Remembering to Relate: Socioemotional Correlates of Mother–Child Reminiscing

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Previous research has established that mothers vary in how elaborately they reminisce with their preschool children, but explanation of these individual differences is lacking. We predicted that maternal elaborations during reminiscing would be related to mother–child attachment status, as well as to measures of verbal and nonverbal emotional expressiveness. Thirty-eight middle class mothers and their 4½-year-old children participated in a reminiscing task and a joint art activity, and mothers completed the Attachment Behavior Q-set (Waters, 1987). Mothers who were more elaborative during reminiscing also reported a more secure attachment bond, but these variables were unrelated to either verbal or nonverbal expression of emotion during mother–child interaction. However, patterns of relations also varied by gender of child. Theoretical implications of these results for understanding joint reminiscing and attachment are discussed.

Just two decades ago, a revolution occurred in our understanding of children’s memory. Against a backdrop of Piagetian and information processing approaches to the development of deliberate memory, Katherine Nelson (1986; Nelson & Gruendel, 1981) argued for a functional approach, focusing on how children use memory in everyday interactions to guide behavior. Rather than examining memory for often meaningless material, Nelson argued that memory was used in the service of self-generated motivated behavior to accomplish both cognitive and social goals. A wealth of theoretical and empirical work on memory development has stemmed from this fundamental paradigm shift. We now know that toddlers and preschoolers have organized, generalized memories of routine and recurring events (e.g., Bauer, 1997; Fivush, 1997; Hudson, 1986; Nelson, 1986), as well as detailed memories of specific, one-time occurrences.
Along with a new understanding of memory, this work also focused researchers on the social and cultural contexts in which memory developed (Nelson, 1993, 1996). If children are using memory to accomplish goals in ongoing interactions, then it follows that we must look to these interactions as sites within which memory develops. Indeed, recent research has abundantly demonstrated that children are learning the forms and functions of memory through participating in adult-guided interactions (Nelson & Fivush, 2000). More specifically, children are learning to narrate their past experiences through participating in joint reminiscing with their parents. The ways in which parents structure conversations about past events with their preschool children has been shown to have a profound effect on the ways in which children come to remember their past and share it with others (Engel, 1986; Fivush, 1991; Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Hudson, 1990; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). Mothers who have a highly elaborative style, providing rich descriptive detail about past events, provide children with an embellished framework for co-constructing their past, and, with development, these children come to tell richly detailed stories of their own lives. In contrast, mothers who have a less-elaborate reminiscing style, repeating the same questions and providing little embellishment, have children who come to report their past in a more sparse manner. Although much of this work has focused on the mnemonic consequences of maternal reminiscing style, less is understood about the origins of these maternal differences. Why are some mothers more elaborate when reminiscing about the past with their young children than other mothers?

In considering the function of reminiscing about our shared experiences, it seems that memory, in and of itself, may not be the major goal. Rather we choose to reminisce with others to create and maintain social and emotional bonds (e.g., Fivush, 1988; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996; Nelson, 1993, 1996). Through constructing and reconstructing our past with others, we intertwine our experiences, memories, and lives. If this interpretation is correct, then we would predict relations between maternal reminiscing style and other aspects of the mother–child socioemotional relationship. In particular, we would predict that there would be a relation between reminiscing and attachment.

Attachment is clearly a foundational construct in developmental psychology. Decades of research have established both the ontogenesis and the consequences of the mother–child attachment bond (see Cassidy & Shaver, 1999, for an overview). Mothers who are appropriately sensitive to their children’s needs and respond contingently, both temporally and affectively, develop a secure attachment bond with their infants. In turn, securely attached infants are able to venture out into the physical and emotional world more comfortably and competently. In contrast, mothers who are less sensitive and appropriate in their responding engender a less-secure attachment relationship, and their children are more anxious and
avoidant when faced with new challenges. Again, the underlying assumption is that a secure attachment provides children with a predictable and secure base from which to explore whatever developmental hurdles may arise (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

More recent theoretical approaches to the developing mother–child attachment bond has stressed the importance of mother–child communication (e.g., Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, 1990, 1999; Thompson, 2000). Whereas the early attachment bond is assumed to be nonconscious, based on sensorimotor associations, with development these interactions become internalized as working models, or narratives of relationships. Securely attached dyads are assumed to be better able to engage in open communication and to integrate negative experiences with more positive ones (Bretherton, 1990; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; see Pillemer, 1998, for a review). More specifically, theorists have argued that parent–child co-constructed narratives provide much of the basis for children’s subsequent attachment narratives (e.g., Bretherton, 1990; Thompson, 2000). Related to this, in response to a story stem or probe about parent–child relationships, children who are securely attached narrate more complete, consistent, and coherent narratives, especially about emotionally difficult material (Main, 1991; Waters, Rodriguez, & Ridgeway, 1998), and this difference persists into adulthood (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Yet little research has examined the content or organization of parent–child co-constructed narratives from an attachment perspective. Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Haimovich, and Etzion-Carasso (in press) developed a coding scheme for examining the emotional match or mismatch between parents and children in co-constructing stories about emotional experiences. They found that dyads who were securely attached early in development were better able to co-construct coherent, emotionally attuned accounts of past experiences during middle childhood than insecurely attached dyads, suggesting a link between attachment status and quality of parent–child communication.

In addition to emotional attunement, attachment theorists might also predict that securely attached dyads would display more elaborated reminiscing. A secure attachment bond might provide the basis for parents and children to engage in embellished and detailed communication about the past. Similarly, memory theorists would predict that a more elaborated reminiscing style would lead to children’s developing ability to represent their past experiences and their past relationships in more detailed and predictable ways, thereby creating and maintaining coherent attachment narratives. Therefore, from multiple theoretical perspectives, there is reason to believe that a more elaborated reminiscing style is related to a more secure attachment bond.

Indeed, one study has now established such a link. Farrant and Reese (2000) examined attachment status at age 18 months and maternal reminiscing style at 18 months, 2 years, 2½ years, and 3½ years. Overall, mothers from more securely attached dyads showed more elaborated reminiscing at all ages. Most interesting,
whereas securely attached dyads showed increasing bidirectional relations between mother and child in reminiscing style over time, dyads with insecure attachments showed few bidirectional relations, suggesting that these mothers and children were not as “in tune” and therefore were not able to reciprocally influence each other’s reminiscing. These findings also pointed to the necessity of examining both mothers and children, as both reminiscing and attachment must be considered an aspect of the dyad and not just of the mother or the child alone. Therefore a major objective of this study is to examine empirically the relation between maternal elaborativeness, children’s participation in reminiscing, and attachment status in preschool children.

There is also reason to predict relations between attachment status and the emotional content of reminiscing. Previous research has established individual differences in the extent to which parents include emotional aspects of the past when reminiscing with their young children (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000) and, importantly, parents who talk more about emotions early in development, have children who talk more about emotions later in development (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995).

From an attachment perspective, it may not be emotion talk, per se, that is critical, but the ability to integrate both positive and negative emotions coherently. Based on both theoretical and empirical work, we would expect more securely attached dyads to be able to discuss emotions more openly, and this may be especially true for negative emotions. As Pillemer (1998) argued, within securely attached dyads, negative emotions can be discussed and resolved because they would be less threatening than for less securely attached dyads. In contrast to this prediction, however, Farrar, Fasig, and Welch-Ross (1997) found that mother–daughter dyads who were insecurely attached discussed more negative events than securely attached mother–daughter dyads. Securely attached mother–daughter dyads discussed both negative and positive events in equal depth. Importantly, there were no relations between attachment status and emotion talk for mother–son dyads, suggesting that gender may be a critical filter through which attachment and reminiscing style must be viewed. More recently, Laible and Thompson (2000) found that more securely attached dyads incorporated more talk about emotion into discussions of the child’s past transgressions. They argued that a secure attachment provides the base for communicating about emotionally difficult and threatening material. Therefore a second objective of this study was to further examine how emotion talk might be related to attachment and to reminiscing.

Moreover, if maternal reminiscing style is reflective of the emotional relationship between the mother and child, then we may also expect to see relations to nonverbal aspects of emotional communication. More specifically, mother–child dyads who are more elaborate in reminiscing may also show more positive emotionality or warmth in their nonverbal behavior during joint interactions. Similarly,
warmth of interaction may be reflective of the underlying attachment bond. There is actually some theoretical controversy over this relation. In Ainsworth et al.’s (1978) original formulation of the attachment construct, timing of maternal responsiveness was the critical variable, but subsequent theorists have included the emotional tone of the response as well (see Soloman & George, 1999, for a discussion). In examining the emotional attunement of parent–child conversations, Koren-Karie et al. (in press) pointed out that some dyads who displayed high emotional attunement did not seem to display much warmth in their relationship. Therefore, the empirical relations between attachment, warmth, and emotional communication remain open. In this study, we assessed both mothers’ and children’s nonverbal expressions of warmth toward each other. Although we assumed that higher warmth might be related to both more secure attachment and more elaborated reminiscing, this was really an exploratory aspect of the study.

Finally, we examined relations among attachment, elaborative reminiscing, emotion talk, and warmth as a function of gender. Although gender has not been found to play a major role in mother–child attachment patterns, gender has been critical in understanding maternal reminiscing. Several studies have demonstrated that parents are more elaborate and more emotional when reminiscing with daughters than with sons (Fivush et al., 2000; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996). Furthermore, as discussed earlier, Farrar et al. (1997) found different patterns of relations between emotion talk and attachment in mother–daughter and mother–son dyads. Therefore, it was of interest to examine whether patterns of relations among these variables might differ as a function of the gender of the child.

In summary, there is good theoretical reason to believe that maternal reminiscing style will be related to attachment status such that more securely attached dyads will engage in more elaborated reminiscing. It also seems likely that more securely attached dyads will be better able to integrate positive and negative emotion in their reminiscing about the past, and possibly that nonverbal expression of warmth will also be related to reminiscing, attachment, and emotional integration. Finally, because previous research has established that gender may influence these relations, we examined relations among these constructs for males and females separately.

METHOD

Participants

The data for this study were a subset of data collected for a larger project examining mother–child communications about ongoing and past events. In the larger study, 58 mostly White middle class families with a 4-year-old child (M age = 4
years 1 month) participated in one home visit and two laboratory visits during which various parent–child interactions were elicited and observed. We chose to examine 4-year-old children because, by this age, children are quite competent at participating in reminiscing conversations and therefore we could easily assess children’s role in these interactions. For the purposes of this study, we examined three aspects of the larger data set, described in more detail later: an elicited mother–child conversation about past events, a videotaped interaction of mother and child engaging in a joint art activity, and the mothers’ responses to the Attachment Behavior Q-set (Waters, 1987). Nine mothers did not complete all tasks relevant to this analysis. Furthermore, because the videotape was coded for maternal and child nonverbal expression of warmth (as described later) only those taped interactions in which the mother’s and child’s faces were visible to the camera could be included in this analysis. Based on this criterion, an additional 12 mother–child dyads were eliminated from inclusion in this study, yielding 37 mother–child dyads, 19 girls and 18 boys. All families gave fully informed consent and received a small gift for participating.

Procedure

Mother–child reminiscing. All families were first visited in their homes and during this visit, the mother was asked to sit in a quiet place with her child and to discuss two specific events that they had experienced together in the past. Mothers were encouraged to select events that were distinctive and that spanned no longer than 1 day, and they were asked to discuss these events in as natural a way as possible for as long as they wished. As in previous research on maternal reminiscing style, no further instructions were given and no further restrictions were placed on the types of events mothers selected (e.g., Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Reese et al., 1993). In this way, we were able to obtain the least restrictive view on how mothers and children might reminisce in more everyday naturalistic contexts. However, this also limited the types of events discussed. The vast majority of events discussed (well over 90%) were highly positive, child-centered events such as family outings to visit special friends or relatives; trips to museums, zoos, aquariums; and so forth. Most conversations were approximately 15-min long, and were audi-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Mother–child joint activity. About 2 weeks after the initial home visit, mothers and children visited a laboratory playroom, where they engaged in a highly interactive “wizard” activity. Mothers and children followed a series of clues that led to activities such as dress up and face painting, building a castle and creating an art collage. The entire event took approximately 40 min and was video-taped. For this study, the art collage activity was coded. This activity involved the mother and child sitting at a child-sized table and creating a collage using markers,
sparkles, glue, and stickers. Mothers and children were provided with the materials and were free to construct the collage in any way they chose. The activity took approximately 10 min.

We selected this activity for several reasons. We wanted to obtain a measure of maternal and child nonverbal warmth during an interaction in which they were jointly focused on a common activity. Because our major measure of warmth was glances (as described in detail in the coding section), it did not make sense to examine warmth during reminiscing during which the mother and child spend most of their time looking at each other. Rather, we needed to select an activity during which the mother and child were focused on a common set of objects but would, at least occasionally, look up at each other and communicate nonverbally about their involvement with each other and the activity. Furthermore, for pragmatic purposes we needed to select an activity during which both the mother’s and child’s face would be visible to the camera for a reasonably extended period of time for coding purposes. Because the art activity involved sitting at a table, this activity was ideal.

Attachment Behavior Q-set. At the end of the first laboratory visit, mothers were asked to return in 2 weeks and told that at the next visit, they would be asked to rate their children’s behaviors on a number of dimensions. They were then given a list of the 90 child behavior descriptions that comprise the Attachment Behavior Q-set (Waters, 1987) and asked to read them over and to pay attention to these behaviors over the next couple of weeks. When mothers returned to the laboratory 2 weeks later, they were asked to sort these 90 specific behaviors on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (does not describe my child at all) to 9 (describes my child very well), with 10 items in each category. These responses were scored according to standardized criteria yielding a score from 0 to 1, with 1 representing a secure attachment. Note that although this measure was originally designed to be completed by a trained observer, Teti and McGourty (1996) showed that mothers are a reliable source for attachment information, and previous research has used mothers as primary observers (Farrar et al., 1997; Laible & Thompson, 2000).

Coding

Two aspects of mother–child reminiscing were of interest for this study: elaboration and emotional integration.

Elaboration. All maternal and child utterances were divided into propositional units, defined as subject–verb constructions, and each proposition was coded for content. Based on previous research, two kinds of maternal utterances are critical in determining maternal reminiscing style: elaborations and repetitions (Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Reese et al., 1993). Elaborations express how much new information mothers are bringing into the conversations, and how richly de-
tailed the conversations are, whereas repetitions capture the extent to which mothers are simply asking the same questions over and over. As discussed previously, we assumed that more elaborated discussions by both mother and child would be related to more secure attachment. In line with previous research, an elaboration was defined as the provision of any new information. For example, the mother asks, “What did we see at the aquarium?” and then asks, “Did we see those little penguins?” and again, “Those little black and white penguins?” A repetition, in contrast, was simply asking the same question again, as in “What did we see at the aquarium?” and then “What did we see there?” Similarly, the extent to which children provided new memory information was also of interest, and therefore all child utterances that expressed new information were coded as elaborations (e.g., the mother asks “What did we see at the aquarium?” and the child responds “Whales.”). Child utterances that repeated what either the mother or child had previously recalled were coded as repetitions (e.g., mother asks “Did we see zebras at the zoo?” and the child responds, “Zebras.”).

Ten of the 38 transcripts were coded by two independent raters who achieved 88% agreement (range = 77%–94%). The remaining transcripts were coded by a single rater. Because the overall number of maternal elaborations and repetitions were correlated with each other, \( r = .60, p < .01 \), and with total number of propositions overall (\( r = .98 \) for elaborations and \( .83 \) for repetitions, both \( p’s < .01 \)), overall level of maternal elaboration was conceptualized as the ratio of elaborations to repetitions, calculated as number of elaborations divided by the sum of the number of elaborations and the number of repetitions, similar to previous research (Reese et al., 1993). This ratio measure captures the extent that mothers are elaborating rather then repeating their previous utterances. As also in previous research for children, the frequency of elaborations was assessed to capture the extent to which children were participating in these conversations by providing details about their past experiences, and frequency of repetitions assessed the extent to which children were simply engaged in talking during reminiscing but not providing any new information. It should be noted that number of repetitions was perfectly correlated with number of overall propositions, \( r = 1.00 \), so repetitions also provided a measure of overall talkativeness.

**Emotional integration.** The second dimension of these conversations that was of interest was emotional integration. All mention of emotion words by both mother and child was counted as expressing either positive emotion (happy, fun, love) or negative emotion (sad, angry, scared, etc.). Two coders counted words in 10 of the 38 transcripts and achieved 96% agreement (range = 90%–100%). Number of positive emotion words and negative emotion words used were correlated, \( r = .57, p < .05 \), and both number of positive emotion words and number of negative emotion words were highly correlated with total number of emotion words used, \( r = .97, p < .001 \) for positive words to total and, \( r = .76, p < .001 \) for negative words to
Because attachment theory predicts that securely attached dyads will be better able to engage in emotionally open conversations, we were especially interested in how positive and negative emotions would be integrated in these conversations. Therefore, we calculated the percentage of positive emotions over all emotion words used to capture the extent to which positive and negative emotion talk was balanced in these conversations. As we predicted that securely attached dyads would be better able to discuss negative as well as positive emotions, we expected they would display a lower percentage of positive emotion words overall than less securely attached dyads. Unfortunately, children used so few emotion words overall in these conversations ($M < 1.0$ per child) that we were only able to examine maternal expression of emotion.

**Nonverbal expression of warmth.** We examined mothers’ nonverbal expressions of positive emotionality, or warmth, during the joint art activity with her child. We adapted a coding scheme from Carton and Carton (1998) that captures the extent to which mothers express positive engagement with their child, and includes the following categories:

1. **Glances,** which are the number of times that the mother looks at her child’s face when not speaking together. This category assesses the extent to which the mother “checks in” with her child during a joint activity to assess her child’s state.
2. **Positive facial expressions,** which include smiles and laughs, wide eyes, open mouth, and open, anticipatory expressions.

We also coded for negative expressions, frowns, and so on, but these were virtually nonexistent due to the nature of the activity. Children’s nonverbal interactions with their mothers were coded into the same categories. Two raters independently coded 10 mothers and 10 children (from different dyads) and achieved 87.6% agreement on mothers (range = 80%–93%) and 95% agreement on children (range = 92%–100%). Because glances and positive facial expressions were highly intercorrelated, $r = .72, p < .001$, for mothers and, $r = .56, p < .01$, for children, the categories were totaled into one variable expressing maternal warmth. Moreover, although most dyads engaged in the art activity for a minimum of 10 min, a few did not, and therefore, the total number of maternal and child warmth indicators were divided by the number of minutes of engagement in the art activity.

Therefore, overall we quantified three variables for the mother: From the reminiscing conversation we calculated level of elaboration and number of emotion words and, from the joint art activity we calculated maternal nonverbal warmth. Three variables were quantified for the child: From the reminiscing conversation we calculated number of elaborations and number of repetitions, and from the joint
art activity, we calculated child nonverbal warmth. In addition, we calculated one dyadic measure: the attachment score.

RESULTS

The analyses addressed two major questions. First, what are the relations between maternal reminiscing style and socioemotional aspects of the mother–child relationship, and, second, how are mothers and children’s reminiscing and socioemotional styles related? In addition, we were interested in whether these relations might differ by gender of child. Before presenting the correlational analyses, we present means and standard deviations for all variables in Table 1. In addition to the emotional integration ratio, we also present the mean number of positive and negative emotions words for descriptive purposes.

As can be seen, this was a highly elaborative group of mothers who scored in the midrange of attachment. It is not clear why this group of mothers were so highly elaborative; certainly they are much higher than comparable samples using the same coding scheme. However, as demonstrated in the following, even with this restricted range, we still found significant relations to some of the other variables. Children were also highly elaborative in this sample, as evidenced by the relatively low number of repetitions used during reminiscing. This suggests that mothers and children were highly engaged in the joint reminiscing task.

Maternal use of emotion words was generally low, and mothers were generally balanced in their use of positive and negative emotion words. Finally, as a group,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Boys(^a)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Girls(^b)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total(^c)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration ratio</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotion</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotion</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>2.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborations</td>
<td>18.25</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>17.08</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>9.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitions</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a_n = 18, \(^b_n = 19, \(^c_n = 37.\)
these mothers appeared to exhibit high levels of nonverbal warmth, smiling and looking at their children about once every 15 sec. Children did not exhibit as much warmth as mothers, smiling and glancing at their mothers once per 1 min, indicating that children were more engaged in the art activity than with their mothers. There were no significant differences in maternal variables with girls versus boys, and nor were there any gender differences between the children as determined by a series of *t* tests.

### Maternal Variables

Table 2 presents correlations among the maternal variables for the sample as a whole and by gender. As can be seen, there is a significant positive correlation between maternal level of elaboration and attachment status, such that mothers who report more secure attachment relations also exhibit more elaborated reminiscing. However, no other correlations approach significance.  

As discussed previously, there is reason to believe that the gender of the child may play a role in how these variables are related. Therefore we computed correlation...
tions among these variables for boys and girls separately, as displayed in the bottom panels of Table 2. For both boys and girls, maternal level of elaboration is still related to attachment status, although both of these correlations now only approach conventional levels of significance due to decreased power. For girls, there are still no other significant correlations among the variables. For boys, however, attachment status is also significantly related to maternal warmth, as is emotional integration. Mothers who display more nonverbal expressions of warmth during a joint activity with their sons also report more secure attachment relationships and use a higher percentage of positive emotion words when reminiscing than mothers who display less warmth. Yet there is also some suggestion that mothers of sons who are more elaborative during reminiscing use a lower proportion of positive emotion words as well, $r = - .37, p = .12$.

**Child Variables**

Children’s warmth is marginally related to attachment, $r = .30, p = .08$, and this pattern holds for boys and girls. Children’s elaborations and repetitions are also correlated, $r = .37, p < .05$. However, when examined by gender, the correlation between child elaborations and repetitions remains significant for boys, $r = .55, p < .05$, but not for girls, $r = .18, p = .47$. These differences suggest that for boys, amount of new information provided during reminiscing is related to overall talkativeness, but this does not seem to be the case for girls. For boys, warmth is also positively related to child repetitions, $r = .42, p < .05$. Finally, for girls, child repetitions are negatively correlated with attachment, $r = -.55, p < .05$, indicating that girls from more securely attached dyads use fewer repetitions during reminiscing.

**Relations Between Mothers and Children**

Table 3 displays the correlations between maternal and child variables. More elaborative mothers have children who use fewer repetitions and mothers who use a higher proportion of positive emotion terms have children who provide more memory elaborations. However, as can also be seen in Table 3, when examined by gender, these relations only hold for mother–daughter dyads. There are no relations between maternal reminiscing style and child variables in mother–son dyads, but there is a tendency for maternal and child warmth to be positively related. Furthermore, mothers of girls who use a higher proportion of positive emotion during reminiscing show less warmth during a joint activity.

**DISCUSSION**

The major purpose of this research was to begin to understand why some mothers are more highly elaborative when reminiscing with their young children than other
mothers. The results support the idea that maternal reminiscing style is, at least partly, a function of the mother–child emotional relationship. More highly elaborative mothers also reported a more secure attachment bond with their preschool child than did less elaborative mothers, and this pattern held for both boys and girls. Therefore, similar to Farrant and Reese (2000), this study confirms that attachment and reminiscing are related. Of course, these results do not allow us to determine whether more securely attached dyads allow for more elaborated communication, or if more elaborate communication helps create a more secure attachment bond. Farrant and Reese’s (2000) longitudinal analysis suggested that it is a secure attachment that allows for more elaborated reminiscing, at least early in development. Further longitudinal research is necessary to elucidate these developing relations.

Surprisingly, we found no relations between emotion talk during reminiscing and attachment status. We had assumed that more securely attached dyads would be able to communicate in more open ways, and especially that they would be better able to incorporate negative emotion in their conversations. Previous research had demonstrated relations between the emotional valence of events discussed and attachment status in mother–daughter dyads but not in mother–son dyads (Farrar et al., 1997). Of course, it must be pointed out that, because of the nature of the task used in this study, conversations focused on highly positive events. It would be intriguing in future research to examine more negative or stressful events. Laible and Thompson (2000) found that securely attached dyads discussed more emotional content in conversations about children’s transgressions, support-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Variables</th>
<th>Elaboration Ratio</th>
<th>Emotional Integration</th>
<th>Warmth</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.41***</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>−0.34*</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With boys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>−0.17</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With girls</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>0.61***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>−0.49**</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>−0.64***</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.
ing the idea that emotionally difficult material might highlight attachment issues. It may be in situations in which mothers and children are discussing highly stressful or traumatic events that differences in the ability to regulate negative emotion may arise and vary as a function of attachment status (e.g., Bowlby, 1988). In addition, we did not find an overall relation between maternal nonverbal positive emotionality, or warmth and attachment status, but children who displayed more warmth during a joint activity tended to be more securely attached. Thus, there is some suggestion that a more secure attachment may be related to more positive nonverbal affect in children.

These overall patterns must be interpreted within light of several gendered patterns obtained. Mothers of sons who had a more secure attachment did display more nonverbal warmth than less securely attached mother–son dyads, but there was no relation for mother–daughter dyads. Intriguingly, mothers of sons who displayed more nonverbal positive affect also talked about a higher proportion of positive emotions during reminiscing. Therefore with sons, mothers seem to display an integrated affective style, with both verbal and nonverbal expressions of positive affect related. Yet, mothers of sons who were more elaborative during reminiscing also tended to use a higher proportion of negative emotion words than less elaborative mothers, suggesting a greater ability to balance positive and negative aspects of past events when reminiscing. This pattern suggests that emotional expression may function differently in different contexts, especially between mothers and sons. Although overall levels of attachment security do not vary by gender, it may very well be that the ways in which attachment and reminiscing style are expressed and related to other variables differ by gender.

Surprisingly, there were no relations between maternal reminiscing style and boys’ participation in reminiscing. Moreover, although child elaborations and repetitions were correlated for boys, they were not correlated for girls. For boys, then, there seems to be an underlying dimension of talkativeness, but for girls, memory elaborations and memory repetitions seem to serve different functions. Girls’ memory elaborations are related to mothers’ focus on positive as compared to negative emotion. Therefore for mothers and daughters, conversations more focused on positive emotionality were related to daughters discussing the event in more detailed and embellished ways. Yet girls who used more memory repetitions were from less securely attached dyads. This suggests that, for girls, memory repetitions may not express an overall level of involvement in reminiscing, but instead represent less emotional engagement in reminiscing.

Previous research has demonstrated that mothers tend to be more elaborative when reminiscing with daughters than with sons, and girls tend to recall more about past events that do boys (Fivush, 1998; Reese et al., 1996). In this study, we found no overall gender differences, either in the ways that mothers interacted with daughters versus sons, or between the girls and boys themselves. Still, the different patterns of relations between mother–son and mother–daughter dyads suggests
that there may be different processes or pathways by which dyads come to engage in reminiscing, and these may be somewhat gendered. Harley and Reese (1999) recently argued for individual pathways into autobiographical memory based on longitudinal patterns that suggest that reminiscing emerges from different origins in different children. Although they did not discover gendered patterns, our results support their interpretation of individual pathways. In particular, the ways in which mothers integrate emotions into reminiscing may have differential effects on children’s participation. Whether gender proves to be a critical variable in these developing individual differences is an empirical question, but what is clear is that parent–child reminiscing is a complex behavior that emerges from, and contributes to, a large variety of other developmental processes and achievements.

Regardless of the within-gender patterns, the major finding in this study is the relation between maternal level of elaboration during reminiscing and attachment. Several attachment theorists have begun to argue for a narrative perspective to attachment (Bretherton & Mulholland, 1999; Thompson, 2000), and several memory researchers have argued that reminiscing is a social activity that creates and maintains emotional bonds (Fivush, 1994; Fivush et al., 1996; Nelson, 1993, 1996; Pillemer, 1998). The results of this study confirm that this is an appropriate theoretical approach. Moreover, these results point to a possible mechanism by which attachment and narrative are related. As previous research has amply demonstrated, children of highly elaborative mothers come to tell their own life stories in richly detailed and coherent narrative forms (Fivush, 1991; Harley & Reese, 1999; Reese et al., 1993). Because securely attached children are more likely to engage in elaborated parent-guided reminiscing, they are more likely to learn the skills necessary for telling more elaborated and coherent narratives about their own past. Moreover, it may not only be the skills that children are learning in these conversations, but also the value of reminiscing. Children of highly elaborative mothers may be learning that reminiscing is an important and integral part of social interactions, and that it is desirable and enjoyable to share your past experiences with others (see Fivush et al., 1996, for further discussion of this point). Therefore, it is not surprising that more securely attached children tell more coherent and elaborate narratives of their past.

Of course we must be cautious in generalizing these results beyond Western, middle class families. There is accumulating evidence that both attachment (van Ijzendoorn & Sagi, 1999) and maternal reminiscing style (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Mullen & Yi, 1995) differs by culture, and clearly the relations between these variables are likely to differ as well. The important point here, however, is that this is a fruitful area of inquiry. Narratives may provide a way of exploring both the bases and the consequences of attachment in culturally sensitive ways.

Perhaps most important, in accord with Katherine Nelson’s (1993, 1996) theoretical perspective, this research demonstrates that remembering occurs within a socioemotional and cultural context. In reminiscing with those we share the past with, we intertwine our present lives with our past, and ourselves with others.
Mothers and children who are securely attached and engage in elaborated reminiscing create bonds based on rich stories of shared lives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We are grateful to Sharon Bhandari, Trina Brown, and Janine Buckner for help in collecting, transcribing, and coding data.

REFERENCES


