

The silenced self:
Constructing self from memories spoken and unspoken

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A fundamental assumption in psychology is that our autobiographical memories and our self-concept are linked; autobiographical memory is the story of our life, the way in which we construct a coherent narrative that describes and explains who we are (Bruner, 1987; Fivush, 1988; McAdams, 1992, 1996). A more controversial but widely accepted assumption is that individual autobiographies are, at least partly, socially constructed (Fivush, 1994; Gergen, 1994; Nelson, 1993). It is as we share our personal stories with others that they take on coherence and meaning and become part of our individual life story. Through reminiscing about our past with others we come to reconstruct and redefine both our experiences and ourselves. But what of experiences that we do not talk about? How do we integrate experiences of which we cannot speak, and what do these experiences mean for our evolving self-concept? As Jean Braham (1995) has argued, “We see the past...in something of the same way we see a Henry Moore sculpture. The ‘holes’ define the ‘shape.’ What is left repressed, or what cannot be uttered, is often as significant to the whole shape of the life as what is said” (p. 37).

In this chapter, I approach autobiographical memory from the feminist perspective of “voice” and “silence” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Yarule, 1986). Essentially, voice refers to the idea that some truths, or some versions of truth are privileged over others. These versions are the accepted canonical versions of events, whether they be historical or personal. Those who are given voice are given authority to tell the story from their perspective. In this way, voice is a form of power. However, it is also the case that who has “voice” changes with changing historical, social and political

contexts, as can be seen in the changing versions of history that include or exclude specific groups of people or specific historical events.

In the realm of personal memory, voice and silence are concepts that can help us understand the ways in which individual lives are shaped by larger cultural frameworks (Fivush, 2000). Some versions of autobiographies are more acceptable than others; some parts of what we remember can be voiced whereas other parts may be silenced.

Moreover, personal memory can be silenced in multiple ways at multiple levels. In the first part of this chapter, I discuss one way in which culture and gender shape autobiography by defining appropriate and inappropriate aspects of emotional experience, and I develop the idea of a gendered “emotional self-concept.” I then turn to memory of trauma, which is almost always silenced in our culture. I use data from an intensive interview study of women sexually abused in childhood to argue that the way in which trauma is voiced or silenced impacts the ability to develop an integrated sense of self. I end by returning to a theoretical discussion of voice and silence, and to a discussion of how and why it matters what we can and cannot say about our past.

Culture and gender as voiced and silenced

Each culture defines the canonical shape of an individual life. In modern Western cultures, we construct an autobiography in which the self is an active agent, the protagonist of a life that centers on individual choices and decisions. In contrast, in Eastern cultures, the self is construed as part of the community; autobiography reflects the role of the individual within group life, a part of community values and morals (Oyserman & Markus, 1993). Recent cross-cultural research on autobiographical memory has demonstrated that these cultural forms are indeed reflected in individual life

stories. Adults from Western cultures talk more about their past experiences, claim to have more memories and earlier memories of their childhood, and focus more on the self when narrating the past than do adults from Eastern cultures (see Leichtman, Wang & Pillemer, 2003, for a review).

These patterns are clearly socialized; Western parents talk more about the past with their young preschool children, talk in more vivid and detailed ways about the past and focus on the child as an active agent to a greater extent than do Asian parents. In contrast, Asian parents focus more on the child's role in the group and on violation of norms than do Western parents (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer, 2003; Mullen & Yi, 1995). By school age, Western children tell more richly detailed stories of the self in the past than do Asian children (Han, Leichtman & Wang, 1998). These patterns support the idea that the ways in which cultures define selves privilege particular forms of personal memory over others; some stories are given voice and others are silenced. In Western cultures, voiced autobiographies focus on self and agency; in eastern cultures, voiced autobiographies focus on community and relationships. Thus, certain aspects of experiences are foregrounded or backgrounded depending on the cultural norms in which we are socialized.

Obviously, culture is not monolithic, and versions of truth may differ for different groups within the culture. Gender is a prime example of a dimension along which voice and versions of truth may differ. The roles that women and men play within any given culture is prescribed and these cultural prescriptions help shape autobiography (see Fivush, 2000, for theoretical arguments). While there are certain basic similarities in the ways in which women and men view their lives, there are also critical differences. In

Western cultures, adult women tell longer, more detailed and more vivid stories about their past. Women also talk more about people and relationships, and about emotions than do men (Davis, 1990; Fivush & Buckner, in press; Friedman & Pines, 1991). These differences reflect gendered cultural frameworks for understanding self and other that influence the kind of information women and men are more likely to focus on in constructing their life stories.¹ Because women are stereotypically the primary caregivers of children and the keepers of family history, they are focused on emotional aspects of experience that serve to regulate relationships (e.g., Chodorow, 1979; Gilligan, 1982; Ross & Holmberg, 1990). The focus on emotion is consistent with the larger cultural stereotypes of women being more emotional than men (Basow, 1992), and reflect the realities of women's lived experience in which they claim to experience emotions more frequently and more intensely than do men (see Fischer, 2000, for an overview). Again, similar to cross-cultural differences in autobiographical memory, these adult gender differences within Western culture can be seen as emerging from gendered patterns of socialization in which certain aspects of emotional experience are allowed to be voiced, and other aspects of emotional experience are silenced.

Voicing and silencing emotion. My colleagues and I have been examining the gendered socialization of autobiographical memory for the past several years and have documented two related ways in which parents reminisce about past events differently with their preschool sons and daughters. First, parents focus more on emotional aspects of the past with daughters than with sons (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle & Fivush, 1995; Fivush, 1995; 1989; 1991; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner & Goodman, 2000; Kuebli & Fivush, 1992), and second, parents focus more on relationships, and the emotional aspects of

relationships, with daughters and more on autonomy with sons (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Fivush 1993; see Fivush, 1998, and Fivush & Buckner, 2003, for reviews). Across several studies, we have documented that both mothers and fathers mention and elaborate on emotions more frequently with daughters than with sons, they mention a wider variety of emotions with daughters than with sons, and they are more likely to discuss and resolve negative emotions with daughters than with sons. These patterns are especially pronounced when reminiscing about sad experiences (Fivush & Buckner, 2000). Importantly, these differences in parental talk begin early in the preschool years, well before there are any difference in the ways in which girls and boys are talking about emotional experience.

That parents are so clearly discussing past emotions differently with their preschool daughters versus their preschool sons implies that parents are helping their young children to foreground or background particular kinds of emotional experiences into their evolving autobiographical memories. Moreover, they are doing so during a critical developmental period during which a stable self-concept is being formed (Lewis, 1992). Gender differences in emotional socialization are illustrated in the following excerpts from conversations between parents and their 4-year-old children (from Fivush et al, 2000). The first excerpt is a mother and daughter talking about a time the child felt sad

MOTHER: I remember when you were sad. You were sad when Malika
had to leave on Saturday, weren't you?

CHILD: Uh huh

MOTHER: You were very sad. And what happened? Why did you feel sad?

CHILD: Because Malika, Malika say, was having (Unin)

MOTHER: Yes.

CHILD: And then she stood up on my bed and it was my bedroom. She's not allowed to sleep there.

MOTHER: Is that why you were sad?

CHILD: Yeah. Now it makes me happy. I also, it makes me sad. But Malika just left.

MOTHER: Uh huh

CHILD: And then I cried.

MOTHER: And you cried because....

CHILD: Malika left.

MOTHER: Because Malika left? And did that make you sad?

CHILD: And then I cried (makes "aaahhhh" sounds) like that. I cried and cried and cried and cried.

MOTHER: I know. I know. I thought you were sad because Malika left.

I didn't know you were also sad because Malika slept in your bed.

Clearly, this conversation is centered on the experience of the emotion of sadness.

The conversation begins with framing the event as one during which the child felt sad, and both mother and daughter emphasize the causes and the experience of the emotion itself. Note also that the cause of sadness is the child's friend; emotions are explicitly

placed in a social-relational context. Contrast this with the following excerpt of a father and his 4-year old son, also talking about a time the child felt sad:

FATHER: Do you remember last night when you took your juice upstairs?

CHILD: Uh huh

FATHER: What did you do with the juice? When you were going up the steps?

CHILD: I spilled it.

FATHER: You spilled it? Did you get upset?

CHILD: Uh huh. I was just sad.

FATHER: You were sad? What did you do?

CHILD: Went downstairs.

FATHER: Yeah, what did you do when you came downstairs?

CHILD: Get some more.

(10 conversational exchanges about the child getting soda)

FATHER: You came down. What did you tell me?

CHILD: That I spilled it.

FATHER: Yeah, what kind of face did you have?

CHILD: A sad face.

FATHER: A sad face.

CHILD: Uh huh

FATHER: What did we do?

CHILD: Clean it up

Here the conversation focuses on the activities and events comprising the experience; although sadness is mentioned, it is not the center of attention or discussion. Moreover,

the cause of sadness is a behavioral mishap; other people are simply not interweaved into the emotional experience.

These excerpts highlight the ways in which emotions are an integral part of reminiscing in parent-daughter dyads but are not integral to parent-son reminiscing. By focusing more on the emotional aspects of their experiences with girls, parents may be teaching their daughters that this is an important and valuable aspect of their experiences, worth thinking about and reporting to others. Parents also reminisce more about people and relationships with daughters than with sons. Both mothers and fathers place emotional experiences in a more social and relational context with daughters than with sons, and place emotional events in a more autonomous context with sons than with daughters. For example, when reminiscing about sadness with daughters, parents focus on events such as not being able to play with a friend, someone being ill or a parent leaving. With sons, reminiscing about sadness focuses on losing or breaking a favorite toy or the child not being able to do what he wants (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Fivush, 1989; 1991). By placing emotions in a more social-relational context with daughters than with sons, parents may be teaching daughters that emotions are part of the glue that holds families and communities together.

Importantly, the ways in which parents reminisce with their young children influence how children come to tell their own life stories. Although there are few differences in autobiographical recall between girls and boys early in the preschool years, by the end of the preschool years, girls are using more emotional language in their personal narratives (Kuebli, Butler & Fivush, 1995; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996) and are talking more about people and relationships than are boys (Bucker & Fivush, 1998;

2000). These patterns suggest that young children are learning to foreground and/or background emotional and relational aspects of their past experiences through conversing about these experiences with their parents.

Emotional self-concept. In addition to learning which particular aspects of past experience are important and appropriate to report and share with others, preschoolers are learning how to understand and present themselves in these early parent-guided conversations. At least part of children's developing self-concept is formed in social interaction with others who help provide an evaluative and interpretive framework for understanding past experiences. Through participating in parent-child reminiscing, children come to understand who they are in relation to other people and in relation to their past. By differentially discussing emotional aspects of past experiences with girls and boys, parents are helping their children learn gendered ways of being in the world. By focusing on emotional experience, on the causes and expression of emotions and on the ways in which other people are a context for experiencing emotion, parents are helping girls form an emotionally rich self-concept. For girls, past experiences are imbued with emotions of both self and other. Moreover, girls are learning that emotions are ways of connecting with others. In thinking about one's own life history, it is replete with shared emotional experiences. In essence, for females, emotions are given voice. In contrast, for males, emotions are silenced. Past experiences are stripped of much of their emotional content. Emotions are internal and autonomous; they do not connect self to others. In thinking about one's own life history, emotional experiences are sparse and isolating.

Clearly we must be careful about drawing gender differences too broadly. There is a great deal of variability within gender groups as well as between the genders. Just as culture is not monolithic, neither is gender. Just as there are differences within cultures, there are differences within genders. Rather than conceptualizing gender as an essential categorical difference (e.g., Gilligan, 1982), it may make more sense to conceptualize gender as a set of learned activities (Deaux & Major, 1987; Fivush, 1998; Fivush & Buckner, 2003). Gender may be best understood as skilled practice, similar to recent conceptualizations of culture (Rogoff, 1990).

Because males and females are more likely to find themselves in certain situations, and engaged in certain activities, they are more likely to learn certain skills and certain ways of acting in the world. Because parent-daughter reminiscing is replete with emotional language, females may come to learn how to express their emotional experience more directly and in more nuanced ways than do males. They may also learn to value these aspects of experience more than males and to value sharing these experiences with others. This is not to argue that males are not able to experience, share and value their emotions, but rather that it is a more difficult activity for them as they are not as practiced in the requisite skills. In this sense, the argument is that females have an emotional self-concept in which emotional experience and expression is highly valued and easily shared, whereas males have an emotional self-concept in which emotions are internal, autonomous and not as easily expressed. Thus it is not a matter of ability but of style. Still, these differences in style have implications for the ways in which males and females may feel more or less comfortable in presenting themselves and sharing their lives with others.

Context effects. Given this perspective, we also need to consider context effects in the autobiographical expression of self and emotion. While there may be enduring individual differences in how one constructs a sense of one's emotional self based on gender and early parent-guided reminiscing, it must also be the case that the ways in which particular emotional experiences will be expressed will be a function of the specific context in which one is sharing one's life stories (Fivush & Buckner, 2003). Autobiographical memory is always selective. We do not recall everything that happens to us, nor do we choose to report everything we recall. Moreover, some aspects of what we choose to tell may be a function of enduring individual preferences, but some may be a function of our conversational partner (see Pasupathi, 2001, for a theoretical overview). Listeners can influence speaker's stories in various ways. In moment-to-moment interaction, listeners who are engaged and involved in listening to narratives allow speakers to tell longer, more coherent and more detailed stories, while disengaged or distracted listeners lead to shorter, more disorganized and more disfluent narratives (Pasupathi, Stallworth & Murdoch, 1998).

In terms of the emotional aspects of our personal experiences, although it is the case that males do not discuss emotional experience as much as females do in general (Brody & Hall, 1993), it is also the case that under some circumstances, males talk about emotions as much as females. In particular, males are more likely to self-disclose emotional experiences with a female conversational partner (Aukett, Ritchie & Mill, 1988), and discuss emotions as much as females do with intimate partners and therapists (Snell, Miller, Belk, & Garcia-Falconi, 1989). These patterns support the previous argument that emotional understanding and expression is partly a matter of style rather

than ability. With certain conversational partners, males can be as emotionally expressive as females. Note, however, that these partners tend to be attuned to emotion, i.e., females and therapists. Thus these partners may provide a more attentive and engaged audience allowing males to express emotional experience that might be difficult with a less engaged partner, i.e., another male.

We can further speculate that over time, if certain stories or parts of stories are consistently responded to in one way or the other, these stories will either be reinforced or drop out of the individuals' repertoire of personal stories. In this way, how listeners respond to individuals' disclosure of personal narratives may come to have a cumulative effect on which personal stories become an active part of one's autobiography (see Pasupathi, 2001, for related arguments). Moreover, early parent-guided conversations about past emotions may be particularly formative because when children are younger they may be more vulnerable to the way in which others construct experience for them. Thus the cultural, developmental, and contextual levels of voice and silence are dialectically related, such that culture prescribes a certain form and content to a canonical life story, and this prescription is communicated in numerous specific interactions in which listener's reactions and responses help shape the individual's evolving life story. For females, overall, the life story is emotionally richer and denser than it is for males.

Thus far, I have discussed the ways in which a universal aspect of all experience, emotion, may be given voice or silenced depending on one's gender. But what of entire events that are not allowed to be spoken of? Certainly in our culture, trauma is one such category of events. This may be especially true for victims of childhood sexual abuse. Indeed, until the 1970's it was assumed that childhood sexual abuse, and especially

familial abuse, was extremely rare, yet more recent surveys have confirmed that as many as 20 to 25% of females experience sexual abuse during childhood and as many as 10% experience abuse by a family member (Edwards, Fivush, Anda, Felitti & Nordenberg, 2001; Finklehor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1990). This is a category of events that is silenced in the most basic terms. Not only are individual stories not heard, but the culture as a whole has also conspired to erase these kinds of experiences from our cultural landscape of possible experiences. How do adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse come to remember or forget these experiences and what implications does this have for their self-concept?

Silencing of childhood sexual abuse

With the political changes accompanying the second wave of the women's movement, sexual abuse against women has come into national focus (Enns, McNeilly, Corkery & Gilbert, 1995). In addition to documenting the extent of these experiences, researchers have turned to examining more basic questions about the long-term effects of experiencing abuse. Here I focus on two aspects of this question relevant for this chapter: what do women remember about their abusive experiences and how might these memories affect their self-concept?

Memory of childhood sexual abuse has become quite controversial, especially surrounding the issue of recovered memories (see Conway, 1997, and Pezdek & Banks, 1996, for full discussions). Whereas many clinicians have described the subjective experiences of their clients who suddenly recall years of abuse after a period of amnesia, many researchers have argued that this kind of forgetting and recovery of memory is not cognitively possible. The nuances of this controversy are well beyond the scope of this

chapter, but let me just note here that there is increasing evidence for the occurrence of recovered memories (Schooler, 2001), and that recovered memories are just as likely to be accurate as continuous memories of abuse (e.g., Brewin & Andrews, 1998).

Moreover, there is growing evidence of specific cognitive mechanisms that can be easily demonstrated in a controlled laboratory setting that might explain the cognitive underpinnings of this phenomenon (Anderson & Green, 2001). Regardless of the ultimate fate of this controversy, what is clear is that the subjective experience of recovering memories is very real at least for some proportion of women who were sexually abused in childhood.

In order to explore the phenomenon of memory for childhood sexual abuse and relations to self-concept in more depth, Valerie Edwards and I (Fivush & Edwards, in press) conducted an interview study with 12 women ranging in age from 21 to 72 who had been severely sexually abused by a family member during their childhood. We were interested in exploring several questions. First, how do women describe their subjective experience of remembering and forgetting abuse over time? Second, how do women actually narrate their experiences of abuse? Third, how do women describe their experiences of self and how does this relate to their memory of their abusive experiences? As just discussed, traumatic events, especially abuse, may be silenced both by others and by the self as too dangerous to even think about. For children experiencing abuse by a loved and trusted adult, trying to integrate the abusive experience with attachment and relationship needs may lead to a deep sense of emotional betrayal, and this betrayal may create an untenable psychological state (Freyd, 1996). Thus, an adaptive response may very well be to push these experiences from mind, to simply not think about them, and in

this way to silence oneself. Even when children try to tell about their abusive experiences to other trusted adults, they are often not believed (Butler, 1999); indeed they are often accused of lying for their own purposes. This kind of reaction to disclosure would certainly fall into the category of silencing. Thus both the women themselves and those to whom they may have disclosed often conspire together to silence these experiences.

In terms of memory and self, we assumed that women who claimed they had never forgotten that they had been abused, and had continuous memories of their abusive experiences, would be able to narrate these experiences more coherently and in more detail than women who had recovered memories of abuse. We further speculated that women who had continuous memories of abuse would have a more integrated self-concept than women with recovered memories. Because recovered memories are associated with dissociative tendencies, we reasoned that recovered memories would also be associated with a more fragmented sense of self.

All of the women in our sample were abused by a family member; 3 by a father, 1 by a stepfather, 3 by a grandparent, 3 by a brother and 2 by an uncle. The beginning of the abuse ranged from preschool to preteen, all women experienced penetration and all but 2 experienced abuse over a period of several years. Nine had also experienced physical abuse during childhood and 7 had experienced additional sexual assault as an adult. Thus this was a severely abused population. None of the women had recovered memories of abuse while in therapy although all of the women had been in therapy at some point during their lives.

Women were interviewed individually, and were asked to recall their abusive experiences, as well as a series of questions about their remembering and forgetting of these experiences over time. These were relatively open-ended interviews; although there was a standard set of questions, the interviewer allowed each woman to discuss her experiences as she chose to, for as long as she chose, and followed in on what each woman disclosed in conversationally appropriate ways. Interviews lasted between one and two hours.

We first examined the women's subjective experiences of remembering and forgetting the abuse. Half of the women claimed that they had never forgotten their experiences. Three of these women claimed that they recalled the abuse in clear and consistent detail all their lives, while three claimed they had always remembered the events but the details came and went over time. Illustrative statements from the interviews are shown in Table 1; as can be seen from their statements, these women believed they had continuous memories of their abusive experiences. In contrast, 6 women claimed there was a period when they did not recall their abuse at all. As shown in Table 1, these women have the experience of a time when they totally forgot they had been abused, and then subsequently recalled these experiences. However, the subjective experience of forgetting and recovery is much more complex. Although these 6 women clearly claimed that they had forgotten their abuse and subsequently remembered it, at other points in the interview, they expressed more confusion. For example, participant #12 reports "I would totally forget about it" and "I forgot about it for quite a while," but later in the interview says, "It was never totally forgotten." Similarly, Participant #3 describes a flashback experience in which she suddenly remembered having been abused

as a child, yet later says, "I don't think I ever forgot it." In some very real sense, these women express remembering and not remembering, forgetting and not forgetting simultaneously.

Women's subjective experience of remembering and forgetting abuse was related to their ability to narrate their abusive experiences. All of the women were able to provide many details of what happened to them, but there were substantial differences in their ability to construct a coherent account of what occurred. Women were classified as providing a coherent or an incoherent narrative of their abuse. For example, one woman when asked to talk about her experiences, began her narrative as follows:

My earliest memory that I can really identify as a specific instance was when I was about six, six or seven. And, uh, my family had gone to the Boys Scout Camp that my father was a Boy Scout executive and he had actually been the kingpin in getting this camp built. And at the end of the camping season, the Boy Scout leaders and their families had a little scouting experience, camping experience to use up all the staples and close the camp and so forth. And one day we took, there were a large group of us, a large group of parents and children that took a hike out in the shrub, umm, scrub brush. You don't get a lot of forest or anything in that part of the state that I was, uh, and, uh, the others went one way and my dad and I went another. And I remember we ended up lying down in the dirt. Actually I was afraid the ants would get on me, while he, uh, fondled me and had me fondle him. And I don't know whether that was the first incident but I remember that I think, because of the peculiar

circumstances that surrounded it, the fact that we were out in brush country, and, uh, but from then on I can remember several things specifically.

This narrative was classified as coherent. This woman begins her narrative by placing the event in time and place, how old she was, where the incident took place and why they were there. She reports quite specific details about what occurred, what she was thinking at the time, and so on. She then goes on to narrate several more incidents in this very coherent manner. Contrast this with the following narrative of another woman, also abused by her father, also beginning at about age 6 (although she is not very clear about the age at which the abuse started):

Well, I'm 48 now and probably when I was about 46, something like that, umm, and stuff I've been going through, umm, up until I was about 46, I remembered, umm, my dad, uh, when my mom was gone and all the other kids were gone, had me sleep in his room and wanted me to, I guess you'd say give him a hand job, or, sounds so funny. Um, anyways, so I was at that time, I was, I would take a wild guess, I don't know. Maybe 5 or 6 years old. And then, after I've been going through this stuff, it's like, uh, remembering all this stuff that was there that you just, I think you're lucky to block it out a lot of times but, uh, just as a baby, baby, I mean very small, I remember my dad, you know, molesting me. Uh, having intercourse with me and I was, I don't know, as far as I can remember, I get pieces that might have been earlier, but, uh, I don't know, as young as like 2-3 years old. So I'm not even sure if I've got all the pieces yet.

This excerpt is very hard to follow, and was classified as an incoherent narrative. It is not set in a specific time and place, the narrator moves back and forth in time, and presents specific events in a confused and confusing fashion. Although the listener has the overall sense of what happened, it is simply not a coherent presentation.

In total, 6 of the women were able to provide a coherent account of their abusive experiences and 6 were not. Intriguingly, 5 of the women with continuous memories gave coherent narratives and one gave an incoherent narrative, and 5 of the women with recovered memories gave an incoherent narrative and one gave a coherent narrative. Thus there is a close relation between the subjective experience of continuously remembering abusive experiences over time and being able to narrate these experiences coherently. Women who had the subjective experience of forgetting and remembering their experiences, on the other hand, were not able to provide a coherent narrative.

Although women were not directly asked about their experiences of self, all of the women spontaneously discussed how the abuse affected their self-concept. Based on their statements, women could be categorized as expressing an integrated self-concept or a dissociated self-concept. Women who expressed a dissociated self-concept talked about splitting their mind from their body or splitting their memories of the abuse off from other memories of the self. Table 2 gives examples of statements from the 5 women who expressed a dissociative self-concept. As can be seen, these 5 women describe a sense of self as separate from their abusive experiences, as split off from themselves. The seven women who expressed an integrated self-concept not only never expressed any dissociative tendencies during their interviews, they actively talked about how their very selves were defined by their experiences, as victims or survivors.

Although not all of these women expressed a positive sense of self (in fact, 3 of them express a relatively negative sense of self as an angry or a bad person), it is still the case that they have not split themselves off from their abuse history.

Five of the 7 women who expressed an integrated sense of self also claimed to have continuous memories, whereas 2 women with an integrated sense of self had recovered memories. On the other hand, 4 of the women who expressed a dissociated sense of self claimed recovered memories, and 1 claimed continuous memories. Again, there seems to be a relation between having an integrated sense of self and continuous memories of abuse.

Clearly, we need to be extremely cautious in drawing any conclusions from these interviews. It was a very small and a very targeted population. Moreover, we did not gather any independent evidence of these women's abuse histories, or of their memories of the abuse over time. We relied totally on what the women told us. We were interested more in describing what the subjective sense of remembering and forgetting abuse was for these women than whether their reports of remembering and forgetting over time were "accurate." Further, we did not have any independent measure of their self-concepts beyond the way in which they spontaneously described themselves in these interviews. Still, the results are provocative. It seems that there are multiple outcomes for women experiencing horrendous abuse. Some of these women always recalled what happened, were able to tell coherent narratives about these events and seemed to be able to integrate their abusive experiences into their larger understanding of self. Other women seemed to have coped with their abuse by dissociating these memories from their

other memories. This led to the sense of forgetting the abuse over time, and to a more dissociated sense of self as adults.

The pattern suggests that when traumatic experiences are silenced by being forced out of consciousness, there may be long lasting effects on the ability to construct a coherent life story that contributes to an integrated sense of self. Women who cope with childhood abuse through mechanisms of denial and dissociation seem to suffer greater threats to an integrated self-concept than women who do not use these coping strategies. At this point, it is unclear how to account for these individual differences in coping. One possibility suggested in the clinical literature is that children abused earlier in development, who have not yet had the opportunity to develop a more stable self-concept, will be more likely to use dissociation as a coping mechanism than older children (Enns et al, 1995). In our sample, 4 of the 5 women who evidenced dissociation were 5 or younger when their abuse began, while only 2 of the 7 women who did not dissociate were this young. As already mentioned, developmental considerations are critical in evaluating emerging links between autobiographical memory and self-concept, and this pattern, while merely suggestive, affirms that this is an important dimension for further study.

Voice, silence and the self-concept

In this chapter I have presented two lines of research that indicate that the ways in which experiences are given voice or are silenced have long lasting implications for our evolving self-concept. In constructing our autobiographical life story, we weave together a complex tapestry based on what happened and how it has come to be constructed in social reminiscing. How we think and talk about events as they are occurring, and in

retrospect will come to determine which aspects of experience are privileged over others. In this formulation, language is a critical tool for the construction of autobiographical memory. How we talk with other people and how we come to represent events for ourselves facilitates the ability to construct a coherent narrative account of what occurred and what it means in our evolving life story.

Language is critical for two interrelated reasons. First, it is through language that we are able to share our past experiences with others. In the process of reminiscing, listeners provide feedback about appropriate and inappropriate communications; through the joint focus on particular aspects of experience, and the concomitant neglect of other aspects of experiences, we come to reinterpret and reevaluate the events of our lives. Moreover, early in development, children need help from adults to create coherent narratives of past events. In the absence of adult-guided reminiscing, young children may have difficulty creating and maintaining coherent memories of what occurred (Fivush, Pipe, Murachver & Reese, 1997). However, this is a double-edged sword. In creating meaningful narratives, by definition some aspects of experience will be foregrounded and some will be backgrounded or even neglected. In this way, what is said, what is shared and what is jointly negotiated to be the “truth” comes to define what happened and how we feel about it. In the words of the novelist, Janet Fitch (1999), “That was the thing about words, they were clear and specific – but when you talked about feelings, words were too stiff, they were this and not that, they couldn’t include all the meanings. In defining, they always left something out” (p. 265). By focusing on specific aspects of experience, and by necessity silencing other aspects of experience, language provides a filter through which we come to understand our lives and our selves.

Second, through talking about events with others, memories take on a canonical narrative form. Through the telling and retelling of what happened, memories become stories, and as we reinterpret and reevaluate these stories, they become stories about us. In the absence of the ability to talk about certain events, such as abuse, it may be difficult to create a meaningful account of what happened. In her memoirs of her childhood battle with cancer, Lucy Grealy (1994) writes, “It was as if the earth were without form until those words were uttered, until those sounds took on decisions, themes, motifs... Language supplies us with ways to express ever subtler forms of meaning, but does that imply that language gives meanings, or robs us of it when we are at a loss to name things? “ (p. 43-44). In the absence of a meaningful organization through which to understand our experiences, we may not be able to integrate those experiences into our self-understanding. This, in turn, may lead to a fragmented sense of self, as in some of the abuse survivors discussed here, especially if the trauma occurs early in development before children have a stable self-concept or are able to construct a coherent narrative of a past event without adult guidance.

The arguments in this chapter are clearly speculative. The concepts of voice and silence provide a theoretical framework for thinking about the ways in which autobiography is shaped both by what is spoken and what is unspoken. Voice and silence allow for a deeper analysis of the ways in which culture, gender and individual histories privilege some forms of knowing over others, some aspects of experience over others. Moreover, we need to consider how changing social and political contexts change what is allowed to be voiced and what is silenced. With the emergence of the second wave of the women’s movement in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, we also saw changes in cultural

frameworks for understanding lives and selves in both of the domains discussed in this chapter. We have seen a loosening of cultural stereotypes about gender and emotions that surely play a role in how parents might socialize emotion differently with daughters and with sons. Similarly, issues of violence against women, including childhood sexual abuse, have been allowed to surface in this same time period. Thus we have seen the emergence of the ability to give voice to certain kinds of experience which had been historically silenced.

For obvious reasons, most of what we know about the structure and content of autobiographical memory relies on what is voiced. The challenge for future research is to develop methodologies that allow for an analysis of what is silenced. To truly understand the relation between autobiographical memory and self-concept, we must move beyond an analysis of what is spoken and begin to integrate the ways in which self is also shaped by what must be left unsaid.

Footnotes

¹This is not to argue that all gender differences are culturally constructed. Gender differences may very well emerge from biological predispositions and evolutionary constraints. Rather the argument is that whatever gender differences may be biologically predisposed, the way in which they are canalized and shaped will be a matter of cultural constructions.

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Table 1. Subjective memory experiences.

| Participant | Statement of memory |
|---|--|
| <hr/> | |
| Group IA: Continuous memory, same detail | |
| <hr/> | |
| 5 | “I certainly never forgot it.” |
| 7 | “There’s not a time I’ve ever forgotten.” |
| 11 | “I remembered it all along.” |
| <hr/> | |
| Group IB: Continuous memory, differing detail | |
| <hr/> | |
| 1 | “...a lot of this has resurfaced.” |
| 8 | “I don’t remember a lot of the details...I fight to remember things.” |
| 10 | “Since I’ve started talking about it, I’ve remembered more.” |
| <hr/> | |
| Group II: Recovered memory | |
| <hr/> | |
| 2 | “...when it came out all of a sudden, I just started crying.” |
| 3 | “Basically my (memory) was one flashback that happened 12 years ago.” |
| 4 | “I had just completely forgotten.” |
| 6 | “It’s resurfaced twice that I know of or that I remember.... sometimes I wouldn’t remember it for years.” |
| 9 | “I lost memory...until I was in my 20’s and it all came to me it seemed in kind of a rush.” |
| 12 | “I would totally forget about it...in my early 20’s I became aware.” |

Table 2. Statements about self-concept

| Participant | Statement of self |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <hr/> Self-as-dissociated <hr/> | |
| #2 | That was the very beginning of my learning how to take myself away from my body. I can be a watcher anytime I want to be. So they can't hurt me anymore. Nothing can hurt me anymore. It doesn't matter what happens to my body because they can't hurt me. |
| #3 | I heard about sexual abuse but I didn't really associate I with me...It was like it went in and it went out and I didn't want to approach it. |
| #4 | It's still hard for me to accept...there are occasions, even, I guess it's called denial, even knowing all of it. Once in a while, I mean, it goes through my head, like, oh, you know I must be nuts or I'm making all this up. I mean fathers, how could they do this? |
| #9 | I don't go to that place in my head where I'm being abused. |
| #10 | And what I did with it was, I would totally forget about it. I mean I would internalize it and dissociate it basically. And so it was like it never happened. |
| <hr/> Self-as-integrated <hr/> | |
| #1 | I feel like I am getting more able to make decisions...I feel like I must have some sort of survival skills. |
| #5 | I felt so alone and isolated...it certainly gave me very low self-esteem. I just felt that I was a rotten person because of these things that I had done. And, uh, that made me feel hopeless. |

#6 I think it's too much, you know, a part of me and who I am to ever actually forget it.

#7 Finally growing old and learning to put things in perspective and put things in the past that belong in the past. Go for the future.

#8 I had to figure out why it was so hard for me to trust...And I think that's one of the things that's just part of me now.

#11 I grew up through my teenage years thinking I was bad...that I had this hidden badness side to me, umm, and now, you know, I don't throw it away anymore.

#12 I'm angry. I'm very angry...But this is like 30, well a little less than 30, 25 years I'd say later, and you know, it's like I've gone through this and I'm trying to work it out.