

# 10

## The Intergenerational Self *Subjective Perspective and Family History*

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Self memory and autobiographical memory are inextricably tied. Our experiences shape our developing self-understanding, and our self-understanding influences how and what we recall of our pasts in an ongoing dialectical relation (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004), and this process occurs in social interaction (Gergen, 1994; Hermans, 1996). Self both emerges from and contributes to ongoing social interactions, such that how we narrate our experiences with others shapes how we come to understand these experiences for ourselves (Fivush, Reese, & Haden, 1996; Pasupathi, 2001). Through describing, explaining, and evaluating our pasts in socially situated reminiscing, we come to construct an interpretive framework for understanding both our experiences and our selves.

Provocatively, our sense of self is not tied solely to personally experienced events. Who we are and how we understand our personal experiences is also shaped by how we understand others' experiences. This is true in at least two senses. First, incorporating others' perspectives on those experiences enriches understanding of our own past experiences; when we share experiences in reminiscing, we construct a more nuanced and more subjective perspective on our own past. Second, and perhaps more intriguing, hearing the experiences of others changes our perspective of our self. Stories of the past that we did not experience still provide powerful models, frameworks, and perspectives for understanding our own experiences. We construct a sense of self through time that relies both on an evaluative perspective of our own personal history, as well as how our history fits into larger cultural and historical frameworks. We are who we are because of what we have experienced and what we have been told; our sense of self is constructed from both personal history and the social cultural history in which our personal history is embedded.

In this chapter we explore these issues in two ways. We first examine how children begin to develop a subjective perspective on their own personal experience through parent-guided reminiscing; subjective perspective refers to the understanding that what one recalls about a specific experience may or may not be the same as what another person recalls, even though both may have experienced the event together. We argue that children's developing subjective perspective leads to the sense of a temporally extended self. Because these arguments have been made previously (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Haden, 2005; Fivush & Nelson, in press), we review them only briefly here. We then turn to a more detailed discussion of how the sense of self through time is expanded in early adolescence to include a personal history defined by family stories, and how family reminiscing leads to an intergenerational self, a self that is defined as much by one's place in a familial history as a personal past.

We approach these issues from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of development. As we will demonstrate, language-based social interaction is the critical tool in the development of personal memory and a sense of self as continuous in time. Without the ability to share our memories with others, we would not be able to construct a sense of past experiences as uniquely our own. Even more so, without language, we would have no access to the experiences of others that we did not share. We return to these issues and to the central role of language in creating a self in time at the end of the chapter.

## THE SUBJECTIVE SELF

Children begin referring to their own past experiences very early in development, virtually as soon as they begin talking (Nelson & Ross, 1980; Sachs, 1983). But at this early stage of remembering, children refer only briefly and in passing to recent events. Parents, however, begin reminiscing about shared experiences with their preschool children well before their children are able to contribute fully to these conarrations (Reese, 2002). Essentially, parents provide the content and structure of these narratives, and children participate by confirming or repeating the parent. Very quickly, by about 30 months of age, children begin to participate more fully in these conversations, recalling bits and pieces of information in response to parental questions. By the end of the preschool years, children are able to provide reasonably coherent and detailed narratives of their own personal past (Fivush & Haden, 1997; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996). A great deal of research has now established that children are learning the forms and functions of talking about the past through participating in these parent-guided conarrations (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2005; and Nelson & Fivush, 2004, for reviews).

What is not as clear is exactly what children understand about memory, representation, and perspective in these early conarrations. The ability to engage in conversations about a past event is a relatively complicated and sophisticated cognitive skill that requires the ability to share an object of attention that does not exist in the physical present. Although the parent must be aware that both parent and child are both recalling the same event and sharing their memories in the present,

children may rely on the parents' ability to create the shared object of reference. In this sense, children do not need to be able to reflect on the *process* of remembering in order to engage in the *activity* of remembering.

Across the preschool years, as parents and children engage in more frequent and more extended conversations about the shared past, there are critical conversational junctures at which children are confronted with the fact that different people who experienced the same event can have different memories of that event (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Nelson, in press). This can occur at the level of the facts of what happened, for example, when the child recalls seeing a kangaroo at the zoo but the parent does not. These kinds of cognitive confrontations facilitate children's understanding that memories are *representations* rather than veridical copies of past events, and that different people who experienced the same event can remember and/or forget different aspects of the event. More interesting, individuals can disagree about emotions, thoughts, and evaluations concerning the past event (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Haden, 2005). For example, the parent enjoyed seeing Santa at the mall, but the child was frightened. When these conflicting rememberings occur, the parent and child negotiate their memories, discussing how and why they recall and evaluate the event differently.

These negotiations are critical in children coming to understand that memories of the past are subjective; that what I remember may or may not be what you remember. Further, when the negotiations are about internal states and evaluations, children begin to understand that they have a unique perspective on the past: This is what I remember and how I felt about it, which may or may not be what you remember or felt about it. It is this unique perspective that makes the memory *mine*. It is in this sense that children develop a *perspectival* theory of memory, a theory based on the understanding that each individual has a unique perspective on his or her past experiences. Moreover, it is this perspective that makes the memory uniquely one's own, and it is in this sense that autobiographical memories become defining for self. Self is not constituted from an accumulation of memories of past events; self is constituted from a subjective perspective that links the meaning and evaluation of past experiences to the present. It is the realization that one has a unique set of memories and a unique perspective for understanding and evaluating these memories that makes one a unique self, and it is this subjective perspective that links these experiences together to form a coherent sense of self from the past into the present. Thus, it is the development of a subjective perspective on the past that allows children to develop a sense of self as extended in time (see Fivush, 2001, and Fivush & Nelson, in press, for a full theoretical argument on this point).

## THE INTERGENERATIONAL SELF

Whereas negotiating conflicting memories of shared experiences is critical for the development of a subjective perspective on one's own experience, children are also exposed to stories about events outside their experience. Personal narratives are told to, about, and around children beginning very early in development (Fiese

& Marjinsky, 1999; Miller, Mintz, Hoogstra, Fung, & Potts, 1992). Children are surrounded by stories about other people and other times, yet there is surprisingly little research on how children make sense of these kinds of stories.

Family stories, stories about shared family experiences, about the parents' lives before the children were born, what parents' childhoods were like, and stories of previous generations, may be particularly frequent (see Pratt & Fiese, 2004, for a review). These kinds of family stories create meaning beyond the individual, to include a sense of self through historical time and in relation to family members (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Norris, Kuiack, & Pratt, 2004). Part of who a person is is defined by the experiences of his or her parents and their parents before them. The ability to take on this kind of perspective in terms of one's own personal experiences goes well beyond understanding that others can recall events differently than the self; it requires an understanding that others have independent lives and experiences that the self is not privileged to and can only know through stories (Fivush, *in press*). As children mature and develop a sense of subjective self, they become aware that others also have a subjective perspective on their personal memories, and they become increasingly interested in how other people experienced and evaluated the events of their lives. By the time children enter school, they are asking to hear stories about their family, their parents, and about themselves when they were babies. This increased interest in hearing stories about events outside of their own personal experience or memory suggests that children are becoming intrigued with how to make sense of their own lives in the context of other people's lives, as we can see in the following excerpt of a conversation between a 5-year-old girl and her mother (from Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). The child had been attacked by a yellowjacket bee earlier that day and had been very frightened, and the mother later asks her about it:

Mother: Do you remember when you were scared today? About the yellowjacket? When you went out to the play set? And you were screaming and screaming and screaming ... were you scared when you thought that yellowjacket was going to get you?

Child: When you were a little girl, did you scream, did you scream, Mom, when you were a little girl, for your Mom to come get you?

Mother: Yeah, I screamed when I was a little girl, but that yellowjacket is not going to hurt you.

How and when children begin to use these kinds of stories to understand the self is the question addressed in our current research on the development of an intergenerational self. This research is focused on three central issues. First, we examine reminiscing within the family as a whole; second, we examine this process in families with preadolescent children; and third, we explore the role of intergenerational stories in the development of preadolescents' emerging self-understanding.

The family is obviously an important context for the socialization of multiple developmental skills (see McHale & Grolnick, 2004, for an overview), including autobiography (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Family researchers have described the

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family as a dynamic system in which communication among multiple family members contributes to developmental outcome (Gottman, 2001; Hooven, Gottman, & Katz, 1995; Kreppner, 2002). The ways in which the family as a whole interacts together is not a simple sum of the parts; in order to understand the socializing influence of the family, it is necessary to examine the dynamics within the system as a unit. As we are particularly interested in the creation of family stories and family history, it seems critical to examine this process as it occurs within the family as a whole.

Further, we focus on families with a preadolescent child, because this is a significant period for the development of autobiography and self and when narratives begin to take on new meaning for the individual (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1993, 2001). With the cognitive and social advances of adolescence, individuals are able to organize and integrate memories of their past experiences into a life narrative, allowing for self-continuity and a more complex sense of self (Pillemer, 1998). Thus, for adolescents, the ways in which families guide them to create more collaborative and integrated narratives may be an important factor in their developing sense of self and may help them navigate problems associated with adolescence and the development of self-identity.

Finally, we are particularly interested in the sharing and transmission of family history narratives. Family history includes both stories of experiences the family has shared together in the remote past, such as family vacations and sibling births, as well as stories outside of the children's experience, including stories of the parents before the children were born, both as children in their own families of origin and as adults before forming this family. These kinds of stories provide an historical context for children, informing them of how they fit into a larger life framework. As Pratt and Fiese (2004) have argued, family stories are the way in which we connect across generations to create family history and family identity. Through the telling and sharing of family history stories, children develop a sense of self as connected to previous generations. By anchoring oneself in family history, one has a sense of place and security that may facilitate self-confidence and self-competence.

Much of what we know about how the family as a whole narrates the past has emerged from research examining general family interactions around the dinner table. This research focuses on multiple functions that family conversational interaction serves in developmental outcome, and only a few studies have focused specifically on narrative talk about the past embedded within these more extended dinner conversations. From these few studies (e.g., Beals & Snow, 2002; Blum-Kulka, 1993, 1994, 1997; Perlmann, 1984), it is clear that talk about past events is common, with about one quarter to one third of dinner conversation devoted to narratives. "Today I ..." narratives, where family members go around the table and describe what they did that day, are the most common and most ritualized type of past event talk. However, families also talk about more distant past events around the dinner table.

In our research we are particularly interested in these more temporally distant family history narratives. How do families continue to tell stories of their past shared experiences as a family? Do children ask for, and do parents offer, stories of the parents' experiences outside of the family? Of their own childhood and of their

parents? And if so, how are these stories told? Who initiates them and who contributes to the narration? And, perhaps most important, does it matter if families share these kinds of stories? We address these questions in two ways: First, we examine the prevalence and type of family history narratives around the dinner table, and second, we assess relations between family history narratives, children's knowledge of their family history, and their self-understanding (see Bohanek, Fivush, Marin, & Duke, 2005, and Bohanek, Thomas-Lepore, Fivush, & Duke, 2005, for details).

Thirty-seven middle-class, two-parent families with at least one child between the age of 9 and 12 years tape recorded a typical dinnertime. Three families had one child present at the meal, 22 families had 2 children present, 8 families had 3 children present, 3 families had 4 children present, and 1 family had 5 children present at the meal. Dinner conversations varied in length from 20–45 minutes.

In addition to collecting tape recorded dinnertime conversations from each family, we also asked the preadolescent child to complete a set of standardized measures of self and well-being, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965) designed to measure feelings of self-worth, the Child Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External locus of control scale (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) designed to assess the sense of self as an effective agent in the world, and the Family Functioning Scale (Tavitian, Lubiner, Green, Grebstein, & Velicer, 1994), assessing family affect and communication. In addition, the mother was asked to complete the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991), which is scored to reflect the child's tendency to exhibit any symptoms of internalizing problems (such as anxiety and depression) as well as externalizing problems (such as aggression and acting out).

Finally, we developed a new measure for this study, called the “Do you know?” scale, which assesses the preadolescent's knowledge of family history. This questionnaire asks children to respond to 20 yes/no questions about their family history. Items include, “Do you know how your parents met?” and “Do you know what went on when you were being born?”

Looking first at the types of narratives families tell around the dinner table, we replicated previous findings on the prevalence of family members telling the events of their day. Of the total 235 narratives that occurred across the 37 families, 226 of them could be classified by time and narrative type. Of these, there were 149 narratives about the day's activities, and 77 narratives about more temporally remote events. Of these 77 narratives, 51 were about events one family member experienced outside the family (most often about a child's school or peer experiences several weeks in the past), and 26 were family history narratives. In all, 18 of the 37 families told stories about their history, accounting for about 12% of all narratives told around the dinner table.

Interestingly, the various types of family history narratives were not equally frequent, with 8 families narrating 13 stories about their shared past, 7 families narrating 7 stories about the parents as young adults, and 6 families narrating 6 stories about the parents as children. Although these family history narratives were not prevalent, when they did emerge in conversation, they were extended and collaborative. Table 10.1 displays who initiated these stories, and who contributed to the telling. As can be seen, across narrative type, each conversation consisted of multiple conversational turns (at least 12), and each conversation

TABLE 10.1 Please supply table title

Family Narrative	Number of Parent Initiated	Number of Child Initiated	Average Number of Conversational Turns	Average Number of Words per Conversation
Shared family (n = 13)	5	8	18.56	160.27
Parents as adults (n = 7)	4	3	12.57	134.71
Parents as children (n = 6)	5	1	17	173.5

was also extended, with no fewer than 130 words per conversation. Provocatively, whereas both parents and children initiated stories about the parents as adults with near equal frequency, children more often initiated stories about events that were shared with the family, whereas parents more often initiated stories about themselves as children.

Many of the narratives of shared family experiences were retellings of family vacations, which were usually accompanied by high positive affect, suggesting that the telling and retelling of these kinds of events serve the function of creating and maintaining emotional bonds among family members (Fivush, et al., 1996). In addition, several of the stories included information about how the family came together as a family, such as this story told by a family of five, with three children between the ages of 2 and 10 years, including 5-year-old Molly and 10-year-old Nicholas. The family is talking about their current garden, when the father brings up a garden they planted in the past:

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Father: ... In the old house, not the house you were born in, Molly, but the house Nicholas was born in.

Nicholas: Yeah?

Mother: Oh, the very first house? House number one?

Father: Mom was wanting to plant, guess what Mom planted?

Nicholas: Roses.

Father: (unintelligible) roses, right?

Mother: And what about the color?

Father: And so, so, then the roses. ...

Nicholas: Uh, red, white, pink.

Mother: (laughs)

This narrative continues for several more conversational turns about the roses coming up and being infected with aphids, and the father ordering ladybugs to add to the garden to eat the aphids, but several things are noteworthy in these

initial exchanges. First, the parents together provide a family time line for the children, which includes information about the constitution of the family at different time points (which children were born in which houses). Moreover, although the younger daughter, Molly, had not been born yet, the father brings her into the story by placing her on the time line, albeit as not yet being a part of the family. Notice also that the oldest child immediately expresses interest in hearing this story by interjecting “yeah?” to encourage his father to continue. He also contributes information to the emerging narrative. But this information is not just about what happened, it is very much about who his mother is as a person. The family clearly shares knowledge (and enjoys sharing this knowledge) that the mother would have planted red, white, and pink roses, and this bonds the family together as a unit that has shared knowledge of its members that others might not be privileged to. Thus, in this brief excerpt we see the creation of the family over time as additional children are born and new houses are moved into, as well as shared knowledge about the predilections of one of the family members in the function of creating a shared sense of family. In these ways, family narratives of shared experiences help children create a sense of self in relation to family members and over time.

Family stories about the parents’ experiences outside of this family, especially the parents’ childhoods, were especially interesting, as these stories help place the child in an intergenerational context, as we see in this story about the mother’s childhood vegetable garden. This is a family of four, with two boys, Aaron, who is 13 years old, and Conner, who is 10 years old. The family is passing vegetables around the table when the mother begins the story:

Mother: I told you about asparagus, how weird it is.

Conner: And how you hated it when you were a kid.

Mother: I didn’t like it when I was a kid, which is really a terrible thing ‘cause my father grew it fresh in the garden.

Aaron: Well, at least it was better than the stuff you buy at the store.

Mother: I know. I’m sorry I missed it. ... My parents didn’t make me ‘cause they liked it so much they didn’t care if I didn’t eat it (chuckles). They made me eat the frozen or canned peas, but they didn’t care if I didn’t eat the asparagus from the garden.

Conner: ... But I thought you said that they didn’t ...

Aaron: (overlapping with his brother) ... they didn’t grow peas in the garden.

Mother: They did, actually did. They grew peas and beans and rhubarb and asparagus. One year he grew corn. That was pretty cool.

Aaron: Did it turn out okay?

Mother: It was okay. It wasn’t great.



Again we see that the children are actively engaged in this conversation, even though they clearly have no direct experience of these events, and indeed, even contribute to the story. It is also clear that this is a recurring story, that the family has spoken before of the grandparent's vegetable garden, as both sons obviously already know about it and are interested in expanding their knowledge. In this way, the mother's childhood vegetable garden becomes part of her children's own history.

Another way in which stories of the parents' childhoods functioned was in building connections between parents' and children's experiences, as we see in this narrative about the father's childhood experiences in choir. This is a family of five, with three children, 13-year-old Becca, 10-year-old Benjamin, and David, a new 10-month-old member of the family. Becca is discussing her band's performance in a competition:

Becca: Well, we didn't get to hear any other bands. We would have liked to but, you know, we had to leave.

Father: Hmm. I remember when I was in choir, when I was in high school.

Becca: uh huh

Father: We didn't do so good. (he and Becca laugh). I think we got 3's and 4's.

Becca: Yeah, yeah, see the thing I don't like about our choir is, uh, they sound really nice, but they're all whispering, you know (in a whispering voice).

(several intervening comments about the music being sung)

Father: I remember we did, uh, ones like Ave Maria.

Benjamin: (sings)

Father: Yeah, stuff like that. Exactly. Exactly.

Becca: ... Cool.

Here we see that Becca and her father build a connection through their similar experiences, such that Becca begins to understand and interpret her own personal experience in light of her father's evaluation of his childhood experience. Notice also, that although the narrative exchange is between father and daughter, Benjamin is an involved listener and takes his turn at contributing by echoing his father's memory. In this way, intergenerational connections are built around sharing similar experiences and especially sharing particular evaluations of those experiences.

Although we only analyzed one dinnertime conversation per family, we assume that we sampled what occurs on a regular basis around the dinner table for that family. In fact, we found strong relations between family history narratives told during dinner and preadolescent's knowledge of their family history. We found positive relations between the amount of family history that children knew on the

“Do you know?” scale and the number of family history narratives told around the dinner table ( $r = .21$ ), the mean number of child initiations of these stories ( $r = .23$ ), as well as active participation and involvement in the narratives as measured by the mean number of mother’s turns ( $r = .26$ ), mean number of father’s turns ( $r = .25$ ), mean number of child turns ( $r = .19$ ), total mean turns ( $r = .26$ ), and the mean number of words across all family members ( $r = .23$ ) ( $p < .12$  for all). Thus, families that conarrate their history over the dinner table in more extended and collaborative ways have preadolescents who come to know more of this history overall.

Most intriguing, preadolescent’s knowledge of their family history was strongly related to multiple aspects of their well-being and sense of self. Preadolescents who know more of their family history had higher family functioning scores ( $r = .38$ ), a more internal locus of control ( $r = -.43$ ), higher self-esteem ( $r = .38$ ), and fewer internalizing problems ( $r = -.30$ ) ( $p < .07$  for all). There were no relations to externalizing behaviors. These results suggest that preadolescents’ knowledge of their family history is an important contributor to their developing sense of self and well-being. Preadolescents who develop a sense of self as embedded in both a shared and intergenerational family context show higher levels of self-understanding and well-being compared to their peers who do not know their family history as well, suggesting that the development of an intergenerational self, a self embedded in a larger familial history, may be a resilience factor as children approach adolescence.

## NARRATIVES, LANGUAGE, AND SELF-CONTINUITY

As we have reviewed here, co-constructed narratives of personal and familial experiences are critical in the construction of self and the understanding that self is continuous in time. Moreover, language is the decisive tool in this process; without language, a sense of self through time would not be possible. Whereas infants clearly recall specific episodes (see Bauer, 2002, for a review), it is only as children begin to share their memories with others through language that children come to the realization that their memories are representations and that they have a unique perspective on their past. Outside of language, past events can be referred to, but individuals’ memories of those events, and especially their evaluations of those events, cannot be compared. The process of reminiscing, of conversationally sharing experienced events as well as the associated thoughts and emotions, is essential for the development of children’s understanding that their memories are uniquely their own, and it is this understanding that allows for the idea that the self, as an experiencing entity, is continuous in time. Without a subjective perspective, the notion that *I* am the same *I* as yesterday would be difficult to construct.

When we turn to the intergenerational self, the role of language is even clearer. There is simply no possible access to the experiences of others outside of language. There is no possible way that a child can know about his or her mother’s childhood except through the stories the mother tells to the child. As the protagonist of Anita Diamont’s novel, *The Red Tent*, states when asked how she would tell her life story, “I would have begun with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin. If you want to understand any woman you must first ask her

about her mother and then listen carefully. ... The more a daughter knows the details of her mother's life ... the stronger the daughter" (1997, p. 2).

What is remarkable is that these family stories become part of our own personal self-definition. How we take on the stories of others, and use them to create our own sense of self, is an astonishing phenomenon still in need of a great deal of explication. Children who know their family history, who have shared in these stories, develop a sense of self embedded in a larger familial and intergenerational context, and this sense of self provides strength and security. It is through language that we share our memories with others, and it is through language that we understand that we are a unique entity, a self with a personal and familial history through time.

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