Gendered themes in family reminiscing

Janine P. Buckner and Robyn Fivush
Emory University, Atlanta, USA

Previous research conducted in laboratory settings has shown reliable gender differences in autobiographical memory. However, these studies have primarily focused on structural or emotional aspects of memory narratives told to an unfamiliar experimenter. The present study extends this literature by investigating gender differences in social references and interpersonal themes in parent–child narratives about the past. Participants were 17 white, middle-class children and their mothers and fathers, who were interviewed when children were 40 and 70 months of age. Parent–child narratives about shared activities in the past, as well as narratives about parents’ own childhood, were examined. Results indicated that when discussing shared events, both parents talked in similar ways across children, although fathers referred to self more than mothers. However both parents referred to their girls more than their boys. Regarding event themes, parents discussed more social events with girls than with boys. Children themselves showed different gendered patterns; girls mentioned self and others, and relationships more than boys did, and children mentioned self and others more often when talking with fathers than with mothers. With respect to narratives about parents’ childhood experiences, however, no gender differences were observed, save that parents referred to others more often in retrospective narratives told to girls than to boys. These findings suggest that gendered behaviours are best understood within the specific contexts and purposes of relational interactions.

Recent investigations within the field of autobiographical memory have begun to examine how individual differences in identity may be reflected in the development and maintenance of our autobiographical histories. In particular, a small body of research has begun to examine the role of gender in the ways people remember and report their personal experiences. Scattered across the field, these studies have shown that adult females tend to report longer, more detailed, and more vivid accounts of the past than do adult males (e.g., deVries, Blando, & Walker, 1995; Ross & Holmberg, 1990; Thorne, 1995; Yarmey, 1993). Women have also been shown to report events from younger ages than men do when asked to recall their earliest memories (Cowan & Davidson, 1984; Dudycha & Dudycha, 1933; Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982; Mullen, 1994; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986; Waldfogel, 1948).

Intriguingly, a few developmental studies also report similar patterns in children’s recall (e.g., Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995; Reese & Fivush, 1993; Stapley & Haviland, 1989). For instance, Buckner and Fivush (1998) found that girls as young as 8 years of age are more vivid, more coherent, and more elaborated in their narratives than their male peers. Moreover, girls’ narratives have also been rated as more emotionally complex than those of boys (Stapley & Haviland, 1989). Thus, from quite a young age, gender differences in females’ and males’ autobiographical memories appear to be a robust phenomenon.

Beyond these differences, another handful of studies suggests that women and men may be

Requests for reprints should be sent to Janine P. Buckner, Department of Psychology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA. E-mail: jbuckn2@emory.edu

The authors wish to thank Debbie Sarfati, Anjali Vasudeva, and Alison Bloom for their assistance in coding and counting the data reported in this study.

© 2000 Psychology Press Ltd
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pp/09658211.html
motivated to reminisce for different reasons. For example, several studies have shown that women often report talking about the past for social reasons (e.g., to be intimate with another, or to remember a loved one), whereas men report remembering in order to savour an accomplishment, to feel good about themselves, or to evaluate their progress in life (e.g., Adcock & Ross, 1983; Merriam & Cross, 1982). Furthermore, thematic analyses of the types of events men and women discuss also reveal gender differences in the kinds of experiences they talk about (Adcock & Ross, 1983; DeVries et al., 1995; Merriam & Cross, 1982; Schwartz, 1984; see also Cowan & Davidson, 1984). For instance, in Thorne’s (1995) investigation of adults’ narrative memories of childhood, females frequently mentioned other people and relationships, and often focused on needs for help or longing for loved ones, whereas males more often talked about moments of independence, and highlighted such themes as perseverance, triumph, and achievements. Such thematic differences also appear quite early in the childhood years. For example, Stappley and Haviland (1989) found that young girls describe their emotional experiences, particularly negative emotional experiences, as occurring in social contexts, whereas young boys mostly talk about these emotions as occurring when they are alone. And as Buckner and Fivush (1998) report, girls as young as 8 years old are more likely to refer to affiliative themes, and mention other people and relationships, than are boys. Thus, studies with both adults and children suggest quite clearly that males and females report rather different kinds of autobiographical memories.

According to developmental and feminist theories of identity formation, these kinds of gender differences in autobiographical narratives may emanate from different expectations and interpersonal orientations which females and males use to perceive the world. As Gilligan (1992) and others (e.g., Chodorow, 1978) argue, whereas the female identity is centred on belongingness and a moral responsibility to make and maintain relationships, the male identity is built on personal experiences that exemplify the unique qualities and aspects that distinguish him as separate from others. Thus, females strive to incorporate into their identity a meaningful community of significant others, whereas males highlight characteristics and activities that set them apart as individuated from others (Cross & Madson, 1997). If these differences lead men and women to different orientations to self and others, then these themes should also be reflected in individuals’ narratives about personal experiences in the past.

However, it is worth noting that studies finding gender differences in autobiographical memory typically elicit participants’ narratives by asking them to tell their memories to a passive and unfamiliar experimenter-listener in a laboratory setting. To date, very little research has examined the role of gender in autobiographical memories as they are constructed in naturalistic contexts, that is, when narratives about the past are told in the course of meaningful ongoing relationships. Research in adult processing has, in fact, shown that differences between males and females are greater in unfamiliar contexts, such as in a laboratory interaction with an unfamiliar experimenter. These differences are attenuated, however, when the same processes are examined in more natural settings, where emotions spontaneously occur and are processed as part of a relational interaction (Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Snell et al., 1989).

To understand this changing pattern in gender differences, theories of gender and identity formation (e.g., Chodorow, 1970; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) suggest that predictions simply based on participant gender may not be appropriate. Instead, gendered behaviours may be best understood as an emerging aspect of the dynamic interactions that occur between individuals situated within a specific context (Fivush, 1998; Tannen, 1994). As such, any consideration of particular gender patterns must consider the beliefs and goals that individuals bring to social interchanges (Deaux & Major, 1987).

If gender is indeed an expression of the ways in which we relate to others and interpret our experiences with them, then it would make sense that researchers should examine gender patterns in autobiographical narratives as they spontaneously emerge within specific interpersonal interactions. How do the interpersonal contexts in which we remember our past experiences influence the kinds of content and themes we see in autobiographical memory narratives? A small body of developmental research has begun to address this issue in parent–child conversations about the past. This work has shown that reminiscing is an important part of family interactions (e.g., Fiese et al., 1995). Within these conversations, parents not only help children to recount and articulate specific details of a shared event, but more importantly, these
practices serve to socialise children in the ways of remembering and evaluating personal events in the past (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996; Nelson, 1993). Together, parents and children co-construct a memory about a shared experience in an atmosphere of collaborative recollection.

Research on this kind of family remembering has demonstrated gender differences in the ways parents and children discuss past events. In particular, results of our ongoing longitudinal research (e.g., Adams, Keubli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1996; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996; see Fivush, 1997 for an overview) suggest that parents are more elaborative and emotional in talk with their daughters than with their sons. For example, Adams et al. (1995) report that parents not only mentioned more emotions with their daughters, but also used a larger variety of emotion terms in conversations with girls than with boys. Quite intriguingly, young children themselves show gender differences in their own memory narratives, even as early as the preschool years. For instance, Haden et al. (1996) found that girls reported longer, more contexted and evaluative narratives than boys in conversations with their parents about particular events in the past. Similarly, Reese et al. (1996) report that preschool girls provided more memory information than their male peers did when reminiscing with parents.

While these studies have examined the amount of details, or emotional or evaluative talk about the past, only limited work has investigated the influence of gender on the social and thematic contents of children’s memory narratives. For example, Han, Leichtman, and Wang (1998) found that when talking about past experiences with an experimenter, young boys made more references to self (relative to references to other people) than girls. and Fivush (1993) found that mothers narratives focused on more socially oriented themes with their daughters than with their sons. To date, however, no work has examined the specific ways in which both parent and child gender influence the social orientation of mothers’ and fathers’ reminiscing with their daughters or sons. Therefore, the major objective of this study was to extend this literature by examining the types of events families remember together. More specifically, we predicted that gender differences in male and female social orientations to the world (and to self) would also be reflected in the degree to which mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons discuss social and relational aspects of their experiences. As previous work on parent–child reminiscing suggests that one role of family remembering is to serve as a platform through which children learn to reflect on the meaning of their own experiences and identity, the present study examined the types of explicit references parents and children made to themselves, and others, in the course of describing children’s past experiences. We also investigated whether parents and children talked about experiences as occurring within a larger social context, or if they focused only on the child’s experiences and reactions to events.

In addition to parent–child conversations about shared events in which the child’s activities and identity are highlighted, we also examined parent’s retrospective narratives about their own childhood experiences. In this task, parents were asked to discuss events from their own childhood, which their children may or may not have heard about before. In this context, parents are highlighting their own identity rather than that of their child. Moreover, in this type of task, children have no first hand knowledge of these experiences, and thus, cannot fully participate in constructing the unfolding memory narrative. Including this set of narratives in the present analysis therefore allows us to examine how males and females share memories in a less collaborative, but still familiar context, relative to narratives about shared experiences. Thus we thought it would be interesting to compare the ways in which gender is constructed in these different reminiscing contexts.

Based on previous research conducted in laboratory contexts, we expected that females in both reminiscing contexts would report more “peopled” narratives, referring to other people more than males, and focusing on social events, rather than detailing the experiences and activities of the self alone. Furthermore, based on previous developmental findings on parent–child reminiscing, we predicted that parents would differ in style as a function of child gender, with parents talking in more social-relational ways with daughters than with sons, and also that girls themselves would differ from boys in the same direction.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants in this study were 17 children (8 girls, 9 boys) and their mothers and fathers from white middle-class backgrounds, who were contacted
through county birth records in the metropolitan Atlanta, GA area. As part of a larger longitudinal study of autobiographical memory and narrative development, families participated in a variety of tasks, including memory interviews, story reading, and self-concept tasks at five different time points across children’s preschool years.¹ The present investigation focused on mother–child and father–child memory narratives collected when children were 40 and 70 months of age, respectively. Although 24 families participated in the larger study, only 17 families completed the relevant interview sessions at both 40- and 70-month time points.

**Procedure**

Families were visited in their homes by one of three female experimenters. Families were informed that the purpose of the study was to investigate how much and what kinds of information children can recall about personal experiences in the past. Data relevant to the present study were collected in separate mother–child and father–child interviews at each time point. The order of parent interviews was counterbalanced, with each parent–child conversation separated by at least 48 hours.

*Event description and interviews.* At each time point, out of the child’s hearing, mothers and fathers were asked to select three special, one-time, shared events to discuss with their child. Although families experienced a wide variety of events, the events selected across families were quite similar. Typical events included family trips to a special place such as an aquarium or a park, or first-time experiences on aeroplanes, being in a wedding, and the like.² After choosing events, parent and child then sat alone together in a quiet place in the home, and talked about their shared experiences in as natural and spontaneous a way as possible. No time constraints were placed on the conversations.

**Retrospective narratives.** In addition to reminiscing about shared events, at the 70-month time point mothers and fathers were asked to tell their child about a single, unique experience from their own childhood memories. No restrictions on type of experience were given for this task, nor were parents told to choose an event from a particular time frame in the past. These “parent retrospectives” were discussed immediately following the three events shared by parents and children.

**Coding**

*Narrative coding.* All conversations were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Narratives were coded using a scheme adapted from Buckner and Fivush (1998). Within each narrative, propositions were defined as phrases that included a subject and predicate. Then each proposition was examined to determine whether it included the following information:

1. **References to child:** Any instance where the child’s name is included in parent’s talk about the past, or when the child is referred to as “you”. References to the child indicate the degree to which parents are highlighting the role of the child in his or her own experiences. Similarly, the child’s references to self as “I” or “me” or his or her first name were coded as belonging to this category. Children’s references to self indicate the degree to which children highlight their own identity in the course of understanding their experiences.

2. **References to parent:** Instances where the parent includes him or her self as part of the event being remembered; includes “I,” “me,” or calling self “Mom/Mommy” or “Dad/Daddy” (e.g., “Daddy was there, too. Wasn’t I?”). Parent references to self reflect the degree to which parents view themselves as being part of their child’s experience. Similarly, child references to the parent were also included in this category.

3. **References to others:** As another indicator of the social context of events, each reference made to another person, including proper names and relationship terms (mother, brother, friend, etc.) was tabulated. References to other people indicate the extent to which parents and children include other people in their thoughts and memories about personal experiences.

¹It should be noted that whereas various parts of this data set have been examined in previous investigations of such narrative features as structure and emotional content (see Adams et al., 1995; Haden et al., 1996; and Reese et al., 1996), the present analysis of parent–child narratives focuses specifically on social references and event themes, and thus represents a new approach to examining these data.

²For theoretical reasons specific to the original design, at various time points in the larger study one of the three events that mothers and fathers were asked to discuss with their child was the same. (For example, in one family both the mother and father talked with their child about a special Halloween party the child attended.)
4. **Affiliation:** More than a simple reference to a person, this more thematic category captures statements about the state of relationships, as cast in a positive or negative tone. Sentiments of good feeling towards another, or the marking of relational beginnings were considered statements of (positive) affiliation (“We loved playing together in the snow”). This category also includes any explicit mention of “togetherness”, or concepts of aiding and helping (“We sat together at the table”, “I’m part of the Angels team”, “She helped me to it”). Talk reflecting a disturbance in unity, a dislike of another, or acts that do not promote cohesion in relationships (such as ignoring someone) were coded as (negative) affiliation (“He just didn’t like me”, “We played a mean trick on her”). Such statements about affiliation, whether positive or negative, reflect the ways in which parents and children not only mention people, but also evaluate the kinds of social relationships that play a role in personal experiences. Although positive and negative affiliation were coded separately, there were so few instances of negative affiliation that these categories were collapsed for analyses.

For this coding scheme, two coders independently counted the number of instances of each type of content occurring in every parent–child narrative. Reliability for these categories was very high, between 92 and 100%.

**Narrative theme.** Each narrative was also examined for the general topic, or type of theme expressed. Narratives were classified as being centrally concerned about other people (or others’ reactions to a specific event), or about the child and his or her own experiences.

1. **A social narrative** was one that involved others in the central experience of the event. The highlight of this type of narrative is being with other people, doing various things together, or just enjoying the company of family or friends (e.g., a girl’s experience of going fishing with her Granddad, or a recounting of the day the family pet died and how everyone was really sad). Social narratives focus on sharing activities and feelings with significant others in children’s lives.

2. An **autonomous narrative**, on the other hand, relates only the child’s individual experiences (e.g., catching a fish in the local pond; cutting sister’s doll’s hair in the closet). While other people are often mentioned in this type of narrative, the emphasis is not on their experiences or activities. Rather, the main details concern what the child felt, thought, or did in the course of the event.

Two coders independently judged each narrative according to narrative theme category and achieved 98% reliability. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

**RESULTS**

The results are presented in two major sections. The first section focuses on parent–child conversations about children’s past experiences. Specifically, these analyses address whether gender differences arose in the types of content and themes that mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons talked about in conversation about children’s own experiences.

The second section focuses on parent retrospective narratives about their own childhood experiences. In this section, only mother and father talk is analysed, as children contributed a negligible amount to the narratives. Again, the central question addressed is how parent and/or child gender influenced the ways that parents reflected on their own experiences as children.

**Parent–child reminiscing**

Initial analyses focused on the number of parents’ and children's propositional phrases in each narrative. A 2 (parent gender) \( \times 2 \) (child gender) \( \times 2 \) (age) mixed model ANOVA conducted on number of propositions revealed no significant differences, indicating that mothers and fathers, as well as daughters and sons, did not differ in overall conversational length.

**Parent talk: Content.** The first series of analyses explored whether mothers and fathers talked in different ways with their children, and whether parents varied in the social content of their conversations according to the gender of their children. It should be noted that several children did not recall information for all three of the events parents selected to discuss. Therefore, all analyses here are based on the mean frequency of each element per event narrative. The mean frequency (and standard deviations) of each type of parental talk are presented in Table 1 by age and gender.
Four 2 (parent gender) × 2 (child gender) × 2 (age) mixed model ANOVAs were conducted separately on the mean number of child references, parent references, references to others, and affiliative talk made by parents in the course of reminiscing with their children. The only significant difference between mothers and fathers was a main effect of parent gender for self references, with fathers (M = 5.12, SD = 3.35) referring to self more than mothers (M = 3.30, SD = 2.88), F(1, 30) = 4.29, p < .05. Furthermore, although these narratives were overwhelmingly focused on the children, over time both parents nearly doubled the number of instances in which they mentioned themselves (M = 2.94, SD = 2.09 at 40 months, and M = 5.43, SD = 4.34 at 70 months), F(1, 30) = 11.97, p < .01. Results also indicated, however, that both mothers and fathers differed as a function of child gender. More specifically, parents referred to their daughters (M = 16.72, SD = 8.57) significantly more than they referred to their sons (M = 11.52, SD = 5.71), F(1, 30) = 4.29, p < .05. Thus mothers and fathers appear to be focusing more explicitly on their children’s identity and experiences in narratives with their daughters than with their sons.

Although no main effects or interactions were significant with respect to parents’ references to others, a significant three-way interaction (parent gender, child gender, and age) was observed for affiliative remarks, F(1, 30) = 5.10, p < .05. Follow-up analyses indicated a significant interaction between parent and child gender at 70 months, F(1, 30) = 5.00, p < .05, but post hoc tests revealed only a marginal tendency for mothers to make more affiliative remarks with daughters (M = 2.62, SD = 2.26) than with sons (M = 0.96, SD = 1.10), t(15) = 1.96, p = .07. Fathers did not differ between girls (M = 1.21, SD = 0.83) and boys (M = 1.76, SD = 1.21) at 70 months of age, t(15) = 1.08, p = .30.

**Child talk: Content.** The next series of analyses on this data set focused on girls’ and boys’ talk in conversation with their parents. As children referred to their parents only a few times within their narratives, references to parents and others were collapsed to form a more general category of references to other people. Table 2 presents the mean number of each type of children’s talk by age, child gender, and parent gender. Similar to analyses conducted on parent talk, three 2 (parent gender) × 2 (child gender) × 2 (age) mixed model ANOVAs were conducted separately on references to self, references to others, and affiliative talk inherent in children’s conversations with parents.

Results of these analyses indicated several main effects of child gender, parent gender, and age. More specifically, girls (M = 6.09, SD = 3.72) made almost twice as many references to themselves as did boys (M = 3.31, SD = 2.03), F(1, 15) = 30.63, p < .001. However, both girls and boys made more references to themselves in conversation with fathers (M = 5.69, SD = 3.05) than with mothers (M = 3.73, SD = 2.70), F(1, 15) = 5.08, p < .05. Not surprisingly, children were more self-referential when they were older (M = 5.90, SD = 3.23) than when they were younger (M = 3.51, SD = 2.52), F(1, 15) = 7.77, p < .01.

Regarding references to others, girls named and referred to other people (M = 13.28, SD = 9.56) more than did boys (M = 7.03, SD = 4.18), F(1, 15) = 10.66, p < .01. Further, both girls and boys made more references to other people with

---

**TABLE 1**

Mean number (and standard deviations) of parent utterances by age, and child and parent gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance type</th>
<th>40 months</th>
<th>70 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>w/girls w/boys Mean w/girls w/boys Mean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mothers fathers mothers fathers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent references</td>
<td>2.69 (1.76) 2.54 (1.45) 2.61 (1.60) 4.71 (3.00) 2.00 (1.03) 3.35 (2.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to others</td>
<td>28.31 (13.42) 24.65 (15.76) 26.48 (15.49) 53.92 (53.17) 21.83 (13.89) 37.87 (33.53)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>1.50 (1.51) 1.79 (2.06) 1.66 (1.77) 1.08 (1.22) .74 (.84) .91 (1.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.17 (3.97) 11.17 (6.70) 13.17 (5.33) 13.92 (6.59) 13.67 (8.70) 13.79 (7.64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.56 (4.47) 3.41 (2.57) 3.98 (3.52) 6.37 (4.83) 7.39 (4.53) 6.88 (4.68)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.62 (2.26) .96 (1.10) 1.79 (1.68) 1.21 (.83) 1.76 (1.21) 1.48 (1.02)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fathers ($M = 12.25$, $SD = 8.06$) than with mothers ($M = 8.07$, $SD = 5.67$), $F(1,15) = 5.00$, $p < .05$. Children also made more references to others as they grew older ($M = 7.93$, $SD = 6.93$ at 40 months; $M = 12.39$, $SD = 6.80$ at 70 months), $F(1,15) = 5.00$, $p < .05$. With respect to talk about relationships, it was discovered that girls ($M = .810$, $SD = .85$) made more affiliative remarks than did boys ($M = .40$, $SD = .76$), $F(1,15) = 4.05$, $p = .06$.

Summary. Overall, these analyses suggest that mothers and fathers are quite similar to each other in their social talk with their children about past experiences; fathers did not differ from mothers in the amount of references to their children or to other people. Interestingly, the only significant effect of parent gender was that fathers talked more about themselves than mothers. With respect to child gender, only one specific difference was noted; parents named or referred to their girls more than they referred to their boys. This would appear to suggest that parents may be emphasising and evaluating their daughters’ identity and experiences more than parents do with sons.

Not surprisingly, children themselves demonstrated an increase in narrative skill over time, providing more references to self and to others when they were older. In addition, results demonstrated that children were much more “gendered” in their own talk than were their parents. In talking about their experiences, girls provided more references to both self and others than did boys, and also made more affiliative remarks. And overall, both girls and boys provided more references to themselves and to other people with fathers than with mothers.

Event themes. In addition to examining social references made by parents and children, we also analysed the overall theme of parent–child narratives. Table 3 displays the percentage of parent–child narratives that focused on social or autonomous themes by age and gender.

To determine the effects of gender and age in the types of events parents and children discussed, a 2 (parent gender × 2 (child gender) × 2 (age) mixed model ANOVA was computed for the percentage of narratives that focused on social themes. Results revealed a main effect of child gender, $F(1,30) = 8.64$, $p < .01$, as well as an interaction between parent gender and age, $F(1,30) = 5.47$, $p < .05$. With respect to child gender, over half ($M = 56.85\%$, $SD = 31.75$) of parent–daughter conversations were about social events, as compared to only a third ($M = 32.85\%$, $SD = 29.75$) of parent–son narratives. These results indicate that over time, both mothers and fathers discussed more social kinds of events with girls than with boys. Moreover, while father–child conversations did not differ in social orientation over time ($M = 51.90\%$, $SD = 30.95$ at 40 months; $M = 40.3\%$, $SD = 31.8$ at 70 months), $t(16) = 1.14$, $p = .27$, mothers and children talked about more social events when children were older ($M = 53.8\%$, $SD = 26.65$, at 70 months) than when they were younger ($M = 33.35\%$, $SD = 33.6$, 40 months), $t(16) = -2.26$, $p < .05$.

### Parent retrospective narratives

The second section of analyses focused on mothers’ and fathers’ autobiographical narratives about their own childhood experiences (“retrospective narratives”). Recall that in this task parents were asked to narrate a single memory recalled from their own experiences as a child. Because the parents were telling children about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Mean number (and standard deviations) of child utterances by age, and child and parent gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utterance type</td>
<td>w/mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child references</td>
<td>3.87 (4.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to others</td>
<td>7.83 (6.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>.56 (.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child references</td>
<td>5.83 (3.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to others</td>
<td>13.79 (8.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>.96 (.93)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GENDERED THEMES
their own childhood experiences, only parental talk was analysed, and parental references to their children were excluded from coding and analyses.

Preliminary analyses were conducted on the number of propositional clauses uttered by parents. A 2 (parent gender) × 2 (child gender) ANOVA revealed no difference in the length of mothers’ and fathers’ narratives, or narratives told to girls and boys. Thus mothers and fathers recounted about the same amount, and did so across conversations with girls and boys.

**Parent talk: Content.** Table 4 presents the mean frequency of each type of content category in the mother and father retrospective narratives. From the table it appears that parents talked in similar ways across girls and boys. To determine the influence of gender on these retrospective narratives, three 2 (parent gender) × 2 (child gender) ANOVAs were conducted on the number of self references, references to others, and amount of affiliative talk inherent in mothers’ and fathers’ talk. Only a few marginal effects were discovered in these analyses. Parents (M = 19.06, SD = 2.50) tended to make more references to others with girls than with boys (M = 12.83, SD = 2.36), F(1, 30) = 3.29, p = .08. Moreover, parents appeared to make somewhat more affiliative remarks with daughters (M = 3.06, SD = 0.67) than with sons (M = 1.39, SD = 0.63), F(1, 30) = 3.32, p = .08. No other main effects or interactions were significant for this series of analyses.

**Event themes.** Next, the percentage of retrospective narratives about social and autonomous themes were calculated. As is evident in the lower portion of Table 3, a majority of mothers (M = 94.44%) and fathers (M = 77.08%) focused their narratives on social themes such as a time playing in the snow with siblings, or spending an afternoon with a favourite aunt learning about ancestors. Both mothers and fathers also appear to have been more socially oriented in their narratives told to girls (M = 93.75%) than to boys (M = 77.78%). Despite these seeming differences, however, a Chi-square test conducted on the distribution of thematic categories across parents and children was not significant at the p = .05 level.

### TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance type</th>
<th>Mothers w/girls</th>
<th>Mothers w/boys</th>
<th>Mothers Mean</th>
<th>Fathers w/girls</th>
<th>Fathers w/boys</th>
<th>Fathers Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent references</td>
<td>20.25 (11.67)</td>
<td>21.44 (13.14)</td>
<td>20.84 (12.40)</td>
<td>22.75 (7.94)</td>
<td>21.89 (7.99)</td>
<td>27.32 (17.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to others</td>
<td>21.50 (13.27)</td>
<td>13.78 (7.34)</td>
<td>17.64 (10.30)</td>
<td>16.62 (11.95)</td>
<td>11.89 (6.43)</td>
<td>14.25 (9.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>3.25 (3.65)</td>
<td>1.33 (1.41)</td>
<td>2.29 (2.53)</td>
<td>2.87 (3.44)</td>
<td>1.44 (1.67)</td>
<td>2.15 (2.55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

The major objective of this study was to examine how gender might affect the social and relational content of parent–child reminiscing. Previous research conducted in laboratory settings has documented reliable gender differences in autobiographical memory. In contrast, we found few differences between mothers and fathers when reminiscing with their preschool children either about a shared event from their child’s past or about an event from their own childhood. However, both mothers and fathers differed as a function of whether they were reminiscing with a daughter or a son. Moreover, there were substantial differences in the ways that girls and boys participated in these conversations, as well as differences depending on whether children were reminiscing with mothers or fathers. These patterns indicate that gender differences are not a simple function of gender per se, but that gender differences in autobiographical memories emerge as a complex function of the reminiscing context and conversational partner.

More specifically, when engaged in shared reminiscing, mothers and fathers referred to their children and other people at about the same rate, although fathers referred to themselves more than did mothers. Moreover, parents did not differ greatly as a function of their child’s age. Similarly, there were few differences between mothers and fathers when reporting on their own childhood experiences. Unlike much of the previous research in which autobiographical reports are elicited by an unfamiliar experimenter in a laboratory setting, adult males mention their children and other people to the same extent as females do when reminiscing with their children in their own home. This finding accords with current conceptualizations of gender differences in emotional processing and social disclosure discussed in the introduction (Aukett et al., 1988; Snell et al., 1989). Whereas females discuss emotions and personal issues in a wide variety of contexts and with many conversational partners, males are more likely to limit their discussion of these topics to contexts in which they are conversing with an intimate other. Similarly, gender differences in the social and relational content of autobiographical memory do not seem to be differences in ability but differences in style. Whereas females engage in socially complex reminiscing across contexts and partners, males may only display this style of reminiscing in more personally meaningful contexts.

Still, the finding that fathers refer to themselves more when engaged in shared reminiscing than do mothers suggests that even in a more familiar and socially meaningful context, males may remain more focused on self than females. However, mention of self must be placed in the context of mention of other people and affiliations. It was not the case that fathers in this study focused on self to the exclusion of others; rather fathers are highlighting their own role in the child’s social world more so than mothers. Perhaps because the mothers in this study were the primary caregivers, the fathers may feel a greater need to explicitly integrate themselves into their children’s lives than do mothers.

Provocatively, while there were few differences between mothers and fathers, there were differences in parents’ reminiscence with daughters and with sons. In shared reminiscing, parents made more references to their child with their daughters than with their sons, and discussed more socially oriented events with daughters and more autonomous events with sons. Mothers also tended to make more affiliative references in shared reminiscing with daughters than sons, especially later in the preschool years. When narrating their own childhood experiences, there was some suggestion that parents made more references to others and mentioned more affiliative themes with daughters than with sons. In both contexts, then, parent–daughter conversations focused more on people and relationships than did parent–son conversations.

Given previous empirical and theoretical work on gendered autobiographical narratives, we had expected that parents would refer to others more with daughters than with sons, but refer to the child more with sons than with daughters. That is, we expected a social orientation with daughters and a self orientation with sons. Thus it is somewhat surprising to find that both mothers and fathers referred to their daughters more in these conversations than to their sons. However, references to the child must be placed in the context of references to others. In all of these narratives, parents referred to others twice as often as they referred to the child. Thus, when parents referred to their children in these conversations, they did so in terms of integrating their child into a web of social relationships. Further, even though references to others did not differ as a function of the child’s gender, overall theme of the narrative did. More than half of the parent–daughter narratives were social, whereas two thirds of the parent–son
narratives were autonomous in theme. Thus, even though parents are referring to their daughters more than to their sons, with girls these references are more often placed in a social context, whereas with boys these references are more often placed in an autonomous context. Overall, then, when reminiscing with their children, parents themselves do not display the different gendered behaviours that have been observed in previous research, but they both model gendered behaviour patterns to their children, depending on whether they are talking with sons or daughters.

Moreover, even at this young age, girls and boys are engaging in these conversations in very different ways. Although there were unsurprising overall increases in children’s autobiographical recollections over time, at both time points, girls’ recollections were more “peopled” than boys’; girls made more references than boys to self, to others, and to affiliative themes. This raises the intriguing possibility that it is the child who is gendered in these conversations, and it is the child’s gendered talk that is eliciting differential parental response.

However, children also varied as a function of the gender of the parent. When reminiscing with fathers, both girls and boys made more references to self and others than with their mothers. Similarly, previous research has shown that children are more elaborative, emotional, and evaluative when talking about the past with fathers than with mothers (Fivush, 1997). In other words, children of both genders displayed a more “feminine” style when reminiscing with fathers than mothers. Why might this be so? One possibility is that fathers are less familiar and therefore more exciting conversational partners, leading children to be more engaged in these conversations. An alternative, though speculative, possibility is that children need to work harder to keep their fathers engaged in these conversations. Because mothers more easily engaged in emotionally and socially embellished reminiscing across partners and contexts, they provide this information for their children, essentially supporting their children’s reminiscing. In contrast, fathers may have more difficulty engaging in this kind of reminiscing and rely on their conversational partner for support (see Reese et al., 1996, for a full discussion of these possibilities).

Regardless of why children differ as a function of conversational partner, the pattern of results highlights the idea that gender might be better conceptualised as a process rather than as a categorical variable. Although clearly one remains male or female across contexts, the way in which gender is displayed varies as a function of context. Gender is not simply a characteristic of the individual but reflects the ways in which we relate to others. The partners with whom we are interacting and the goals of the situation in which we are engaged will influence the ways in which we express our gendered identity. These findings indicate that autobiographical narratives are not fixed representations, but reflect constructive processes occurring in specific contexts. Which stories we are telling to whom and for what purpose will influence what aspects of the experience is selected and reported. Thus at least some aspects of autobiographical narratives reflect stylistic preferences that may vary from context to context.

When reminiscing about shared experiences, parents and children co-construct gendered narratives as they highlight together children’s experiences and identities. Thus, parents and daughters emphasise social and relational aspects of the child’s experiences to a greater extent than do parents and sons. In this context, gender is foregrounded, perhaps because it is considered developmentally appropriate to highlight cultural expectations of gender-consistent behaviour. Moreover, preschool children may be particularly attuned to gender as an important component of their identity because it is during this developmental period that gender identity is established (see Golombok & Fivush, 1994, for a review). In contrast, when parents discuss their own childhood experiences, gender seems to shift to the background. Perhaps parents are trying to highlight their nurturance and support of their children in this context, thus both males and females focus on social and relational aspects of their experience. Still, even in these narratives there is some suggestion that parents are modelling more social and relational ways of being in the world with daughters than with sons. Examples of parent–child reminiscing have been published in previous publications (e.g., Reese et al. 1996), but we include some examples of parent retrospective narratives in the appendix to illustrate these differences. Thus there may be some ways in which gender identity remains consistent across contexts and other ways in which it varies.

Moreover, it is likely that these gender differences vary as a function of culture as well as more local context (Wang, Leichtman, & White, 1998;
see Pillemer, 1998, for a review). Because much of gendered behaviour is culturally constructed (Golombok & Fivush, 1994), it would be instructive to examine the ways in which gender is expressed through reminiscing in other than Western white middle-class samples. Perhaps the most important implication of these findings is that the content of autobiographical memories is dynamic; who is remembering with whom, and for what reasons, will influence the kinds of information that is recollected by individuals. Further, when families reminisce together about the past, they are not simply recapping what happened; together they are expressing, and even constructing, histories and gendered identities that will also cross generations.

Manuscript received 1 November 1999
Manuscript accepted 6 July 2000

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

**Mother retrospective**

M: But when I was a little gi-i-rl, and it snowed, we lived in New Jersey, it used to snow some in the winter time. And my dad used to get my brother Tom and my sister Patty to go out and shovel the dri-i-veyaw. And we, they used to shovel the dr-i-veyaw all in one big stack in one corner of the driveway. And then, if it was the right kind of snow, they used to make me IGLOOS... Anyway, on snowy da-a-yas, I used to say, “Ohhh, make me an igloo! Make me an igloo!” and then Uncle Michael and I would put on all our snow clothes and we would go out there and just play and play and play in this igloo...

**Father retrospective**

F: I remember catching that fish up on the wall. Mmmhmm, I, Daddy had given me a fishing pole for Christmas... You know that red one I still have? He gave me that when I was a kid. And we went to a farm near great granddaddy’s farm. And daddy helped me. He put a purple rubber worm on the hook. And it was almost dark. And we were walking around the lake, we were just casting into the lake. And I didn’t think I was gonna catch anything. And then, the fish came and saw that purple worm on the bottom and he GRABBED it a-a-a-d he JUMPED up out of the water! And I pulled and I screamed “ahhhhh!” (laughs) I got it, and I reeled and I reeled and I reeled and I didn’t think I was gonna catch it. And I pulled it out of the water and onto the bank and it was the biggest fish I had ever seen alive...