contour what is reportable and toward what ends.

In terms of familiar frameworks in personality psychology, perhaps the closest companion to the concept of proximal development is that of reciprocal interactionism, the view that persons, situations, and behaviors fluidly and reciprocally influence each other (Endler, 1981). However, models of reciprocal interactionism have tended to neglect the larger cultural systems that constrain what happens during immediate interactions. Proximal studies of self-telling have shown that parents teach their children early on which events are reportable and how to report them, and that these lessons are contoured by culture and gender. Cultures differ in the degree to which children are encouraged to tell adults about their own experiences. For example, whereas U.S. mothers often encourage their children to report personal experiences, Japanese and Mayan children are not encouraged to do so (Minami & McCabe, 1991; Rogoff & Mistry, 1990). In addition, Anglo middle-class U.S. mothers tend to emphasize independence and the development of the child's full potential in the stories they tell to their children; Chinese mothers, on the other hand, tend to tell stories for the purpose of imparting a moral lesson (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997).

With regard to gender, a number of studies, primarily with Anglo middle-class U.S. samples, have found that talk about emotional events is a sex-typed activity. Gender differences in emotion talk are promoted early on by parents, who have been found to elicit more elaborated emotional memories from preschool-age daughters than sons. Mothers have been found to talk more about emotions and about more emotions to daughters than sons, differences that were later reflected in the daughters' and sons' own emotion talk by the end of their preschool years (Fivush & Kuebli, 1997). Perhaps partly reflecting these early childhood practices, adult women tend to report more memories from early childhood, earlier memories, and more detailed and vivid memories than their male counterparts (Cowan & Davidson, 1984; Friedman & Pines, 1991; Mullen, 1994), and reportedly share their emotional past experiences with a wider array of significant others than do men (Rimé et al., 1991).

Finally, functions of memory telling tend to vary with age. Older adults more often share memories for the purpose of teaching by example, whereas adolescents more often tell memories for the purpose of identity-making (Webster, 1995). These findings suggest that conversations between parents and teenagers about past events may sometimes be at cross-purposes because the parent wants to constrain the teens' experience by channeling the teen toward or away from the parents' own past experiences, while the teen seeks to find him or herself through telling his or her own experiences.

I have touched on a number of ways in which the larger forces of culture, gender, and age help to contour preferences and functions of personal memory telling. I now consider how to parse memory telling into components in order to facilitate proximal studies of what develops during memory telling. Recent work by Davies and Harré (1990) and Bamberg (1997) provides a useful framework for addressing where to look to capture developments through story-telling. This framework demarcates three sites of development: within the story itself, within the self, and between the teller and the listener. In discussing each of these sites of development, I will also identify new arenas for research on personal memory telling and personality development.

**Personal Development Within the Story Itself**

One site of development concerns that of the characters within the story and the nature of their relationship. As the story unfolds, a certain posture develops between self and other(s) in the story. The main character positions him or herself vis-a-vis the other and portrays a certain intention (Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990). From observing developments between the story characters, we may get an impression of the kind of person that the teller is. Stories themselves are fertile ground for personality development not just because we use them internally
to guide our future, as Adler emphasized, but because we proffer these stories to others as vivid examples of what we have been through. We try them on for size and gauge others' reactions to them. The dog story that introduced this article is a perfect example. The teller's story conveyed the impression that he was a "nasty little boy," an impression that he apparently did not intend. He intended the story to demonstrate his loyalty, but the story missed the mark.

Intentions or motives in stories can obviously be identified from several perspectives. My own research has usually focused on outside coders' viewpoints of the protagonist's intentions, as have most studies of motives in Thematic Apperception Test (TAT, Murray, 1943) stories. Although restricting attributions of intent to the viewpoint of outside coders has its drawbacks, interest in consensual views is unlikely to wane in empirical research. Still, we could make more demands on coders than we often do. Instead of restricting coders to inferring motives in memories, we could also ask them to infer character or traits from the stories that people choose to tell.

To date, systematic research on the personal impressions that particular stories make on others has been surprisingly rare. One of our studies is relevant because the personal memory interviewer provided a Q-sort (Block, 1978) description of the informant after the interview (Thorne & Klohnen, 1993). Linkages between the interviewer's Q-sort description and particular kinds of story lines were notably sparse. However, a few observed attributes, independence in young women and depression in young men, were significantly related to story lines. Specifically, young women who impressed the interviewer as independent produced repeated story lines about adults failing to come to her rescue. This theme was vividly illustrated by a 23-year-old informant. Six of her 14 stories showed the same basic story line. The earliest story involved her father refusing to retrieve her teddy bear after it had fallen out of her crib; "I was really mad at him, that he wouldn't come." Her most recent story described an episode with her high school principal, in which she unsuccessfully tried to get him to suspend some athletes who had assaulted her. The theme of negligent authorities is apparent, but why the link with independence? A proximate possibility is that the interviewer was impressed by the informant's repeated insistence, story after story, that she could not depend on elders for help and had to rely on her own devices. Male depression was the other observed attribute that was found to be correlated with a repeated story line. Males who appeared depressed to interviewers told repeated stories about failed romantic relationships. The message of these stories seemed to come through loud and clear to the interviewer: "I am depressed by my repeated failures at romance."

I speculate that story lines that most impress observers as characterological are those that portray a relatively high density of counter normative themes, in this case, a young woman's repeated claims that elders do not help her, and a young man's repeated stories about failures at love. These themes seem to run contrary to sex-role stereotypes, in which females, supposedly the weaker gender, should be helped, and in which males, supposedly sturdy oaks, should not whine and seek sympathy. It is important to note that this interpretation directs attention to the role of cultural norms in attributing meanings to stories.

The aforementioned study (Thorne & Klohnen, 1993) is not ideal because it aggregated across memories to identify shared story lines. Although such aggregation is possible, it blurs the exquisite detail of personal memories and the ways that tellers spontaneously form connections between episodes. Although focusing on specific personal stories would seem to restrict research to single occurrences, it is important to recognize that personal memories are not usually one-time events because most personal memories get told multiple times (Rimé et al., 1991). Furthermore, because vivid memories tend to be relived in the telling (Brewer, 1988), one-time events can be experienced again and again with successive tellings.
Development Within Selves--Differentiating "Then" and "Now"

Whereas developments within the story are circumscribed by what happened "back then," tellers often add codas to their stories or in other ways comment on the current meaning of the event. When tellers comment on the meaning of the story, we can often get a feeling for developments within the self. Take, for example, the following narrative from one of our college-age informants. This reportedly self-defining event occurred at age 13:

I was sitting on the living room couch watching TV with my mother. The movie was one of those really boring ones, so we had an excuse to chat. All of a sudden, I felt as though the woman next to me was just another woman, not my mother. It felt scary to hear her voice because I did not see at the time who this woman really was. We talked about love and life, and how people come and go in our lives. I remember feeling for the first time a different type of connection between my mother and me from that conversation on. She was reminiscing to when she was my age, and I could relate so much to what she was saying. It was the first time that I saw my mother as more than just my parent, and my relationship with my mother has really changed. I feel that I have grown up.

This young woman's story displays growth in her relationship with her mother, a broadening of bonds from the daughter position to the peer position. If studied in the traditional way by coding motives, the meaning might be need for intimacy or communion. Viewed in terms of self development, the story is one of a developmental transition in the teller's relationship with her mother. The transition to a more differentiated view of self and other is one of the hallmarks of maturing stories (McAdams, 1993). Other features of mature stories may also begin to emerge in adolescence, including coherence, openness, credibility, conflict resolution, and integration (McAdams, 1993).

Commentaries on how one has changed for the better are not uncommon in adolescent self-telling. The self-defining memories that we have been collecting are sometimes tagged with spontaneous reflections about how one changed for the better as a result of an experience, e.g., "I became a whole different person after acting in that play," "I found a new self-confidence in high school sports," "When the light shone through the window at my Bar Mitzvah, I felt that I finally became a man."

McCabe, Capron, and Peterson (1991) also observed that adolescent memory narratives sometimes include commentary about how one's perspective on the event has changed. For example, one informant described having fallen in a pond in childhood, and having believed for some time that his brother had tried to drown him, an interpretation that he now no longer believes. Other commentaries implicitly referred to personality changes, such as "I was insecure, back then." McCabe et al. (1991) found that nearly half of their informants spontaneously turned their memorable adolescent experiences into lessons learned, e.g., about whom to trust, the value of hard work, accepting death, and being more kind to girlfriends.

Noting that Erikson (1968) viewed the transition to adulthood as a time of self-exploration and personality growth, Pals, Hendin, & Beer (1998) examined written self-defining memories for statements of transformation or personal growth. One-fourth of the college sample's memories were identified by coders as transforming on the basis of explicit statements that the event had changed some aspect of oneself. Compared to non-transformative events, tranformative events were more negative at the time they occurred, suggesting a profiting from adversity (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). Furthermore, follow-ups one year later found that students who reported transformative memories viewed themselves as having increased during the subsequent year in openness to experience, independence, and self-esteem. Pals et al. (1998) concluded that negative life events can promote emotional and self-definitional development across time, a conclusion supported by stress and coping research (e.g., Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996).
If researchers are not clear about the time frame that they wish respondents to tell, or about distinguishing between informants' past and current meanings, memory findings can be a muddle. We have been especially impressed with two kinds of muddles. One concerns affect. The distinction between what happened then and what it means now is particularly important in coding affect because negative events can take on positive meanings. In one of our pilot studies (Nishino & Reichle, 1996) with college age samples, we asked for two vivid memories, one positive and one negative. Although most of the negative events looked negative to us because they were often traumatic, many of the positive events also looked negative, so much so that we suspected that our participants were not reading the instructions. In examining the content of many of these suspiciously positive memories, we found that their contents concerned lessons learned as a result of long-term reminiscing and coping with an initially traumatic event.

A second related peril with regard to studying memories is that if instructions are not clear about what time slice one is seeking for an account of a past event -- then, now, or then and now--respondents will be left to their own devices in deciding how much of the event to report. Although researchers often tend to view differences in the degree of resolution or coherence of a story as reflecting pre-existing personality differences, such findings are also contoured by different assumptions on the part of subjects about what is wanted, either a concrete past event circumscribed by time and place, or an update on its current meanings. People seem to differ in the degree to which they tend to make larger meanings of events, but to date, researchers have not examined what happens when informants are uniformly pressed to go beyond the circumscribed content of past events to infer larger meanings.

Developments Between Teller and Listener

The third and final site of self-development in story-telling lies at the heart of proximal development because it concerns what people learn about themselves in the process of telling emotional past events to others. These lessons sometimes endure beyond the event telling to become memorable moments in themselves. Self-learning through self-telling can be captured using retrospective as well as in-situ methods. Some results of retrospective research are first described, and then I consider the difficult and enriched terrain of ongoing studies of self-telling.

We have recently been focusing on vivid and important personal event memories that are at least one-year-old, which Singer and Salovey (1993) termed self-defining memories (Thorne & McLean, 2000). Working from the assumption that adolescents and young adults frequently share personal memories with others, we ask informants not only to describe three self-defining memories, but also, for each memory, to describe a vivid memory of telling that memory to someone else. We have found that most of the self-defining memories have reportedly been told to others, and that about half of the self-defining memories are accompanied by a vivid account of telling the memory to someone else. As expected, accounts of memorable tellings reveal that the original event can take on new meanings because of the reactions of the telling audience.

A dramatic example comes from 18-year old "Mac." One of Mac's self-defining memories described an event in which he experienced a 5-day ordeal from ingesting amphetamines. He recounted in vivid detail being awake for five days, being manic, tense, and completely miserable. "The comedown was horrible, I was nauseated but I couldn't vomit. I was weak and tired but equally restless." When asked for an account of a memorable telling, Mac responded:

About two days later, I told my friend and former speed buddy how I felt. He told me, "Oh, you'll get used to that," and that was when I totally realized that I didn't want to be a drug user. I didn't want to "get used to" such a miserable existence. I got kind of weirded out because I couldn't understand how you could let yourself become used to pain like that. That was when I finally decided to stop using drugs.
Telling his drug buddy about his ordeal completed a trend that had began with the ordeal itself. The buddy's reaction, "You'll get used to it," confirmed to Mac that he wanted to quit drugs altogether.

Telling emotional events can be risky because tellers may not be able to anticipate what kind of reaction they will get. Because self-telling in late adolescence is presumably in high gear, with important events being told numerous times, tellers can accumulate a range of audience reactions to the same event. An exquisite example comes from a 19-year-old female who told about the consequences of serially telling various friends about being raped at age 15. The guys (non boyfriends) whom she told would get frustrated because they didn't know how to console her. The successive boyfriends she told blamed her reluctance to have sex with them upon the man who had earlier raped her. Subsequently, she told some close girlfriends about the rape and they cried with her and helped her to realize that what happened wasn't her fault.

In testing out audience reactions to emotional event telling, adolescents may increasingly develop layers of experiences that are differentially revealed to particular people. The work of G. H. Mead (1934) helps to describe the psychological process by which different selves develop, become accepted or revised, and synthesized. Mead viewed the social self as developing through playing at social roles and increasingly taking the perspective of other "players" on one's own performances. By adulthood, as roles become more complex and significant others more extensive, Mead believed that these various "me's" became consolidated into an encompassing social self evaluated from the perspective of the generalized other, who challenges the appropriateness and genuineness of the me’s. Self-defining memories are very useful instantiations of particular me's, and that the perceived meanings of other's reactions to particular tellings are useful instantiations of the generalized other. Whether one generalized other develops, or whether adults retain multiple generalized others in evaluating the personal and social meanings of their stories is a question that awaits future research.

Instances in which one chooses not to elaborate a self-defining memory can also reveal formative moments for developing Generalized Others. Another participant in our retrospective study (Thorne & McLean, 2000) of self-defining memory tellings told the story of his Bar Mitzvah. At one moment during the ceremony, he said that a light shone through the windows and it was at that moment that he felt he became a man. The memorable telling of this moment occurred right after the ceremony, when his buddies commented that he "looked funny" at one point during the ceremony. Sensing that he would be teased for disclosing a spiritual moment, he clammed up because he suddenly understood that spiritual experiences were not to be told to the guys. Another male learned that his father did not want him to crow about a compliment he had received. His father seemed uninterested so he did not pursue the story and reportedly had not told anyone until we asked him for a self-defining memory. Surveys of emotional event sharing have found that shame memories are least likely to be told to others (Rimé et al., 1991). The above non-told stories suggest that "shame" may be defined more by other's curtailments of attempted tellings than by the content of the original event. For example, a spiritually uplifting experience is not shameful in itself, but the guys defined it as shameful by their reactions. Similarly, a personal triumph is not shameful in itself, but may be regarded as such by parents who value modesty in their children. Shame memories thus may be useful in revealing the kinds of emotions that valued communities do not deem reportable.

From the accounts of telling that we have collected thus far, it appears that memorable moments of telling span the gamut from positive to negative audience reactions, but are more likely to be positive than negative. Although it is tempting to attribute the greater likelihood of positive telling outcomes to a self-enhancing bias, the original self-defining events in our ongoing study showed a bias in the opposite direction. Research has found that telling about traumas can be particularly salutary (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).
Avenues for Future Research

Although personality development through self-telling appears to be in high gear during adolescence and early adulthood, ongoing studies of past event telling are currently more prominent with parent-child dyads than older samples. Because personality and social psychologists more often study adolescents and young adults than do developmental psychologists, and because self-telling reflects both individual and social forces, personality and social psychologists are nicely positioned to fill this gap. In this concluding section, I will suggest some promising avenues for future research.

Individual Differences in Readiness for Story-Telling

Each time one tells a personal story about one's past, one transfers one's past onto people in the present, creating one's past anew in the present (Thorne, 1989). These self-constructions may or may not be deliberate, but they can take on a life of their own (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1993). People vary in the degree to which they tend to share their past with others. Some of this difference seems captured by individual differences in need for intimacy, a concept that is measured by the content of TAT stories and centers on preferences for mutual self-disclosure (McAdams, 1980). In casting about for a term that conveys the readiness to tell self stories to others, my students and I have come to call this tendency "proffering personal information about the past, or "PPIPing".

In talking with students about whether they like to PPIP, it is clear that some do and some do not, and that most have a decided opinion about whether such tellings are appropriate, seemly, and wise. Reluctance to PPIP can stem from fear of creating a certain reputation, and clearly, reputations can be made in such tellings (Craik, 1985; Gergen, 1994). The stories that we choose to tell about ourselves can create lasting impressions that can take on a life of their own. The more broadly we share our stories, the more control we exert over our reputations but also the more fodder we provide for alternative interpretations. Sharing the self can be perilous because one can never be certain how the story will be interpreted by others. Presumably, the more experience one has in self-telling, the more confident one will feel about others' reactions.

Whether confidence and breadth of self-telling can be captured by customary measures of individual differences is unknown. For example, need for intimacy refers to preference to disclose to close friends, but how broadly does this extend to other friends and family members? Extraversion refers to preference to associate with a broad array of others, but not necessarily to telling personal stories to a wide array of others. Secure attachment, as identified by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main & Goldwyn, 1996), which centers on the coherence of discourse about early relationships with caregivers, may identify comfort and skill in telling emotional events to a wide array of people because the interview is administered by strangers. However, secure attachment in the AAI interview is based on an overall discourse style and does not center on personal memories per se.

Readiness for storytelling may be shown in measures of latency, frequency, and breadth of story telling. Sharing personal memories soon after the emotional event, and on many successive occasions, and to different people, affords more opportunities for feedback vis-a-vis the emotional experiences of others. People who choose to keep events to themselves may be less likely to grow from the experience because they do not get the kinds of reciprocal feedback that bring alternative interpretations to the experience.

Gendered Ecologies of Self-Telling

Parent-child discourse is the most frequent site of self-telling in childhood, increasingly moving to same-sex peers from mid-childhood to adolescence, and to spouses in adulthood.
(Burhmester & Prager, 1995). However, disclosure audiences tend to narrow earlier for males in adolescence, and continue to be more narrow in adulthood. Males begin restricting disclosure to same-sex friends earlier in adolescence than do females, and although parents continue to be targeted for disclosure, this is more true of female than male adolescents (Burhmester & Prager, 1995). In adulthood, spouses are the primary audience for men's self-telling, whereas for women, self-telling continues to include friends and other family members (Rimé et al., 1991). The narrower ecology of self-telling for males would seem to have important consequences for emotional development.

The Developmental Significance of Parents' Stories

Parents' story-telling is often done for the purposes of teaching the younger generation (Webster, 1995). This phenomenon can be likened to that of genetics: Whereas genes constrain biological development, parents' stories can constrain children's social and emotional development. Parents can accentuate trends in their children's personality by emphasizing particular stories. For example, one of our informants said that her mother often tells her about a trip to the mall when the daughter was 3 years old:

There was a piano store and a man was playing an organ out front. As soon as I heard the music, I ran to it and started dancing. Soon there was a large crowd around me, but I didn't mind, I just kept going.

This story about herself was appropriated from an elder who told her about it. Memories of what one did in early life typically are appropriated from elders because the capacity to verbalize personal event memories does not usually emerge until language skills are established (Nelson, 1993). This finding suggests that adults who report many early memories may have experienced more extensive past event discussions with their parents during childhood.

Parents also use stories of their own personal past to try to teach by example. The process by which parents decide what to tell their children about their own personal past, and what not to tell, is fascinating and almost entirely unexplored. Presumably, when a child has an experience that the parent has also experienced in the past, the parent is tempted to comfort, warn, or inform the child by relaying his/her own experience, or at least the part that is deemed appropriate for telling. Whether the PPIPing has the intended effect is another question. In our interviews with teenagers about their parents' PPIPing, we have found a wide array of opinions about whether it is useful. Parent PPIPing can sometimes be oppressive, and can sometimes be salutary, as when a mother in an aforementioned episode relayed stories of her own teenage years to her teenage daughter.

Because temperament tends to differ among siblings, siblings are likely to find different kinds of events surprising and therefore to engage different domains of their parents' own childhood experiences. This phenomenon, too, remains to be explored. In addition, there are few studies of how teens and parents co-coordinate their own past experiences through discourse, although there is plentiful advice about how parents should try to talk with their kids about their own experiences, especially with regard to illicit drugs. Because sons, relative to daughters, begin to exclude parents as a disclosure audience relatively early in adolescence, parental stories may be less meaningful for teenage sons than daughters, a difference that may continue into adulthood.

Reconciling Personal Memories and Personality Traits

Despite important epistemological differences raised earlier, traits and personal memories are both important aspects of self presentation (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991). Recent work by Woike (1995) suggests that the settings and routines that are conveyed in personal memories provide a useful bridge to traits, whereas the emotional themes of memories provide a useful
bridge to motives. It is also possible that momentous events can trigger changes in formerly stable personality traits. Imagine a typically reserved person experiencing an atypical event in which she suddenly feels the excitement that comes from entertaining others. This event is a self-defining memory because it defies her routines; it needs the routines in order to seem out of the ordinary. Personal memories may derive their personal and interpersonal distinctiveness, in part, from the backdrop of personality traits.

There is another sense in which traits and personal stories interweave in that they are both important aspects of self-presentation and therefore subject to feedback from others. Whenever we claim that we have certain tendencies, such as extraversion or introversion, we may encounter acceptance or resistance just as when we tell particular stories. We cannot be anything in the eyes of others without their implicit or explicit consent, and our communities support and constrain self-development in important but presently mysterious ways. Trait-like presentations may be as prone to community collusion, approval, and censure as are richly elaborated personal stories.

Because the relation of traits and life stories is not well-charted, researchers will profit from including participants' accounts of why they chose to tell particular stories about themselves and what they learn from telling them (e.g., Thorne, 1987). In addition, researchers need to be alert to natural settings in which emotional event telling is in high gear. Developmental psychologists have been especially innovative in capturing memory telling on the hoof. Events that press for immediate sharing with friends and family are those that disrupt our routines, such as Bar Mitzvahs, menstruation, and other rites of passage, first dates, romantic breakups, and physical injuries.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Although personal memories have been appreciated by psychologists for nearly a century, their significance for personality development has tended to be relegated to internalized representations of early childhood memories. However, recent studies of autobiographical memories reveal that ages 10 to 30 are the most memorable period of the life span, and that events that are most likely to be remembered are highly emotional and disruptive of everyday routines and likely to be told to others soon after the event occurs. Studies of how tellers proffer and make sense of momentous events, and how families and friends collude in sense-making can importantly extend our understanding of a phenomenon that was formerly relegated to psychoanalysts. Personality and social psychologists can make important contributions to the burgeoning interest in self-telling because self-telling seems to be particularly dense during the age periods that we are most inclined to study, adolescence and early adulthood. Furthermore, the gap that has customarily divided studies of persons (personality) and situations (social psychology) is necessarily bridged in studies of self-telling. Although we have tended to neglect the ways in which personality is constructed and maintained through self-telling, developmental psychologists have prepared fertile ground for personality research.
References


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