Narratives about parents may help adolescents navigate their own experiences. Yet, research has not examined what adolescents know about their intergenerational past. Sixty-five 14- to 16-year-old middle-class, racially diverse adolescents narrated two stories about each parent’s childhood, and 2 positive personal stories. Narratives were coded for structure (length, elaboration), theme (affiliation, achievement), and internal states. Mothers’ stories were more elaborative, affiliative, and emotionally rich than fathers’, which were more achievement focused. Girls’ personal narratives were longer, more elaborative, and more emotionally rich than boys’ and resembled narratives about mothers but not fathers. Adolescents may be narrating parents’ experiences through a gendered lens of the parent but personal experiences through their own gendered lens. Implications of intergenerational narratives for adolescent identity are discussed.
changes that occur within families, allowing the children to compare their parents’ and grandparents’ days of growing up with their own (Fiese & Bickham, 2004). These types of family stories may reflect and preserve family identity from generation to generation, allowing the child to feel a sense of connectedness to previous generations and to develop a sense of self that is defined both by one’s personal and familial history (Fiese et al., 1995; Fivush et al., 2008).

Research also indicates that parents, particularly Taiwanese (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997) and Chinese (Wang & Fivush, 2005; Wang & Leichtman, 2000) parents, use the opportunity of joint storytelling with their young children about the child’s personal experiences to teach moral and social standards consistent with cultural norms. Similarly, narratives of parents’ childhood may be told to children and adolescents to convey moral and social values. Thorne, McLean, and Dasbach (2004) found that American parents report value-teaching as the primary reason for telling their children stories about their own childhood transgressions. Intriguingly, adolescents who most incorporate their parents’ voices of value-teaching into their own narratives subsequently score higher in multiple areas of social adjustment than adolescents who never, or rarely, refer to their parents’ perspectives (Arnold, Pratt, & Hicks, 2004). Thus, certain types of intergenerational narratives may be a fundamental means by which children come to experience their own world, structure their own experiences, and navigate important developmental milestones.

Despite the apparent importance of intergenerational narratives, only a small number of studies have explored these types of stories, and all of this research has focused on the stories that parents tell their children about their childhood, rather than on how children themselves come to remember these stories. These few studies suggest that the childhood stories that parents tell their children may be gendered, both in that mothers and fathers tell different kinds of stories and that mothers and fathers tell different stories to their daughters compared with their sons.

In terms of gender of parent differences, fathers tell stories with stronger themes of autonomy and achievement than mothers, while mothers narrate stories with stronger social and affiliation themes, regardless of the age of the child. In a study of 4-year-old children, Fiese and Skillman (2000) found that fathers were twice as likely as mothers to tell stories with stronger autonomy themes that included such things as attempts to be independent or successful. Furthermore, fathers were significantly more likely than mothers to tell stories of work, which included achievement, as well as reports of how things work in the world, and they were three times as likely to narrate stories involving some sort of risk-taking behavior (Fiese & Bickham, 2004). Mothers on the other hand, tended to narrate stories with stronger affiliation themes, assessed as the desire or wish to connect with others. Their stories also contained more mention of roles and routines. Interestingly, gender-specific themes in parents’ childhood stories emerge in infancy, well before the child can participate in these narratives (Fiese et al., 1995).

In terms of gender of child differences, Buckner and Fivush (2000) have found that both mothers and fathers of 40-month-old children focus their own childhood narratives on social events more with girls than with boys, make more direct references to their daughters than to their sons, and use more affiliative remarks with their daughters than with their sons. In addition, childhood stories told by mothers to their daughters display the strongest themes of relationships, roles, and routines and are the least likely to include work themes (Fiese & Bickham, 2004). On the other hand, sons are more likely to hear parent childhood stories with themes of autonomy than daughters (Fiese & Skillman, 2000). Remarkably, these findings are reversed for daughters when parents rate themselves as nongender typed (Fiese & Skillman, 2000), such that these daughters are more likely to hear parent childhood stories with stronger achievement and autonomy themes from both parents than the daughters of gender-typed parents.

These findings suggest that when parents narrate gendered stories to their children, they may implicitly or explicitly send messages about the respective roles and characteristics of males and females in society, and through these gendered narratives, children may adopt a gendered style as they begin to translate their own experiences into narratives. We know that gender differences in autobiographical narratives emerge during early childhood, with girls telling more elaborated, more emotional and more socially oriented stories than boys (e.g., Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995), and these differences remain in adulthood, with adult females telling more elaborated and more emotional autobiographical narratives than adult males (e.g., Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003; Fivush & Buckner, 2003; Niedzwiekska, 2003; Thorne & McLean, 2002). These differences may be partly socialized through parent–child reminiscing, in which both mothers and fathers co-construct
narratives about the child’s personal experiences that are gendered in these ways (see Fivush & Buckner, 2003, for a full theoretical argument), but gendered ways of understanding and narrating experiences may be further socialized through models provided by others’ experiences. That mothers and fathers tell stories about their own childhood that are gendered suggests that children may additionally be filtering their personal experiences through the gendered stories of others.

Intergenerational narratives may become particularly important during adolescence, as this is the period when individuals increasingly negotiate their individual and family identities (Erikson, 1968). It is during adolescence that individuals notice more and more incongruities in themselves and their experiences, giving rise to what Erikson referred to as the identity crisis (Erikson, 1968). As adolescents attain formal operational thinking, they entertain different possibilities for the self in the future, and one of their primary tasks during this stage is to organize and integrate seemingly conflicting roles, experiences, and relationships as parts of the same self (McAdams, 2001). The beginnings of a life narrative emerge as adolescents select those events that are meaningful to understanding who they are and organize them into a story format structured around specific life goals (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Thus it may be during adolescence that individuals truly reflect on their own experiences in relation to others and increasingly draw connections between their parents’ childhood experiences and their own experiences. During adolescence, narratives take on a richer, more organized form, as single events are connected to create a more coherent story with an overarching theme (Fivush et al., 1995; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Individuals become better able during adolescence to step back from the events of the narrative and to reflect on their importance in relation to self and the world, thus engaging in what McLean and colleagues refer to as narrative meaning-making (McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). It is through this reflective process that a narrative identity emerges.

Further, in line with our earlier arguments, adolescent narrative identity may be gendered. In a recent study, McLean and Breen (2009) demonstrated that middle- to late-adolescent boys and girls tell turning point narratives with very different themes, with boys reporting more stories about values and beliefs and girls reporting more stories about relationships, including peers, friends, and romance. Interestingly, girls also report telling others their stories more often than boys, and for more relational purposes than boys, such as getting closer to others, making others feel better, and sharing the self. Similarly, when older adolescents (age 19 years) were asked to talk about life-threatening events, females’ narratives were found to be longer, more focused on the deaths of family members and friends, and more compassionate than males’ narratives, while males talked more about personal accidents and endurance in the face of adversity than females (Thorne & McLean, 2002).

That mothers and fathers tell gendered childhood stories to their daughters and sons parallels the finding that adolescent boys and girls narrate gendered stories of their own, suggesting that adolescents may be constructing a gendered identity at least partly through the understanding of their parents’ experiences as told to them. If this is the case, then we would expect adolescents to tell both intergenerational and personal stories to reflect the gender of the protagonist (i.e., the parent or the adolescent) rather than the gender of the teller. On the other hand, if adolescents tell both intergenerational and personal stories to reflect their own gender, this would suggest that they filter their experiences as well as the experiences of others using their own gender. Their own gendered identity guides the way they experience the world, regardless of the gender of the protagonist.

Thus the major objectives of this study were to systematically examine both intergenerational and positive personal narratives in early to middle adolescence, a time when issues of identity become crucial. This is the first study in the narrative identity literature to examine stories that adolescents know about their parents’ childhood. Based on previous research indicating gender differences in the stories that mothers and fathers tell their daughters and sons, as well as gender differences in personal narratives emerging in childhood, we examined possible gender differences in how adolescent males and females told stories about their parents’ childhood experiences and their own personal experiences along the dimensions of narrative structure (length and elaboration), theme (achievement and affiliation), and content (internal state language, especially emotion). We predicted that males and females would tell gendered stories about their own personal experiences, in that girls would tell more elaborated, affiliative, and emotional personal narratives than boys. For intergenerational narratives, if adolescents are telling the stories as they heard them from their parents, we expected to see these same gender differences in how both boys and girls tell stories about their mothers as compared with their fathers. On the other hand, if adolescents are narrating their
parents’ childhood experiences from their own perspective, then we would expect to see gender differences in how boys and girls tell stories about their parents based on the child’s gender, not on the parent’s gender. We may also see both effects, in that adolescents’ stories about mothers and fathers differ and that boys and girls differ between themselves in how they tell their parents’ stories, suggesting a socialization of gender effect.

Finally, we compared adolescents’ personal narratives to the narratives they tell about their parents along the same narrative dimensions to examine similarities and differences in boys’ and girls’ personal narratives and their narratives about their mothers and fathers. If adolescents are incorporating the gendered identity displayed in their parent’s childhood narratives into their own gendered identity, then we would expect girls’ personal narratives to be more similar to their narratives about their mothers in narrative structure, theme, and content, and boys’ personal narratives to be more similar to their narratives about their fathers.

METHOD
The data reported here are part of a larger study examining family narratives and adolescent identity and well-being (see Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, in press, for more details regarding the larger study). Only the participants and procedures relevant to the current study will be discussed.

Participants
Participants were 65 middle-class, two-parent families with an adolescent in either the 8th or 10th grade, recruited through local institutions such as schools and churches. There were thirty-seven 8th graders (mean age = 13.57, ranging from 13 to 14 years; 17 females and 20 males) and twenty-eight 10th graders (mean age = 15.50, ranging from 15 to 16 years; 15 females and 13 males). Forty-six of the participants self-identified as White/Caucasian and 16 as African American. Two participants self-identified as mixed ethnicity, while one self-identified as Indian. Overall, the families were generally traditional in structure, with 59 adolescents coming from traditional two-parent homes (of these, 3 were adopted) and 6 coming from blended two-parent homes.

This sample was a highly educated one. Sixty-three of the 65 mothers indicated their level of education. Of those, 3 reported having a high school degree, 17 reported having a college degree, and 17 reported having a degree at the postgraduate level. Sixty-one of the 65 fathers indicated their level of education. Of those, 2 reported having some high school education, 4 reported having a high school degree, 10 reported some college education, 26 reported having a college degree, and 19 reported having a degree at the postgraduate level.

For the current study, adolescents were the primary participants. All mothers gave fully informed consent as approved by the Emory University Institutional Review Board and were compensated for their participation in the study with US$25.00 at each of two home visits. Adolescents signed an assent form and were given two movie tickets at the first home visit and a US$25.00 mall gift certificate at the second home visit. Data for this study were collected at the first home visit.

Procedure
Families were visited in their homes by one of eight female research assistants. Out of earshot of the parent, adolescents were asked to narrate personal stories and stories about each parent’s childhood.

Adolescents’ parent–childhood narratives. Each adolescent was asked to narrate two stories about their mother and two stories about their father, using the following prompt: “I am interested in how people tell stories about their families. These are stories about things that you have not experienced yourself, but that were told to you. So you are not going to remember them, because you were either too little, or not born yet. The first stories I’d like to ask you are stories about your mom when she was a kid. Can you think of two stories about your mom when she was a kid?” If a general description of the parent’s childhood was provided, the adolescent was encouraged to think of a specific event. The researcher prompted for the narrative: “Can you tell me everything you know about that specific incident?” and at the end of the narrative, “Is there anything else you would like to add?” The procedure was repeated for the second event. Fathers’ stories were elicited in the same way, and mothers’ and fathers’ stories were counterbalanced.

Adolescents’ personal narratives. Adolescents were asked to narrate two positive personal narratives, using the following prompt: “I want
you to think about a really positive event in your life that you remember; a time when you were really happy, excited, or proud. It may have happened recently or many years ago. Can you tell me everything you remember about that event?” At the end of each narrative, the researcher prompted for more information by asking: “Is there anything else you would like to add?” We note that as part of the larger study, we also collected narratives about highly negative events, but we only include the positive events here because some of the coding schemes of theoretical interest in this study, specifically achievement and affiliation, were not reliable for the negative event narratives. Although this means that the elicitation context for the personal and the intergenerational context was a bit different, we note that about 70% of the intergenerational narratives nominated by the adolescents were of positive experiences as well. We also note that a detailed description and comparison of adolescents’ positive and negative personal narratives is presented in Bohanek, Fivush, Zaman and Grapin (unpublished data) and reveals very few significant differences between positive and negative narratives on some of the coding dimensions used in this study, as well as several additional coding dimensions more relevant to event valance. Adolescents were, for the most part, consistent in how they narrated positive and negative narratives. We return to this issue in the discussion.

Coding

The tape-recorded narratives were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy before coding. Coding schemes were selected to examine three theoretically derived narrative dimensions: (1) differences in the structure of the narratives (length and elaboration), (2) differences in the overall theme of the narratives (affiliation and achievement), and (3) differences in the internal state content of the narratives, including use of general affect, specific emotion words, and cognitive states. For each of these dimensions, we adapted reliable coding schemes already in the literature.

Narrative structure. An overall word count was done on each narrative as a measure of the length of the narrative, using Microsoft Word Count. The elaboration scale was adapted from Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, and Goodman (2000). Elaboration was a measure of the extent to which the adolescent provided detailed descriptions of the events in the narrative. Elaboration scores ranged from 0 (no elaboration) to 3 (highly elaborative), as described in Table 1.

Narrative theme. The dimensions of affiliation and achievement, on which mothers and fathers have differed in their childhood stories to sons and daughters, were adapted from Fiese and Skillman (2000) and Buckner and Fivush (2000), as described in Table 1. Affiliation was a measure of the level of interaction between the parent/adolescent and others in the narrative. Note that this use of affiliation is different from past definitions in that there is an emphasis on the type and level of interaction between characters rather than an emphasis on the valence of the relationship. Scores ranged from 0 (no affiliation) to 3 (highly affiliative). Achievement was a measure of the parent’s/adolescent’s desire to achieve something and the steps taken toward reaching that goal. Achievement scores ranged from 0 (no achievement) to 3 (very achievement-oriented). Stories with an achievement score higher than 0 were also coded for whether the achievement was social (e.g., the desire to establish a relationship) or nonsocial (e.g., getting a good grade). However, achievement in the vast majority of stories was of a nonsocial nature; therefore, this distinction was not included in the analyses.

Internal state content. Within each narrative, each and every mention of an affective state, an emotion word, and a cognitive state was counted. Previous research has shown that females tell personal narratives that are higher on all of these dimensions than males (e.g., Bauer et al., 2003). Affect referred to general affective evaluation of a person or situation (e.g., “That was really tough for my mom.” or “It was really cool.”), whereas emotions referred to the use of a specific emotion word (e.g., sad, angry, happy). Cognitive states referred to all thoughts, beliefs, and desires (e.g., “My mom thought her sister was prettier than her.” or “I really wanted to go to that party.”). All internal states were only coded if they referred to emotions and thoughts experienced about the event itself even if expressed in the present (e.g., “and I’m still sad about that”) but not if they referred to emotions and thoughts outside of the event (e.g., “I can’t believe I remembered that.”). Internal state language was initially coded for whether it referred to the parent, the adolescent, or another. The majority of internal states belonged to the parent in parent—childhood narratives and, similarly, to the adolescent in their personal narratives. Hence, these sub-codes were not further analyzed.
Appendix A presents three sample narratives, a mother–childhood narrative, a father–childhood narrative, and a personal narrative coded for elaboration, narrative theme, and internal state content.

Reliability

All coding schemes were developed by two researchers, who then independently coded 20–25% of each narrative type for reliability. The remaining narratives were then coded by one of the two trained researchers. For the parent–childhood narratives, the intraclass correlation for elaboration was .84, \( p < .01 \), and for affiliation and achievement, intraclass correlations were .77, \( p < .05 \), and .75, \( p < .05 \), respectively. The Cohen’s \( \kappa \) for affective and cognitive states was .92, and for emotion words it was .69. For the personal narratives, the intraclass correlation for elaboration was .93, \( p < .01 \), and for affiliation and achievement, intraclass correlations were .79, \( p < .01 \), and .78, \( p < .01 \), respectively. For the instance-based coding of affective states and cognitive states, the Cohen’s \( \kappa \) was .91, and for the emotion words count it was .84.

RESULTS

The results are presented in three sections. In the first, we examined possible gender differences in how adolescents narrate stories about their parents’ childhood experiences along the dimensions of narrative structure (length and elaboration), narrative theme (affiliation and achievement), and internal state content (affect, emotions words, and cognition words). We next analyzed gender differences in how adolescents tell stories about their own experiences along these same dimensions. Finally, we compared adolescents’ personal stories with the stories they narrate about their mothers’ and fathers’ childhood. Preliminary analyses indicated that there were no main effects and few interactions involving age, none of which were theoretically meaningful; therefore data were collapsed across age for all analyses. Finally, inspection of the data through histograms revealed two outliers, one 10th grade boy and one
10th grade girl who told personal stories that were more than two standard deviations longer than the mean length; these two participants were eliminated from all further analyses.

Adolescents’ Intergenerational Stories

The first set of analyses examined possible gender differences in adolescents’ narratives about their parents’ childhood. Although asked to narrate two stories about each parent, some adolescents were unable to do so; however, no adolescent was unable to tell any story about either parent. Thus for analyses, when available, the mean score on two stories were used; if there was only one story present, the score for that story alone was used. The first two panels of Table 2 display means and standard deviations for all narrative variables. We conducted a series of 2 (gender of adolescent) × 2 (gender or parent) analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with gender of adolescent as a between subject variable and gender of parent as a within subject variable. Follow-up t-tests were conducted where necessary. To place these analyses in context, we first describe the kinds of stories that adolescents selected to narrate.

Narrative topic. Twenty percent of the narratives were examined by two researchers to derive the most common narrative themes. All other narratives were then placed into these categories. Narratives were placed into more than one category if the narrative focused on more than one central theme. On the whole, adolescents narrated a wide variety of different stories that fell into several broad categories, with 94 stories (39%) about family relationships, 75 stories (32%) about mishaps, accidents, and illnesses, 42 stories (18%) about achievements, including career and academic successes, 34 stories (15%) about peer relationships, 17 stories (7%) about animals or pets, and 7 stories (3%) that could not be categorized, such as stories about being afraid of the beach, having big cheeks, and wearing bifocals.

Narrative structure. There were no differences in overall length of the narratives, but stories about mothers (M = 1.61, SD = 0.89) were more elaborate than stories about fathers (M = 1.25, SD = 0.79), \( t(1, 61) = 8.47, p < .01 \). No other effects were significant.

Narrative theme. A 2 (gender of adolescent) × 2 (gender of parent) × 2 (theme) repeated measures ANOVA, with gender of adolescent as a between subject factor and gender of parent and theme as repeated measures, revealed a gender of parent × theme interaction, \( F(1, 61) = 14.76, p < .01 \). Stories about mothers were more affiliation-oriented (M = 1.44, SD = 0.66) than stories about fathers (M = 0.99, SD = 0.83), \( t(1, 62) = 3.18, p < .01 \), and stories about fathers were more achievement-oriented (M = 1.28, SD = 1.11) than stories about mothers (M = 0.88, SD = 0.99), \( t(1, 62) = 2.15, p < .05 \). There was also a gender of adolescent × gender of parent × theme interaction, \( F(1, 61) = 5.23, p < .05 \), indicating that stories told by

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**TABLE 2**
Means (SD) for Variables in Intergenerational and Personal Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Variables</th>
<th>Narratives About Mothers</th>
<th>Narratives About Fathers</th>
<th>Personal Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (number of words)</td>
<td>98.83</td>
<td>136.00</td>
<td>95.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(48.62) (88.93)</td>
<td>(48.09) (81.58)</td>
<td>(122.96) (175.25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.82) (0.93)</td>
<td>(0.76) (0.82)</td>
<td>(0.66) (0.77)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.65) (0.66)</td>
<td>(0.91) (0.73)</td>
<td>(0.74) (0.82)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.14) (0.80)</td>
<td>(1.00) (1.11)</td>
<td>(0.90) (0.99)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective states</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.89) (1.53)</td>
<td>(0.80) (0.84)</td>
<td>(2.00) (4.50)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion words</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.90) (1.48)</td>
<td>(0.75) (0.93)</td>
<td>(2.14) (3.79)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive states</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.97) (1.14)</td>
<td>(0.83) (1.05)</td>
<td>(2.58) (4.48)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
girls about their fathers were significantly more achievement-oriented than stories told by boys about their fathers, \(t(1, 61) = 2.85, p < .01\). Girls’ stories about their fathers were also significantly more achievement-oriented than their stories about their mothers, \(t(1, 30) = 4.01, p < .01\), but there was no difference in the achievement scores for boys’ stories about their mothers and fathers (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations).

**Internal state content.** Stories about mothers contained significantly more affective content (\(M = 1.03, SD = 1.26\)) than stories about fathers (\(M = 0.66, SD = 0.81\)), \(F(1, 61) = 4.87, p < .05\), and stories about mothers (\(M = 1.02, SD = 1.22\)) also contained more emotion words than stories about fathers (\(M = 0.64, SD = 0.84\)), \(F(1, 61) = 5.02, p < .05\). For use of cognitive state language, there were no main effects or interactions.

**Adolescents’ Personal Stories**

The second set of analyses focused on adolescents’ personal narratives. Each adolescent narrated two experiences, and the mean score of the two stories was used in all analyses. Again, preliminary analyses revealed no main effects and no theoretically interesting interactions with age, so all analyses are collapsed across age. Means and standard deviations on all narrative variables for adolescents’ personal narratives by gender, collapsed across age, are displayed in the last panel of Table 2. To place the analyses in context, we first provide a description of the kinds of experiences the adolescents narrated.

**Narrative topic.** Adolescents told 71 stories (55%) about achievements, usually academic- or sports-related, 26 stories (20%) about animals or pets, 22 stories (17%) about family relationships, mainly family vacations, 17 stories (13%) about peer relationships, and one story about a video game that could not be placed into any of the categories above.

**Narrative structure.** As displayed in Table 2, girls told significantly longer narratives than did boys, \(t(1, 61) = 2.19, p < .05\); therefore all further analyses used length as a covariate. Girls also told more elaborated narratives than boys, \(F(1, 60) = 3.01, p < .10\), even when co-varying for length.

**Narrative theme.** A 2 (gender) \(\times\) 2 (theme) repeated measures ANCOVA with gender as a between

subject variable and theme as a repeated measure revealed no gender differences in themes of affiliation or achievement. But overall, adolescents told more achievement stories than affiliation stories, \(F(1, 60) = 12.50, p < .01\) (see Table 2).

**Internal state content.** Girls included more affective content in their narratives than did boys, \(F(1, 60) = 6.29, p < .05\) (see Table 2). There were no gender differences in the use of emotion words or cognitive states.

**Relations Between Adolescents’ Personal Stories and Stories About Parents**

Our final set of analyses focused on relations between adolescents’ personal and intergenerational narratives. Thus, we examined individual differences in narrative style; essentially, do adolescents who tell more elaborated, affiliative, internal state saturated narratives about themselves also use these narrative dimensions when narrating about their parent’s childhood and does this relate to gender? In order to examine this question, we conducted Pearson’s correlations comparing each individual’s personal narrative to narratives about their mother’s childhood, narratives about their father’s childhood, and narratives about mother’s childhood to narratives about father’s childhood on each narrative dimension. Because we have already established differences by both gender of child for personal stories and gender of parent for parent–childhood stories, we thought it necessary to examine these correlations for boys and girls separately. Correlations are displayed in Table 3.

As can be seen, girls who told longer, more elaborate stories about themselves, using more affect and cognitive states, told similarly long, elaborate, and internal state saturated stories about their mothers but not their fathers. The correlation between girls’ use of emotion words in their own and their stories about their mothers, although not significant by traditional levels of significance, did approach significance (\(p < .10\)). Note, however, there were no relations between girls’ personal narratives and narratives about either mothers or fathers on dimensions of affiliation and achievement. Most interesting, the analyses for boys revealed few correlations (other than length) among personal narratives and narratives about either mothers or fathers. Finally, it is noteworthy that narratives about mothers and about fathers were essentially unrelated to each other.
DISCUSSION

Little research to date has examined the stories that are passed on from generation to generation within families, and no study in the narrative identity literature has looked at what children and adolescents take away from these stories. Yet, certain stories about the family past may be especially important during adolescence, as individuals begin to develop a sense of self as embedded within a larger familial history. Thus, our primary objective in this study was to examine the narratives adolescent boys and girls tell about their mothers’ and fathers’ childhood. To begin to understand how adolescents’ stories of their parents may inform their own developing narrative identity, we also examined the personal narratives of these adolescent boys and girls.

Overall, stories about mothers’ childhood were more elaborative, more affiliative, and contained more affective states and emotion words than stories about fathers’ childhood, while stories about fathers were more achievement-focused than stories about mothers, particularly when told by girls. However, whereas there were few gender differences between boys and girls in their intergenerational narratives, adolescent girls told longer, more elaborative, and more affectively rich personal narratives about themselves than did boys. Thus, in general, adolescents appear to narrate stories about their parents’ childhood in line with gendered orientations of the parent, while they narrate stories of their personal experiences in line with gendered orientations of themselves.

There are at least two reasons why adolescents may tell gendered stories about their mothers and fathers. First, it is highly likely that the stories adolescents tell mirror the stories they have heard. Fiese and Skillman (2000) showed that childhood stories told by fathers to their children tend to be more autonomous and achievement-focused, while childhood stories told by mothers tend to be more social and relational in nature. Yet previous research also suggests that parents tell different stories about their childhood depending on the gender of their child, with sons receiving more achievement stories from both parents, and daughters receiving more affiliation stories from both parents (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Fiese & Skillman, 2000). Because sons and daughters are hearing different kinds of stories, we might expect gender differences in how boys and girls told stories about their mothers’ and fathers’ childhoods, but we did not find that here. Fivush and Buckner (2003) have argued that parents provide gender-typed stories during the preschool years when the concept of gender is developing (Kohlberg, 1966) and parents and children may be focused on creating clear gender contrasts. But as gender constancy develops, parents may socialize gender in a different way, perhaps by focusing on their own gendered identity, regardless of whether the adolescent is male or female. Although speculative, our findings suggest that, by adolescence, children are hearing and incorporating stories about their parents’ childhood that accord with the parent’s gender, but not the child’s gender.

Another possibility is that adolescents provide more elaborate, emotionally rich narratives about their mothers than their fathers because they share very different relationships with each parent. Research suggests that adolescents classified as securely attached generally favor their mothers over their fathers as their primary attachment figure and rate their mothers higher on attachment support than their fathers (Freeman & Brown, 2001). Moreover, adolescent
boys and girls both report higher affect toward their mothers than their fathers and rely more on their mothers for emotional support than their fathers (Patterson, Field, & Pryor, 1994). Adolescents’ dependence on and perceived availability of their fathers also decline with age (Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999), and both boys and girls tend to open up to and share more with their mothers than their fathers (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Therefore, the adolescents in our study may simply be remembering more detailed, elaborated stories about their mothers than their fathers because they feel more supported by and closer to their mothers and are able to communicate more with their mothers than their fathers and because their mothers may provide them with these stories more often than their fathers do.

An interesting and unexpected finding, and the only difference between adolescent girls and boys in the intergenerational narratives, was that girls told more achievement stories about their fathers. We expected stories provided by adolescent boys to be more achievement-focused because boys have been shown to receive more achievement stories from parents than girls (Fiese & Skillman, 2000). However, Fiese and Skillman (2000) have also shown that when parents are non-gender-typed (i.e., they do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes in raising their children) daughters are more likely to hear stories with themes of achievement than the daughters of gender-typed parents, but there is no difference in the stories sons hear depending on the type of family. Our sample was a highly educated one, and both parents in almost all of our families worked outside of the home. Families in which mothers work tend to be more nontraditional in style, and parents display more egalitarian roles, teaching their daughters to be more autonomous and self-reliant (Brannon, 2005). Thus, it may be that the nontraditional parents in our families socialize their daughters to defy cultural norms, encouraging them to focus on their personal achievements by narrating more of their own achievement stories to them. Because fathers may provide more achievement stories in general (Fiese & Skillman, 2000), girls socialized to focus on their achievements may center on achievement narratives when asked to provide stories from their parents’ childhood. But because mothers may provide more affiliation stories, there are fewer achievement stories to select from. Indeed, our results indicate that the girls in this study provide more achievement than affiliation stories even when talking about their own experiences.

An alternative explanation for these results may relate to the finding that girls often look up to their fathers as the typical male role model who is supposed to exemplify success (Biller, 1971). Thus, when fathers narrate more achievement stories to their children, daughters may amplify these successes in their fathers’ lives, and this may cause them to recall primarily achievement stories about their fathers when prompted. However, these findings require further examination in order to fully explain them.

Regardless of the interpretation of gender differences, this was the first study to examine stories that adolescents know and tell about their parents’ childhood. Certainly folk psychology and limited empirical evidence suggests that parents tell stories about their childhood frequently to their own children beginning in infancy (Fiese et al., 1995). Our results indicate that adolescents are listening to and know these stories, often quite well. Almost all the adolescents in our study easily and eagerly provided elaborated narratives that they knew about their parents, suggesting that these stories are an important part of shared family communications. In fact, adolescents’ narratives about their parents were just as elaborative and included just as much general affect and cognitive states as their personal narratives, indicating the extent to which intergenerational stories are integrated into their knowledge of family and self.

Mirroring the gender differences in their narratives about their mothers compared with their fathers, adolescent girls and boys tell very different personal stories about their own experiences, with girls telling longer, more elaborated, and more affectively rich personal narratives than boys. Importantly, these results replicate previous findings of gender differences in the structure (e.g., Thorne & McLean, 2002), and content (Pillemer, Wink, DiDonato, & Sanborn, 2003), specifically internal state content (Bauer et al., 2003), of men’s and women’s narratives about their personal experiences, suggesting that men and women attend to and consider different aspects of their experiences to be important, and these are the aspects that become reflected in their respective narratives. This gendered orientation to the world may begin as young as childhood (Fivush et al., 1995) and may be the result of gendered parent–child reminiscing, in which both parents distinguish between sons and daughters when discussing past experiences, telling longer, more interpersonally focused, and more emotionally rich narratives to daughters than to sons (see Fivush, 1991). The current findings suggest that these gender patterns persist through adolescence, when constructing an adult identity and negotiating different societal roles become salient issues. The gendered
telling of their own personal experiences may indicate that as adolescents struggle to define themselves, the ways in which they have previously co-constructed gendered narratives of experiences in early childhood with their parents may help define their individual gendered orientation to the world.

Yet, despite differences in structure and content (length, elaboration, and affective content), we did not find gender differences in the narrative themes (affiliation and achievement) of boys’ and girls’ personal stories. Past studies have found that women tell more social-affiliative stories, while men tell more autonomous and achievement stories (e.g., Niedzwieiska, 2003). Intriguingly, in our study both boys and girls narrated stories about themselves that were generally more achievement-oriented than affiliative. Indeed, the vast majority of events that boys and girls chose to narrate were about achievements in the classroom or in the areas of sports and extracurricular activities. This may have been an effect of the way in which adolescents’ personal narratives were prompted. Adolescents were asked to think of positive events in their lives, which made them extremely happy, excited, or proud, thus eliciting events highly focused on personal achievements. This finding also suggests that at this age, adolescents are highly focused on their personal successes. School becomes much more competitive, and as adolescents begin to think about their future, the consequences of not doing well may become more salient. In fact, at this age, academics become an increasingly central component of the adolescent’s emerging self-concept (Evangelista, 2001). Moreover, our sample of adolescents came from highly educated, dual-earner families. As mentioned before, researchers have argued that families in which both parents work tend to impart less stereotyped rules about gender roles, particularly to their daughters, often encouraging them to be more focused on successes and achievements, compared with families in which the father is the primary earner (Brannon, 2005). What is especially interesting, however, is that even when boys and girls tell stories about the same types of events, girls’ narratives were longer, more elaborate, and more emotionally rich than boys’, suggesting that adolescent girls and boys perceive their world and interpret their experiences in very different ways.

In fact, when we examine relations between adolescents’ personal and intergenerational narratives, we once again see gender differences between boys and girls. In particular, adolescent girls tell personal narratives that are similar in style to the stories they tell about their mothers, but not about their fathers, suggesting that some aspects of a gendered narrative orientation may be socialized through parental storytelling. However, we found no relations between boys’ personal narratives and either stories about mothers or fathers. Thus girls may be more sensitive to the gendered models being provided by their parents’ storytelling than are boys. These results attest to the importance of intergenerational narratives in helping adolescents to construct a narrative identity.

It must be noted that our comparison of intergenerational and personal narratives was exploratory in nature. The personal narratives focused on positive events whereas the intergenerational narratives were more open-ended, and thus some of the differences obtained may have been due to the elicitation prompts. Because this was the first study in the narrative identity literature to examine intergenerational narratives, we left the prompts as open-ended as possible in order to get a sense of the phenomenon more broadly. In fact, about 70% of the narratives adolescents narrated about their parents’ childhood were of positive events. Moreover, different elicitation prompts for personal and intergenerational narratives would not explain the gendered differences we obtained, as all adolescents were given the same set of prompts for the intergenerational stories, yet these differed by gender of parent but not gender of adolescent, and all adolescents were given the same elicitation prompts for the personal narratives, yet these varied by gender of adolescent. Still, more directly comparing personal and intergenerational narratives when using the same narrative prompt is an important avenue for future research, and one we are pursuing in our lab.

Further, all of our families were middle-class, two-parent, dual-earner families, and future research must examine more diverse populations. We have also only examined here the stories that adolescents tell. It would be extremely informative to compare these stories to the stories that the parents themselves tell about these same events, as well as to how parents and adolescents co-construct these stories in everyday conversations. Additionally, perhaps because almost all of these narratives were positive, preliminary investigations of the data suggest that adolescents benefit from these types of stories. However, not all intergenerational stories may be beneficial, particularly parents’ stories of transgressions. It remains to be seen whether or not children benefit from all types of stories of their parents’ past. These questions are currently under investigation in our lab. Finally, we present here data from one point in time. While this allows us to compare adolescent’s
personal and family narratives, it does not allow any investigation of direction of effect. This issue awaits future longitudinal research.

Still, the results of this first study are impressive. In addition to demonstrating the importance of intergenerational narratives, specifically parent-childhood stories, during adolescence, a critical time for the formation of identity, we have also extended established gender differences in autobiographical narratives to adolescence. Adolescents know and easily recount stories about their parents' childhoods, and for the most part, these stories are narrated differently depending on the gender of the parent, not the adolescent, confirming previous research that parents are telling gendered narratives to their children and demonstrating that these gendered messages are being incorporated into adolescents' own understanding of their parent's identity. That adolescents differentiate among personal narratives, narratives about their mothers, and narratives about their fathers is evidence that these gender differences do not reflect a general narrative style, but rather the gendered orientation of the protagonist of the story. Further, there is suggestive evidence that parents' gendered identity has some impact on children's gendered identity, in that girls are telling personal stories that mirror the narratives they tell about their mothers in structure and content but not their fathers. The role that family stories play in adolescents' emerging identity is provocative and awaits future research to elucidate.

APPENDIX A

Narrative About Mom, Provided by an 8th Grade Female

“When she was about my age she had a friend who came from kind of uh . . . I don’t know . . . like her family. . . . I mean when she was thirteen or fourteen she was already like doing drugs and having sex and stuff and I think she had abusive parents or something. Um, so she ran away and I think they skipped school and ran away; my mom went with her. And they were gone for two nights and um the first night, I don’t remember . . . I think they stayed with these guys that they met. And they gave my mom and her friend like alcohol or drugs or something. I don’t think they did anything to them. But, I don’t think my mom was ever really sure (Cognition). And they spent the night in the bathroom of this dirty little like disgusting place. And my mom said it was awful (Affect); it was like one of the worst experiences (Affect) of her life. And um . . . and when my mom agreed to run away I think she was kind of hoping (Cognition) it would change things at home because it seemed like her parents never really paid much attention to her ‘cause they were always you know drinking and partying and just had all this other stuff to deal with all the time. Um so she . . . they were worried about her (Affect; Emotion Word) and when she finally went home her mom . . . her mom came and picked her up somewhere like after they finally were tracked down. And then um after about two days things just went back to normal at her house and it was like her parents just kind of forgot about it (Cognition). I don’t even know if I told that correctly, but that’s how I remember it. I mean, she told it to me pretty recently, like a few months ago, but um that’s pretty much . . . it’s pretty much the correct story in a nutshell. I don’t really remember major details, I mean minor details, or whatever.”

Elaboration Score: 3; Affiliation Score: 2; Achievement Score: 2

Narrative about Dad, Provided by an 8th Grade Male

“When she was about my age she had a friend who came from kind of uh . . . I don’t know . . . like her family. . . . I mean when she was thirteen or fourteen she was already like doing drugs and having sex and stuff and I think she had abusive parents or something. Um, so she ran away and I think they skipped school and ran away; my mom went with her. And they were gone for two nights and um the first night, I don’t remember . . . I think they stayed with these guys that they met. And they gave my mom and her friend like alcohol or drugs or something. I don’t think they did anything to them. But, I don’t think my mom was ever really sure (Cognition). And they spent the night in the bathroom of this dirty little like disgusting place. And my mom said it was awful (Affect); it was like one of the worst experiences (Affect) of her life. And um . . . and when my mom agreed to run away I think she was kind of hoping (Cognition) it would change things at home because it seemed like her parents never really paid much attention to her ‘cause they were always you know drinking and partying and just had all this other stuff to deal with all the time. Um so she . . . they were worried about her (Affect; Emotion Word) and when she finally went home her mom . . . her mom came and picked her up somewhere like after they finally were tracked down. And then um after about two days things just went back to normal at her house and it was like her parents just kind of forgot about it (Cognition). I don’t even know if I told that correctly, but that’s how I remember it. I mean, she told it to me pretty recently, like a few months ago, but um that’s pretty much . . . it’s pretty much the correct story in a nutshell. I don’t really remember major details, I mean minor details, or whatever.”

Elaboration Score: 3; Affiliation Score: 2; Achievement Score: 2

Narrative about Dad, Provided by an 8th Grade Male

“When I got accepted into this um SEMA program. It’s Science, Engineering, Mathematics and Aerospace Academy. It’s sponsored by NASA. I was in the second grade. I was, one out of I think three kids in my school or something like that and it was a random out-of-a-hat thing and I got picked for it and I was so excited (Affect; Emotion Word) and I’ve been doing it ever since. It’s really just like a day camp thing on Saturdays, science based. I was really happy (Affect; Emotion Word). I was going like ‘Wow, that’s cool’ (Affect). And I think (Cognition) it’s really fun (Affect), but they only go up to um, I’m not sure what grade they go up to. Well, I remember I was in second grade and my second grade teacher came up to me and asked me if it would be okay if she nominated me for it. And I said, “Oh. Well what is it?” And she told me about it and I thought (Cognition) it was really cool (Affect) so she nominated me, but I didn’t expect (Cognition) it would happen. I think I was up against another fifth grader and I think maybe a third or fourth grader. And I remember, on the announcements, hearing um my name being called as the one who had gotten
accepted into it. They, for some reason, took one person from each school in DeKalb County or something. And it’s at Fernbank Science Center and I remember I went there and it was just really fun (Affect). We learned about this stuff; it all ties into space somehow. Like um we like learned about food that the astronauts eat or something. And I remember I went to it and I thought (Cognition) it was so cool (Affect) even though it did take up like the whole morning of my Saturdays, but it was almost . . . it was like completely worth it (Affect). And I took it always in the winter and then I took it once in the summer and I didn’t like it (Affect; Emotion Word) in the summer. But, from then on, I took it in the winter and only this past year have I started taking it in the fall. I was so happy (Affect; Emotion Word) and I was so proud (Affect; Emotion Word) of myself for actually beating those two older students for it. And I remember being so scared (Affect; Emotion Word) because we went to the planetarium and then they herded us out into our classrooms. I was so scared (Affect; Emotion Word) that I wouldn’t make any friends or anything and I made one friend and that was really cool (Affect) and it was just so fun (Affect). And the kids in there were really nice. Some of the boys were a little xxxx. Other than that, they were really nice. It was just so cool (Affect). And then, also, that my teacher would nominate me for that, I felt really good (Affect; Emotion Word) that I’d like accomplished something.”

Elaboration Score: 3; Affiliation Score: 1; Achievement Score: 3

Personal Narrative, Provided by an 8th Grade Male

“Well I had found out about tryouts, and I’d been playing golf awhile, so I just wanted (Cognition) to um, I thought (Cognition) I’d try out. So I started working pretty hard with it just practicing and trying to get better. And so we went and started tryouts and I made it through the first day real easily. It was just putting, it was easy. And then, so the second and third day were actual playing days. So the first day I did really well, and the second day I just . . . awful. And so it was really starting to worry me (Affect; Emotion Word), because I didn’t know (Cognition) if I’d make it because I did so bad the last day. So I had to sit through like another three days of waiting to find out. And so, when I finally found out it was a big relief (Affect) and I was just, I was glad (Affect; Emotion Word) I made the team, because everybody in my family is really into golf and they were really supporting me and all that stuff, so I thought (Cognition) it was a big accomplishment, me making it.”

Elaboration Score: 2; Affiliation Score: 1; Achievement Score: 3

REFERENCES


