Functions of parent–child reminiscing about emotionally negative events

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Parent–child reminiscing about negative experiences influences children’s developing “emotional self-concept”, which comprises three interrelated functions: self-defining (this is the kind of emotional person I am), self-in relation (this is how I express and share my emotions with others), and coping (this is how I cope with and resolve negative emotion). In this study, we examined how 70 mostly white, middle-class mothers discuss three negative experiences (fear, anger, and sadness) with their 4-year-old children. Conversations about fear elaborate on the facts of the event and emotional resolutions, thus focusing on coping. Conversations about sadness contain evaluative feedback and emotional resolutions, thus focusing on self-in relation and coping. Finally, conversations about anger highlight the emotional state itself, thus focusing on self-definition. Mothers are also more elaborate and more evaluative with daughters than with sons, and place emotional events in a more interpersonal context with daughters than sons. Thus girls may be forming a more elaborated and more interpersonal emotional self-concept than boys.

When we talk about the past, we talk about emotions. Emotions provide a sense of meaning and personal significance to our experiences, and are a critical link between our past experiences and our current self. If much of our self-concept is defined through our autobiographical life story (e.g., Bruner, 1987; Fivush, 1988; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; MacAdams, 1992; Neisser, 1988) then our emotional reactions to these experiences, as they were occurring and in the present, provide the glue that connects our past to our present and makes these experiences meaningful. It is through our subjective perspective on our past that we define ourselves in the present (Fivush, 2001).

Young children, who are just learning how to think about their past experiences, depend on adults to help them structure their representations of what occurred and to evaluate these experiences (Fivush, 1994; Nelson, 1993). More specifically, while young children can remember what happened, parent-guided reminiscing helps children to organise, interpret, and evaluate these experiences in ways that begin to inform children’s developing sense of self (Fivush, 2001; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997). Thus one of the
seem the functions of parent-child reminiscing is to help young children create connections between memories of the past and current understanding of self. Given that emotional aspects of personal experience link past with present, the ways in which parents reminisce about specific kinds of emotional experiences with their young children may be a particularly important context for children’s developing self-understanding (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Fivush, 1993). Through understanding and evaluating specific kinds of emotional experiences, children begin to develop an “emotional self-concept” (Fivush, in press; Fivush & Buckner, in press), comprising three functions: self-defining (this is the kind of emotional person I am), self-in-relation (this is how I express and share my emotions with others), and coping (this is how I cope with and resolve negative emotion). Note that these three functions are interrelated; information relevant to any one function may also be relevant to other functions, and developments within one of these components entail developments within other components as well.

More generally, parent-child talk about emotions plays an important role in emotion socialisation (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994; Dunn et al., 1991). Families that discuss emotional experiences in more open and integrative ways have children who develop better prosocial skills, have more positive peer relations, and show better psychological adjustment (see Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001, for a review). However, this body of research does not focus on reminiscing about emotional experiences. Talking about the past differs in important ways from discussing current emotional experience (Dunn et al., 1991; Fivush, 1993), and influences the development of an emotional self-concept in at least three ways.

First, with respect to the self-defining function, parents can choose to focus their children’s attention on specific past emotional experiences over others, e.g., sadness rather than anger or fear. By focusing on particular emotions, children may begin to form a concept of self as a person who experiences these specific emotions and not others, e.g., “I am a person who is sad a lot but rarely angry.” Second, with respect to self-in-relation, emotions are tied closely to relationships (Campos & Barrett, 1984; Fogel, 1993). As such, the ways in which young children come to understand their emotional experiences will play a role in how they understand themselves in relation to others, and how past relationships help define current self-concept. In reminiscing, parents may focus on the ways in which emotions emerge from and are resolved through interpersonal relationships (Fivush & Buckner, 2000; Gilligan, 1982).

Finally, with respect to coping, we all experience negative events in our lives and the way in which we make sense of these experiences may play an important role in how we come to understand and resolve aversive events (Pennebaker, 1997). Through reminiscing about negative emotional experiences, parents may help children develop a sense of self as experiencing and coping with emotions in particular ways. For example, parents may choose to focus on the emotional state itself, or the causes and consequences of particular emotional reactions, or resolutions of negative affect. Moreover, it seems quite likely that parents would discuss different kinds of emotionally negative experiences in different ways. Much of the previous research on emotion socialisation does not examine discussions of different emotions in detail, but rather groups emotions as negative or positive. From the perspective presented here, we would expect that differences in the ways in which specific negative emotions are discussed would have different consequences for children’s developing emotional self-concept. Understanding and resolving events in which the child experienced fear might very well be different from understanding and resolving events in which the child experienced anger, or sadness. It is, therefore, critical that reminiscing about different emotions are examined independently in order to examine the development of coping in particular, and emotional self-concept more generally.

There have been two approaches in the literature examining parent-child reminiscing. One focuses broadly on parental style; these stylistic differences describe how mothers structure reminiscing and highlight differences in the process by which mothers introduce and evaluate new information into conversations about past events, rather than on the specific content of what is recalled. The second line of research has examined the content of parent-child reminiscing about specific emotional experiences. These studies examine what kind of information parents focus on when discussing specific emotional experiences and highlight the ways in which the content of parental reminiscing about emotional experience (e.g., emotional state, cause of emotion, resolution of emotion) may be linked to children’s developing emotional self-concept.
In studies examining reminiscing style, parents are simply asked to reminisce with their preschool children, rather than focusing on specific kinds of emotional experiences. Under these conditions, parents tend to discuss highly positive emotional experiences such as family trips to amusement parks and museums, and family occasions such as weddings and holidays. Although using somewhat different terminology, several studies confirm that there are two distinct parental reminiscing styles (Engel, 1986; Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Hudson, 1990; Peterson & McCabe, 1992). Some parents show a highly elaborative style, discussing the past in great detail, and providing rich, vivid descriptions of what occurred. These parents also encourage their children’s participation in the co-construction of the narrative to a greater extent by evaluating their children’s contributions. Other parents are less elaborative, asking few and redundant questions when reminiscing with their children, and offering few evaluations of their children’s contributions. Importantly, over the course of the preschool years, children of more highly elaborative parents come to tell more richly detailed stories of their own lives (Harley & Reese, 1999; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). Provocatively, some studies have also shown that parents use a more elaborate and evaluative style with girls than with boys (Reese & Fivush, 1993; Reese, Haden & Fivush, 1996; see Fivush, 1998, for a review), and by the end of the preschool years, girls are telling more richly detailed narratives of their personal experience than are boys (Buckner & Fivush, 1998).

It seems likely that more elaborate reminiscing facilitates the development of a shared history in which parents and children create a sense of togetherness through time. This shared history would further facilitate the creation and maintenance of emotional bonds and the sense of self as connected to others (Fivush, Haden & Reese, 1996; Fivush & Reese, 2002). In this way, children of more highly elaborative parents may develop a more elaborated sense of self-in-relation over time.

The second line of research has focused on gender differences in the emotional content of parent–child reminiscing (Adams, Kuebl, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Fivush, 1989, 1991; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Kuebl & Fivush, 1992). As adults, women express more emotion, and report experiencing and valuing emotions more than males (see Fischer, 2000, for an overview). The developmental studies confirm that parents of preschoolers are already discussing emotions differently with their daughters and sons. The findings of these studies indicate that parents talk more about emotions overall, and especially talk more about sadness, with girls than with boys, and by the end of the preschool years, girls are talking more about emotional aspects of the past, and especially sadness, than are boys (see Fivush & Buckner, 2000, for a review). In this way, girls may be socialised to have a more emotionally laden definition of self in the past, and, in particular, to have a greater definition of self as a person who experiences sadness. It may also be the case that parents work harder to help resolve negative affect with girls than with boys (Fivush, 1991). Thus girls may be learning how to both express and resolve negative affect to a greater extent than are boys in these early parent-guided conversations. Further, parents place emotions in a more interpersonal context with girls than with boys (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Fivush, 1989). Thus girls may be developing an emotional self-concept that is more relational than boys.

In integrating the findings across these two lines of research, we argue that the functions of parent–child reminiscing are multiply determined and inextricably intertwined (see Bluck & Alea, 2002, for a theoretical discussion of the functions of autobiographical memory in general). When reminiscing with their young children, parents are simultaneously influencing the development of the child’s coherent sense of self in the past and the present (self-defining), creating a shared social history which bonds them together (self-in-relation), and helping their child to interpret and evaluate their own personal experiences (coping), all of which contribute to children’s developing emotional self-concept. Moreover, these functions may be differentially highlighted depending on the emotional valence of the event under discussion or the gender of the child. Negative events are a particularly interesting context to examine because in discussing negative experiences, parents may help children to understand how to cope with and resolve negative experiences, as well as how to evaluate these experiences in light of their evolving self-concept and understanding of self in relation to other. The major objective of this study is to examine parent-child reminiscing about negative emotional experiences in detail, integrating the two approaches emerging from the previous research.

More specifically, we examine both the style and the content of parent–child conversations
about negative emotional experiences. Whereas previous research has demonstrated distinct parental reminiscing styles that vary on the dimension of elaborativeness, we do not yet know whether level of parental elaboration may be related to the type of emotional event being discussed. Are parents more elaborative when reminiscing about fear versus sadness versus anger? Assuming that level of elaboration is related to the functions of creating a shared history and helping children construct a more elaborated definition of self and self-in-relation, then we might predict that anger would show lower levels of elaboration than fear or sadness because anger is a less culturally acceptable emotion to express and to share with others, especially for females (Basow, 1992; Fabes & Martin, 1991). Sadness, in contrast, might show the highest level of elaboration, as sadness is an emotion that brings people together to share and resolve feelings of loss. Based on previous research, we further predict that parents will be more elaborative and more evaluative overall with girls than with boys, and especially so for sadness (Fivush & Buckner, 2000).

A second question concerns differences in the content of these conversations. Will parents differ in their focus on discussing the emotion itself, the causes of emotional experience, or resolving negative affect, depending on the type of emotional event under discussion or the gender of the child? As adults, females are more emotionally expressive than males (Fischer, 2000); therefore we predict that parents will talk more about emotions overall with girls than with boys (e.g., Fivush et al., 2000). Further, we might expect parents to resolve negative affect more with girls than with boys (Fivush, 1991). But if the content of reminiscing functions to help children interpret and evaluate their emotional life in light of their evolving concepts of self and other, how might content differ in conversations about different emotional experiences? For example, because sadness is an emotion that can link people together and anger can tear people apart, parents may focus more on talking about the emotional feeling of sadness, and focus more on the causes and resolutions of anger. However, these arguments are speculative and no strong predictions can be made.

Another aspect of content concerns the overarching theme of each conversation. What kinds of events do mothers and children select when discussing specific emotions? Given past research (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Fivush, 1989) we predict that mothers will place emotions in an interpersonal context to a greater extent with daughters than with sons, but how theme might differ by the specific emotion under discussion is not as clear. Anger, almost by definition, is an interpersonal emotion, but sadness and fear can be focused on either the individual's inner emotional life or on how other people are integrated into one's own emotional experience.

Finally, because we assume these conversations are bi-directional (e.g., Reese et al., 1993), we also examine what children are contributing to the discussion. More specifically, we examine children's style and content in order to place maternal style and content in perspective. Clearly, conversations are between people and therefore it is necessary to examine what both conversational partners are bringing to the conversations. This is especially important in interpreting possible gender differences; without concomitant information about what girls and boys are contributing to these conversations, it would be extremely difficult to interpret possible differences in mother's conversations with daughters versus sons. In sum, the major objective of this study is to provide a more fine-grained analysis of similarities and differences in mothers' and children's reminiscing style and content of emotion talk as a function of gender and the specific emotion being discussed.

**METHODS**

**Participants**

A total of 70 preschool-aged children (42 boys and 28 girls) and their mothers participated. The sample was predominantly Caucasian, with 97% Caucasian children and two non-Caucasian children (one was Hispanic and one was racially mixed). Most (76%) of the sample reported an annual family income of $30,000 or more. Almost all (92%) of the children's parents were married. Mothers had received an average of 16 years of education (range = 12–20 years, SD = 2.5 years). These demographics represent the population of families living in the small university town in which the study was conducted. At the time of the study, all but five children were aged between 3 years 6 months, and 4 years, with the remaining children seen shortly after their fourth birthdays. Children were of varying birth order, with most (82%) either first-born (46%) or second-born
(36%). Mothers signed fully informed consent and received $20 for their participation.

**Procedure**

One of six female research assistants visited all but three families in their homes. The remaining three families came to a developmental laboratory located on a university campus. Following Fivush (1991), the research assistant told the mother that a goal of the study was to examine children’s memories. The mother was asked to discuss with her child three specific past events, a time that her child experienced sadness, anger, and fear. The mother was given index cards with one emotion printed on each card to remind her to ask about each emotional event (“sad”, “angry”, and “scared”). The cards were always given in this order. (Mothers and children were also asked to discuss a happy event first and an emotional event of their choosing last, but because our focus was on emotionally negative experiences, these conversations are not considered further in these analyses.) The experimenter encouraged the mother to structure the conversations in any way that she wanted, and to talk for as little or as much as she liked. After making sure that the mother understood the procedure, the experimenter turned on the tape recorder and stepped out of the room.

**Coding**

All of the mother–child conversations were transcribed verbatim and broken down into conversational utterances, defined as a subject–verb construction. Only utterances pertaining to the nominated event were examined. Both mother and child utterances were coded using the same mutually exclusive and exhaustive hierarchical coding scheme adapted from Fivush and Fromhoff (1988) and Fivush et al. (2000). Coding focused on two dimensions of talk, style and content, as defined in Table 1.

Style codes capture the way in which mothers and children introduce and evaluate new information into the conversation, and include elaborations, repetitions, and evaluations (see Table 1). Content codes determined if the utterance focused on factual aspects of the event itself or the emotion associated with the event. Emotion was further coded as focusing on attributions, causes, or resolutions (see Table 1). Finally, off-topic (e.g., talk about something happening in the present or talk of another event), place holders (such as “I don’t know”, “What?” “Let’s see”, “Think real hard”) and need reminders (“Do you remember?” or “Tell me about it”) were also coded. These categories were infrequent, not theoretically relevant, and thus were not included in analyses.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style codes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborations</td>
<td>Any utterance that contains new details, or extends or embellishes the conversation.</td>
<td>“Were there swings there?” when swings have not yet been mentioned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Any utterance that either confirms, negates, or questions the previous statement.</td>
<td>Saying “yes, that’s right” or “no, we didn’t see a lion”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitions</td>
<td>Any utterance that does not contain any new information.</td>
<td>“We saw swings at the park” after swings have already been mentioned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content codes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>Any utterance that refers to actions, objects, or descriptions about the external event.</td>
<td>“We saw an owl” or “It was really dark that night”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Any utterance that contains emotion words or emotion behaviours (i.e., laughing, crying).</td>
<td>“It was really scary” or “You laughed really hard about that, didn’t you”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution</td>
<td>Any utterance that attributes an emotional state or reaction to an individual.</td>
<td>“Were you scared last night?” and “I was really angry”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause</td>
<td>Any utterance that explains the cause of the emotion.</td>
<td>“Why were you scared?” or “You were angry because daddy didn’t let you play”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolutions</td>
<td>Any utterance that attempts to resolve the negative affect experienced.</td>
<td>“But you know monsters aren’t real” or “You could have cried but you didn’t”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two raters independently coded 20% of the transcripts and achieved 89% agreement on conversations about fear, 88% agreement on conversations about anger, and 86% agreement on conversations about sadness. After reliability was established, the remaining transcripts were divided between the two raters and coded.

A second aspect of coding for content focused on the theme of the conversation as constructed by the dyad. Note that theme is conceptualised for each conversation as a whole, and thus emerges from both mothers’ and children’s contributions. Through inspection of the protocols, we developed 10 thematic categories that captured the overall theme of each conversation, as defined in Table 2; these categories were then further divided into those that had an interpersonal focus and those that had an independent focus. Interpersonal themes include discussion of other people as central to the child’s emotional experience whereas independent themes focused on the child’s internal emotional experience. All conversations were categorised by theme by two independent coders, who achieved an overall agreement of 86% across types of emotion and themes (range from 56% to 100%).

RESULTS

The results are divided into three sections. We first discuss the style and content of maternal reminiscing depending on the type of emotional event being discussed and the gender of the child. We then turn to analyses of the style and content of children’s contributions, again depending on the type of emotional event being discussed and the gender of the child. Third, we provide a descriptive analysis of the themes of the conversations for the dyads. All significant multivariate effects were followed up with appropriate univariate and post-hoc tests at the $p < .05$ level.

**Style and content of maternal reminiscing**

Means and standard deviations for all maternal style and content variables are displayed in Table 3 by event type. Maternal reminiscing style was examined in a $2 \times 3$ (gender of child) × $3$ (type of emotional event: sadness, anger, and fear) × $3$ (type of style utterance: elaborations, evaluations, and repetitions) MANOVA, with gender as a between-subject variable and event type and style

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversational themes</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal themes</strong></td>
<td>Centred on the loss of an important relationship as being central to the child’s emotional experience, such as not being able to play with a favourite friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost relationships</td>
<td>Centred on episodes where the child was separated from a parent, including being left at the babysitter and a parent leaving on a business trip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental separation</td>
<td>Conflict between child and parent, usually about parent not allowing the child to have a toy or perform an activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with parent</td>
<td>Fighting between child and other (not parent), usually about child fighting with their siblings over a toy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with peer/sibling</td>
<td>Focused on “fictional” characters such as witches, ghosts, or monsters as being central to the child’s emotional experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters</td>
<td>Centred around lost or broken toy, or the child having to give up a desired activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent themes</strong></td>
<td>Thunder/noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost object/activity</td>
<td>Almost all conversations focused on lightning and thunder, but a few others were about other kinds of loud noises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury</td>
<td>Focused on the child’s minor injury or illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scary activity</td>
<td>Activities that were identified as being scary, like rollercoaster rides or swimming in deep water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of skill</td>
<td>Child not yet having the skills to perform an activity, such as building a block tower or writing one’s name.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 3
Means (and standard deviations) for maternal style and content variables by event type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event type</th>
<th>Sadness</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborations</td>
<td>7.11 (2.92)</td>
<td>7.62 (4.99)</td>
<td>8.59 (4.23)</td>
<td>23.12 (10.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>2.57 (2.12)</td>
<td>2.38 (2.04)</td>
<td>2.68 (2.15)</td>
<td>7.62 (4.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitions</td>
<td>0.77 (1.08)</td>
<td>0.75 (1.25)</td>
<td>0.87 (0.98)</td>
<td>2.38 (2.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10.44 (5.87)</td>
<td>10.75 (6.88)</td>
<td>12.15 (5.80)</td>
<td>33.12 (14.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>3.26 (3.83)</td>
<td>3.43 (3.95)</td>
<td>5.03 (4.27)</td>
<td>11.59 (8.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion cause</td>
<td>4.70 (2.54)</td>
<td>4.96 (3.08)</td>
<td>4.64 (2.85)</td>
<td>14.16 (5.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion attribution</td>
<td>1.59 (2.84)</td>
<td>2.12 (2.64)</td>
<td>1.30 (1.69)</td>
<td>5.04 (4.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion resolution</td>
<td>0.84 (1.60)</td>
<td>0.51 (1.31)</td>
<td>1.26 (1.98)</td>
<td>2.62 (3.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10.44 (5.87)</td>
<td>10.75 (6.88)</td>
<td>12.15 (5.80)</td>
<td>33.12 (14.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

as within-subject variables. There were no overall differences in amount of talk among the three types of emotional events but, as shown in Table 3, mothers used significantly more elaborations overall than evaluations, and more evaluations than repetitions, $F(2, 132) = 261.43, p < .001$. Furthermore, mothers talked more overall in their conversations with girls (M = 37.50, SD = 15.22) than with boys (M = 30.05, SD = 12.21), $F(1, 66) = 4.81, p < .05$; more specifically, mothers were more elaborative and evaluative with girls than with boys, $F(2, 132) = 2.85, p = .06$, but repetitions did not differ (see Figure 1). Finally, mothers were more elaborate when discussing fear than when discussing sadness or anger, $F(4, 264) = 3.08, p < .05$ (see Table 1).

In order to explore the content of mothers’ conversations, a 2 (gender of child) × 3 (type of emotional event: sadness, anger, and fear) × 4 (content of utterance: factual, emotion attribution, emotional cause, and emotional resolution) MANOVA was conducted with gender as a between-subjects variable and event type and content as within-subject variables. Mothers talked more about the causes of emotions than about the facts of the events themselves, more about the facts than emotional attributions, and more about emotional attributions than emotional resolutions, $F(3, 192) = 62.97, p < .001$ (see Table 1). However, content differed depending on the type of event discussed, $F(6, 384) = 3.18, p < .05$. Mothers talked significantly more about the facts

![Figure 1. Mean frequency of type of maternal style utterances by child gender.](image-url)
of the event itself during conversations about fear than about sadness or anger. Mothers also provided more emotional resolutions during conversations about fear and sadness than about anger, but made more emotional attributions during conversations about anger than about either sadness or fear (see Figure 2). There were no differences in talk about cause across events.

**Style and content of children’s reminiscing**

We were also interested in how children’s reminiscing style and content might vary as a function of gender and emotional event type. All means and standard deviations for child style and content utterances are shown in Table 4 by event type. A 2 (gender of child) × 3 (type of emotional event: sadness, anger, and fear) × 3 (type of style utterance: elaborations, repetitions, and evaluations) MANOVA, with gender as a between-subjects variable and event type and style as within-subject variables was performed. As shown in Table 4, children produced more elaborations and evaluations than repetitions, $F(2, 132) = 99.86, p < .001$. Children also talked significantly more in conversations about fear than sadness, but conversations about anger did not differ significantly from either, $F(2, 132) = 4.55, p < .01$. Overall, girls provided more elaborations ($M = 11.61, SD = 6.43$) during their conversations than boys ($M = 7.73, SD = 4.56$), but they did not differ in number of evaluations or repetitions, $F(2, 132) = 9.46, p < .001$. Finally, children provided more evaluations during conversations about fear than about sadness or anger, which did not differ significantly from each other, $F(4, 264) = 2.50, p < .05$.

A 2 (gender of child) × 3 (type of emotional event: sadness, anger, and fear) × 4 (type of content: factual, attribution, cause, and resolution) MANOVA on the children’s utterances revealed that, overall, children were providing significantly more information about the facts of the event itself and cause of emotion than information about emotional attributions, and more about emotional attributions than resolutions, $F(3, 192) = 63.59, p < .001$ (see Table 4). However, this varied by type of emotional conversation, $F(6, 384) = 2.14, p < .05$. As shown in Table 4, children were talking significantly more about the facts in conversations about fear than about sadness or anger, and discussing emotional resolutions more in conversations about fear and sadness than about anger.

**Mother–child conversational themes**

As described in the coding section, each conversation was coded into one of 10 mutually exclusive categories, which were further grouped as interpersonal or independent. Note that the conversation as a whole for both mother and child was categorised. Because there were unequal numbers of boys and girls, we converted the
TABLE 4
Means (and standard deviations) for children’s style and content variables by event type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event type</th>
<th>Sadness</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborations</td>
<td>2.87 (2.47)</td>
<td>3.16 (2.62)</td>
<td>3.36 (2.77)</td>
<td>9.32 (5.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>2.53 (2.09)</td>
<td>2.57 (2.58)</td>
<td>3.51 (2.29)</td>
<td>8.50 (5.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitions</td>
<td>0.20 (0.47)</td>
<td>0.17 (0.45)</td>
<td>0.29 (0.55)</td>
<td>0.66 (0.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.60 (3.61)</td>
<td>5.90 (4.40)</td>
<td>7.16 (4.02)</td>
<td>18.49 (8.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>1.75 (2.23)</td>
<td>2.16 (3.06)</td>
<td>2.96 (2.81)</td>
<td>6.64 (4.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion cause</td>
<td>2.55 (1.63)</td>
<td>2.71 (2.02)</td>
<td>2.89 (1.83)</td>
<td>7.88 (3.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion attribution</td>
<td>0.70 (1.45)</td>
<td>0.96 (1.39)</td>
<td>0.64 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.23 (2.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion resolution</td>
<td>0.52 (1.13)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.88)</td>
<td>0.70 (1.24)</td>
<td>1.46 (2.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.60 (3.61)</td>
<td>5.90 (4.40)</td>
<td>7.16 (4.02)</td>
<td>18.49 (8.57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

frequencies to the percentage of conversations falling into each of these categories by type of emotion and gender (see Table 5). Not surprisingly certain themes were more likely to be discussed in particular emotional conversations than others. For example, characters and thunder were always associated with conversations about fear, whereas conflict with peers or lost objects never were. Overall, the majority of the conversations were interpersonal across gender and events, although anger had the highest percentage of interpersonal themes, followed by sadness and then fear. Interestingly, whereas virtually every mother–daughter conversation about anger was interpersonal, 20% of mother–son conversations about anger were independent. Similarly, just over half of mother–daughter conversations about fear were interpersonal, whereas over half of mother–son conversations about fear were independent. Thus there is some suggestion that negative emotions, especially anger and fear, are placed in a more interpersonal context with girls than with boys.

Looking more specifically within themes, about a quarter of all conversations about sadness focused on a lost toy or activity for both boys and girls. Parental separation was also a frequent topic of sadness for both genders. For boys, conflicts

TABLE 5
Percentage of mother–son and mother–daughter conversations about each theme by gender and event type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sadness</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Fear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost relation</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental separation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict w/ parent</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict w/ peer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost object</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thunder/noise</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scary activity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of skill</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with parents were also highly associated with sadness, whereas for girls sadness was more likely to be associated with the loss of other relationships. Not surprisingly, anger conversations focus on children’s conflicts with parents as well as siblings and peers, although boys are also frequently angry about lost objects. Conversations about fear focus heavily on scary characters such as witches, monsters, and ghosts, especially so for girls. Boys are scared by loud noises more than girls, and both boys and girls experience scary activities such as rollercoasters and swimming in deep water.

One other finding deserves mention. Whereas conflict with peers or siblings was almost always associated with anger for both genders, conflicts with parents were more emotionally diverse, being discussed as sad and even sometimes fearful. Similarly, parental separation was usually sad but sometimes associated with anger and fear as well. Thus it seems that parent–child relationships are discussed in a more multidimensional way and may be more emotionally complex than relationships with peers and siblings.

Summary

Overall, mothers were more elaborative and evaluative with daughters than with sons, and more elaborative when discussing fear than sadness or anger. Similarly, girls were more elaborative than boys, and both boys and girls were more elaborative and evaluative when discussing fear than sadness or anger. Mothers generally focused on causes when discussing emotional experiences, but focused on the facts when discussing fear, emotional resolutions when discussing fear and sadness, and emotional attributions when discussing anger. Children showed a similar pattern, talking more about factual information in conversations about fear and more about resolutions in conversations about fear and sadness than anger. Conversations tended to be more interpersonal than independent across event types, especially so with girls.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the style and content of mother–child reminiscing about everyday negative experiences of fear, sadness, and anger. Our results provide evidence that mothers vary in the way in which they structure conversations depending on the type of emotion being discussed and the gender of the child. Importantly, conversations about specific emotions did not differ in overall length, so differences in the ways in which these emotional conversations were structured do not reflect willingness or interest in discussing the event, but rather reflect differences in conversational focus. As argued in the introduction, these conversations serve three interrelated functions that comprise an emotional self-concept: self-defining, self-in-relation, and coping. In order to highlight these functions, we first discuss results and specific examples for each type of emotional conversation and we then discuss more overarching results across event type.

When discussing fearful events, mothers elaborate more, and they talk more about the facts concerning the event itself than when discussing sadness or anger. Mothers also focus on resolving fear more so than anger (but not sadness, as discussed later). Children also seem to be more concerned with fearful experiences than sadness or anger. They talk more about fear overall, and they provide more evaluations and resolutions when discussing fear than when discussing sadness or anger. To illustrate, we present an excerpt from a prototypical conversation about fear (M stands for Mother and C for Child, … indicates some missing dialogue):

M: …Sometimes you’re scared of shadows, right?
C: Yeah
M: At nighttime in the dark?
C: Well yeah, at night I’m scared of the nother ones
M: …Where are they?
C: They were [inaudible] on the wall
M: On your wall?
C: Yeah, only one
M: …But Mommy showed you it wasn’t really a monster or anything?
C: Well, Mommy it was.
M: …But honey
C: Well Mommy it was just a monster shadow
M: It was the monster shadow again, you tell me, right? And that’s why Mommy got you your flashlight, remember?
C: Yeah
M: So you can turn it on whenever you need to.
C: I can turn it on. I can shine it on the shadow.

As can be seen in this example, both mother and child are very concerned about discussing the reality (or nonreality) of the shadow monsters. The mother is careful to explain again that these monster shadows are not real, and also to emphasise that they have developed a way to deal
with the child’s fears (the flashlight) which gives the child control over the situation and the emotion. Thus these conversations are highly co-constructed with both mothers and children contributing information about what happened and how to resolve it. Mothers’ focus seems to be on providing factual information about these events. Of course, this is quite likely to be developmentally sensitive. Almost all of the conversations about fear in this study focused on developmentally typical preschoolers’ fears of monsters under the bed, bad dreams, or loud noises such as thunder. Although young children are obviously quite fearful of these events, mothers are certainly aware that these are not things that can really harm their children, and they elaborate on why and how these things are not real and/or not to be feared. We might expect substantial differences in mother–child conversations about fear as children grow older and their fears reflect more real-world concerns.

Parent–child conversations about truly fearful events, such as natural disasters, serious illnesses, and injuries might also look quite different. Previous studies on parent–child conversations about a tornado (Ackil, Waters, Dropik, Dunisch, & Bauer, 1999) and an injury resulting in emergency room treatment (Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2001) also show a focus on causes of the fearful event, but do not seem to find as much of a focus on resolution as we found here. For events that are traumatic, and perhaps even life-threatening, the negative affect may be more difficult to resolve. Still, our results indicate that when discussing normal childhood fears, mothers and their preschoolers focus on elaborating what happened, what caused the emotion, and what the child can do to feel better. In this way, conversations about fear seem to be focused on coping, emphasizing coping and resolution of negative affect.

In contrast, in conversations about anger, mothers do not elaborate, they do not discuss the facts surrounding the event itself, nor do they resolve anger as much as they do in conversations about fear. Rather, when discussing anger, mothers focus on emotional attributions. Children also do not talk as much about anger, they do not evaluate information about anger, and they do not discuss emotional resolutions of anger to the same extent as fear or sadness, as can be seen in this excerpt:

M: …You got angry with me.
C: Cause I didn’t want you to go out

M: Hmm. That made you mad. Why did that make you mad?
C: Because I wanted you to stay.
M: You did? So you were angry with me?
C: Yeah
M: …You just felt angry?
C: Yeah

Conversations about anger seem to “hang in the air”. The emotion itself is discussed but the causes of the emotion are not elaborated and the negative affect is not resolved. Thus, paradoxically, although these conversations focus on attributions of emotions, mothers do not seem to be interested in helping their children to understand the factual situation surrounding anger responses nor how to deal with anger when aroused. Rather, these conversations seem to be focused on self-definitional issues, emphasizing the experience of the emotion but not how it is shared with others or resolved.

Finally, sadness falls between these two extremes. Conversations about sadness are not as elaborative overall as conversations about fear, nor do mothers focus on the event itself, as they do for fear, or on emotional attributions, as they do for anger. Rather, mothers focus on evaluating and resolving sad feelings. Children also focus on resolutions, as this example illustrates:

M: How do you usually feel when we’re playing at nighttime and then Mom and Dad tell you it’s time to go to bed?
C: Sad.
M: Yeah, I thought so.
C: I always feel sad at bedtime.
M: …You can’t stay up as late as Mom and Dad because you need to get your rest, right?
C: I want to stay up later than Brian [the child’s brother].
M: …Does that make you sad when Brian talks and you’re trying to sleep?
C: …I just can’t get to sleep
M: Okay, we’ll do that in the afternoon when it’s naptime. We put Brian in before you. You want us to do that at nighttime too?
C: Yeah.
M: Okay. Well, Dad and I can think about it.

In these conversations, mothers focus on evaluating and resolving their children’s experience. Note also that the conversation about anger presented earlier and this conversation are both about parental conflict, yet when this conflict is discussed in the context of anger, it is left unresolved whereas when parental conflict is discussed
on the context of sadness, the mother works quite hard at understanding her child’s emotional reaction and providing a resolution. Conversations about sadness accept the emotional experience as warranted and discuss ways to alleviate the negative affect. By evaluating and sharing these emotional experiences in ways that validate children’s experience, mothers emphasise both self-definition and self-in-relation.

Across all three emotional conversations, mothers talk more about the causes of their children’s emotions than describing the facts of the event itself, or talking about emotional attributions or resolutions. Thus a major focus of these conversations is on helping children to understand the source of their emotional experience, an aspect of coping. Further, the majority of the conversations have an interpersonal theme, suggesting that emotions are placed in the context of relationships with other people, thus contributing to children’s understanding of their emotional life as related to others.

However, by focusing on the factual aspects of fearful events and resolving fearful emotions, children may be learning that the emotion of fear itself should not be as much a part of their emotional self-definition. Through explaining the “facts of the matter”, mothers focus children on the non-necessity of experiencing fear; there really is nothing to be afraid of. Moreover, mothers do not provide much evaluation of their children’s fear responses. Thus these conversations focus on coping (resolution) but have little self-definition or self-in-relation.

In contrast, conversations about anger focus on the emotional state itself, but provide little evaluation or resolution, in contrast to our predictions. Although anger is clearly experienced, it is not appropriate to share it with others. Through this form of reminiscing, children may be learning to keep their angry feelings to themselves, or even not to think about them at all. Thus conversations about anger focus on self-defining functions (i.e., anger is an acknowledged emotion), but have little discussion of self-in-relation (i.e., little evaluation of the experience of anger as an appropriate emotion to express and share with others) or coping (i.e., little discussion of emotional resolution).

Finally, sadness is socially shareable, as predicted, but mothers focus on evaluating their children’s contributions to the conversations. Mothers pay less attention to describing and elaborating the factual aspects of sad events or to discussing the emotional state itself. Rather, mothers seem to be allowing their children to talk about sad events, and how to resolve their feelings, in a socially supportive conversational context. Thus these conversations focus on self-definition (i.e., sadness is an appropriate and validated emotional reactions), self-in-relation (i.e., sadness is very much a shared emotion), and coping (resolution). The overall pattern of results indicates that children are developing culturally appropriate emotional self-concepts about the experience and expression of specific emotions.

Mothers are also more elaborative and more evaluative overall and place emotional experience in a more interpersonal context with daughters than with sons. Similarly, although girls and boys do not differ in overall amount of talk in these conversations, girls contribute more new information to the conversation than do boys. These results confirm previous findings of gender differences in reminiscing in general (Reese et al., 1996), and reminiscing about emotions more specifically (Fivush & Buckner, 2000). Parent–daughter dyads co-construct more embellished and detailed narratives of past emotional experiences than do parent–son dyads. However, in contrast to previous studies we did not find any evidence here that mothers talked about sadness more with daughters than with sons. As this specific result has been replicated in several studies (see Fivush & Buckner, 2000, for a review), it is not clear why we did not find this difference in this study as well.

Still, the gender differences obtained in this study support previous theorising that girls are being socialised into a more embellished, emotionally laden, and interpersonal autobiographical sense of self (Fivush & Buckner, 2000, in press; Gilligan, 1982). By reminiscing in more elaborative and evaluative ways about past emotional experiences, girls may be developing a more elaborated emotional self-concept than boys. Girls may come to understand themselves as experiencing and expressing more emotion, and may see emotion as more central to their self-definition than boys. Further, emotional experience is placed in a more interpersonal context. For girls, emotions emerge from and are resolved through their interactions with others to a greater extent than for boys; thus girls emotional self-concept may be more integrated with their understanding of self-in-relation than are boys.

Last, we must acknowledge two major limitations of this study. Because we studied a
homogeneous white, middle-class sample, we must be cautious about generalising too broadly. Emotion socialisation varies widely by culture (see Lutz & White, 1986, for a review) as well as by social class. For example, Miller and Sperry (1988) found that single working-class mothers living in an inner-city environment encouraged the expression of anger in their young daughters. They explicitly talked about how difficult life was and how they wanted to teach their daughters to stand up for themselves. In middle-class culture, in contrast, mothers may believe that anger expression is a detrimental trait rather than an asset. Thus the function of experiencing and expressing anger may differ depending on the larger sociocultural context. Future research should examine the ways in which different emotional experiences are discussed in different social and cultural groups.

Further, we only examined one age group in this study. As already alluded to, the types and causes of emotions that are considered appropriate or inappropriate may change with development. Related to this is the issue of bidirectionality. We analysed mothers’ and children’s contributions to these conversations independently, but clearly, conversational partners are influencing each other. Further, children’s individual and developmental abilities to participate in these conversations, and to comprehend emotional experience, will surely play a role in how mothers discuss these experiences with them. These are important questions for future research.

In summary, our results indicate that mother–child reminiscing about everyday emotional experiences is a rich context for the development of children’s emotional self-concept. The everyday ups and downs provide the texture of our lives; our emotions provide a sense of meaning and personal significance to our daily experiences. Through participating in adult structured reminiscing about emotionally negative events, children are developing a sense of self as an emotional being, and learning how to evaluate, resolve, and share these experiences with others.

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