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Personal narratives, well-being, and gender in adolescence

Jennifer G. Bohanek and

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Robyn Fivush

Emory University.

Abstract

Relations between narratives, especially the inclusion of internal state language within narratives, and well-being have been found in adults. However, research with adolescents has been sparse and the findings inconsistent. We examined gender differences in adolescents' personal autobiographical narratives as well as relations between internal state language and emotional well-being. Mirroring previous research with different age groups, we found that females narrate both positive and negative personal experiences in more emotional ways than do males. Also, adolescent females include more cognitive processing words indicative of self-reflection than do adolescent males. Adolescent males who told personal narratives richer in internal state language displayed higher levels of well-being, but there were no relations between internal state language in personal narratives and well-being for adolescent females. These results are interpreted in terms of gender differences in emotional processing and understanding. Directions for future research are discussed.

The way in which emotional experiences are expressed through narratives provides a window on how emotions are understood and regulated. Narratives are the way in which humans “make sense” of the experiences of their lives (Bruner, 1987, 2002); through constructing narratives, we construct meaning (Fivush, 2007; McAdams, 2001). Much of narrative meaning-making is expressed through internal state language, language reflective of thoughts and emotions experienced during the event (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). Internal state language provides evidence that the narrator is reflecting on, evaluating and interpreting the event, and indicates that the individual is moving from the “landscape of action” to the “landscape of consciousness” (Bruner, 1987). In fact, higher use of internal state language, indicative of this sense of subjective perspective, has been linked to positive outcomes in adults; more specifically adults who use more cognitive processing words, such as “think” and “understand,” and more emotion words in their narratives of stressful events subsequently show higher levels of physical and psychological well-being, suggesting that narratives themselves are part of the emotional regulation process (Pennebaker, 1997;

Address correspondence to Jennifer G. Bohanek, Center for Developmental Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Campus Box 8115, 100 East Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8115, Jennifer_Bohanek@unc.edu..

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Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; see Frattaroli, 2006, for a meta-analysis). To date, however, the expression of internal state language in adolescents' personal narratives has not been extensively studied, and research examining links between adolescents' narratives and well-being is scarce. Thus, the objectives of the present study were to investigate adolescents' use of internal state language in narratives of emotional events, as well as to determine how this aspect of meaning-making might be related to their social and emotional well-being.

Emotional regulation through narratives may occur across a wide range of emotional events, yet it may serve different functions for positive and negative personal experiences. Sharing, reflecting on, evaluating, and interpreting positive events may serve to establish or reaffirm emotional bonds with others as the events are incorporated into the life story (Fivush, Haden & Reese, 1996; Frederickson 2001). Creating and maintaining this sense of shared history has in turn been associated with more positive social-emotional adjustment (Bohanek, Fivush, Zaman, Lepore, Merchant, & Duke, 2009).

Internal state language may, however, be especially important for making sense of negative events that create aversive affect that must be regulated and resolved. Conceptually, individuals who are better able to express and explain their cognitive and emotional states through expressive narratives of aversive experiences are assumed to be engaged in a process of emotional regulation that will lead to higher levels of well-being (see Frattaroli, 2006, for a full explication). Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that both adults and children use more cognitive processing words (e.g., think, understand) in narratives of negative as compared to positive events (Baker-Ward, Eaton & Banks, 2005; Bauer, Stark, Lukowski, Van Abbema, Ackil, & Rademacher, 2005; Bohanek, Fivush, & Walker, 2005; Burch, Austin, & Bauer, 2004). However, the findings on the use of emotion language are not as easily interpretable. It is clearly the case that both children and adults use more positive emotion when narrating positive than negative events, and more negative emotion when narrating negative compared to positive events, but some studies find more expression of emotion overall in narratives of negative compared to positive events (Fivush, Sales, & Bohanek, 2008; Peterson & Biggs, 2001), whereas other studies find no difference in overall use of emotion language across event type (Bohanek, 2006; Bohanek et al., 2005; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003; see Fivush, Bohanek, Marin & Sales, 2009 for an overview). Additional research is required to further explore these inconsistent findings in meaning-making across positive and negative events.

Additional research is also needed because empirical links between children's narratives of personal experiences and emotional well-being have not been extensively studied and the few findings are inconsistent. Further, most studies have focused on negative events. For example, Sales, Fivush, Parker, and Bahrck (2005) asked preschoolers who had experienced Hurricane Andrew to tell about their experiences of being in their homes as roofs and walls collapsed around them, both within a few months of the storm and again 6 years later. Children who expressed more internal state language in their initial narratives of the hurricane subsequently showed lower levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms, suggesting that internal state language within narratives reflects and facilitates children's abilities to regulate aversive emotions associated with difficult experiences. However, this was a highly public event, and parents and children reported talking about it together frequently.

In contrast to these findings, Reynolds, Brewin, and Saxton (2000) found no relations between 8- 12-year-old children's use of cognitive processing and emotion words in narratives of daily stressful events and their subsequent well-being. Most of the events narrated were experiences the children had not shared with others, such as peer-bullying and marital discord among their parents. One possible explanation is that children and adolescents use relatively few emotion words in their narratives (Bauer et al., 2005), and thus this lack of relation may reflect a floor effect. Fivush and her colleagues expanded the conceptualization of emotion language to include expressions of general affect (e.g., "That was awful," "That was hard for me," "It was really cool."), and found that 8-12-year-olds who use more of this kind of general affective language display lower levels of emotional well-being subsequent to narration (Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Brewin, & Reynolds, 2007; Murphy, Fivush, Sales, & Teague, 2009; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008). By age 14, however, children seem to benefit from including internal state language in their narratives of stressful events (Soliday, Garafolo, & Rogers, 2004). Thus age may be a critical variable in the benefits of narrative meaning-making. Children younger than 14 may not yet have the necessary narrative and emotion regulation skills (Compas, Campbell, Robinson, & Rodriguez, 2009; Habermas & Bluck, 2000), and thus at earlier ages, the use of internal state language may raise anxiety that children are not able to resolve without discussion with parents or other adults. With the social and cognitive advances of adolescence, individuals may develop skills needed to benefit from narrative meaning-making.

More specifically, adolescence heralds new challenges, including identity formation and the development of extra-familial relationships, which hone emotional regulation skills (Erikson, 1959/1980; Grotevant, 1998). Further, during adolescence, children begin to include more internal state language in their narratives (Bauer et al., 2005) and become better able to note and resolve disparities and discontinuities in emotional states and reactions (Habermas & Paha, 2001; Harter, 1999; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Developing narrative and emotional regulation skills may be especially important as adolescents experience increasingly intense and fluctuating emotions (Arnett, 1999), and the parent-child relationship becomes more emotionally labile (Laursen, Coy & Collins, 1998). Thus it is critical to examine relations between narratives and emotional well-being as children enter middle adolescence.

An additional limitation of previous research is the focus on negative experiences. As already mentioned, narrating positive events may also be critical for adults' well-being. Fredrickson (2001) and Burton and King (2004) have shown that expressing and sharing positive emotional events of our day with others is beneficial for well-being. Similarly for adolescents, in an exploratory study, Bohanek (2006) found that 14-year-old adolescents' expression and explanation of emotion in positive personal narratives was concurrently related to ratings of higher psychological well-being, suggesting that building on positive experiences may be related to higher well-being even at this young age. However, in line with the findings that expressive writing about negative experiences may be detrimental for younger children, she also found that emotional expression and explanation in negative personal narratives was concurrently related to lower psychological well-being, suggesting that adolescents may not yet have the ability to cope with and/or reflect on negative events.

Thus it is critical to examine narratives of both positive and negative events in relation to adolescent well-being to more fully understand this developmental phenomenon.

There is also some reason to believe that relations between narratives and well-being may differ for female and male adolescents. First, beginning in childhood and extending through adulthood, females tell more emotionally-laden personal narratives than males (Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003; Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Cross & Madson, 1997; Davis, 1999; Fivush & Buckner, 2003), suggesting that females may have a richer and more nuanced understanding of emotion than do males (Brody & Hall, 1993; Fischer, 2000). Thus we might predict that females would show stronger relations between meaning-making as expressed through internal state language in narratives and higher levels of well-being than do males. On the other hand, it is also the case that during adolescence, females show increasing levels of rumination, focusing on negative emotions without creating regulation or resolution, and this form of self-reflection is highly related to depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Females ruminate more than do males (Butler & Nolan-Hoeksema, 1994), and beginning in early adolescence, females are at least twice as likely as males to develop depressive symptoms and major depressive disorder (Davidson et al., 2002; Hankin, Mermelstein, & Roesch, 2007), suggesting that a link between females' tendency to ruminate at least partially accounts for the gender differences in the incidence of depression. Thus it is possible that adolescent females' use of internal state language in their personal narratives may actually be detrimental to their well-being. Finally, there is some suggestion that adult males benefit more from narrative meaning-making than adult females (Frattaroli, 2006); males who use internal state language in their narratives of stressful experiences show higher subsequent benefits than do females. Thus, while relations between narrative meaning-making and well-being may differ by gender, it is not clear what direction these patterns may take.

Our major objective was to investigate relations between narrative meaning-making, as expressed through internal state language, and well-being at an age when children become able to create self-reflective meaningful narratives about their personal experiences. Based on theoretical arguments by Fivush et al. (2007), we included cognitive processing words, specific emotion words (e.g., happy, sad), as well as a broader category of general affective expression (e.g., cool, tough), to cast a larger net on how adolescents express their internal states. We predicted that adolescents who integrated more internal state language in their personal narratives, language reflective of emotional processing and cognitive regulation, would show higher levels of social and emotional well-being, conceptualized as fewer internalizing (anxiety, withdrawal) and externalizing (aggression, anger) behaviors. However, we thought there might be age and gender differences in these relations. Younger adolescents may not be able to utilize internal state language as frequently as older adolescents, and also they may not yet have developed the social and emotional skills needed to effectively interpret and evaluate these emotional events. In terms of gender, we predicted that females would provide more emotional narratives than males, but predicted relations with well-being are less clear. On the one hand, females might show stronger positive relations between narrative meaning-making and well-being than males due to their higher use of internal state language; on the other hand, females might also show the opposite pattern, such that higher levels of internal state language might be reflective of

rumination and would therefore be related to lower levels of emotional well-being. Finally, we compared relations between internal state language in narratives of positive and negative events as related to well-being. Because only one other study has examined these relations, we made no predictions.

Method

Participants

The data reported in the present study are part of a larger study examining family narratives and adolescent identity and well-being. Families with an adolescent child between 13 and 16 years of age were recruited through schools, sports camps, churches, and other local institutions.

Participants were informed that we were interested in what parents and children remember about past experiences, as well as the kinds of stories that families tell about these events. Sixty-six middle class, two-parent opposite-gender families completed at least some of the narrative and well-being protocol and thus were included in the present analyses. Of the 65 families who provided information on family structure, 59 were traditional (3 of these children were adopted) and 6 were blended families. Sixty-three families returned information on race/ethnicity. Forty-six families self-identified as White/European American, 15 as African-American, 1 as mixed ethnicity, and 1 as Asian.

The parents were highly educated; of the 63 mothers who indicated their level of education, three reported having a high school degree, 14 reported some college education, 30 reported having a college degree, and 16 reported having a degree at the post graduate level. Of the 62 fathers who indicated their level of education, two reported having some high school education, four reported having a High School degree, 11 reported some college education, 27 reported having a college degree, and 18 reported having a degree at the post graduate level.

The 66 adolescents included 37 eighth graders (mean age = 13.57, range 13-14 years; 17 females) and 29 tenth graders (mean age = 15.48, range 15-16 years; 15 females). All mothers signed fully informed consent, and families were compensated for their participation (\$25.00 at each of two home visits). Adolescents signed an assent form and were given two movie tickets at the first home visit and a \$25.00 gift certificate at the second home visit. Narrative data for the present study were collected at the first home visit and questionnaire data were collected at the second home visit.

Procedure

Narrative elicitation—Families were visited in their homes by one or two of eight female research assistants. During the first home visit, the research assistant and adolescent participant sat in a quiet place in the home and adolescents were asked to narrate two positive and two negative personal events using the following prompt: “I want you to think about a really positive (negative) event in your life that you remember; a time when you were really happy, excited, or proud (angry, sad or scared). It may have happened recently or many years ago.” After the adolescent nominated all four events, the interviewer

continued, “Can you tell me everything you remember about (name of each event)?” At the end of each narrative, the researcher asked if the adolescent had anything else to add. Positive and negative events were counterbalanced. For each narrative, adolescents were additionally asked about their age when the event occurred and why they considered the event important. Although we did not restrict the time period from which the event could be selected, the overwhelming majority of events narrated (more than 90%) occurred within the previous year. Data from two participants could not be analyzed due to missing or unintelligible tapes, and one boy and one girl were removed from the analyses because their narratives were more than 2.5 standard deviations from the mean in length. Thus 31 boys and 31 girls completed both positive and negative event narratives.

Questionnaire measure—During the second home visit (typically 1-2 weeks after the first home visit), the adolescent was asked to complete a packet of questionnaires regarding individual and family life. Whereas emotional regulation has been defined in many ways in previous literature, including physical well-being (by measures such as immune responses and sick days) and psychological well-being (by measures of self-esteem, depression, PTSD, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, etc.), we define emotional regulation in the present study by children's self-report of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Children who are better able to regulate emotions would show lower levels of internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, anger, substance abuse) than children who are less able to regulate their emotions.

The Youth Self Report Report (YSR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) is used to determine the presence or absence of internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) and externalizing (e.g., acting out) problems in children. Because only the internalizing and externalizing scales are of interest in the present study, we limit our discussion to items and scoring for these scales. Internalizing and externalizing scores are calculated independently, with responses from 31 items summed to create a total internalizing score, and responses from 32 items summed to create a total externalizing score. Each item is scored from 0 to 2, with 0 indicating that the item is *not true* of the child, whereas a 2 indicates that the item is *very true or often true* of the child. For example, sample items reflective of internalizing problems include “I cry a lot” and “I would rather be alone than with others,” and sample items reflective of externalizing problems include “I disobey my parents” and “I get in many fights.” Lower scores indicate less frequent internalizing or externalizing behaviors, and higher scores indicate more frequent and/or severe internalizing or externalizing behaviors.

As a measure of internal consistency, Achenbach and Rescorla (2001) calculated Cronbach's alphas for each scale, with both the internalizing and externalizing $\alpha = .90$, which indicates strong internal consistency. As reported by Achenbach, overall 1-week test-retest reliability Pearson's r 's for the internalizing and externalizing scores are .80 and .89, respectively. Of the 62 participants who participated in the narrative portion of the present study, 29 boys and 27 girls completed the Youth Self Report, thus the number of participants in analyses with this measure will vary accordingly.

Coding

The tape-recorded narratives were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy before coding. Based on theory and previous literature described earlier, coding focused on three aspects of internal state language: the use of words indicative of cognitive processing, the use of specific emotion words, and the use of general affective language. These schemes were adapted from existing schemes (Bauer, Stennes & Haight, 2003; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008; Zaman & Fivush, 2009). Each instance of the following categories was tallied:

1. Cognitive states. All references to thoughts, cognitions, desires, and beliefs were counted (e.g., “I thought she liked me,” “I really wanted a cell phone,” “I didn't know he was that much older than me.”)
2. Emotion words. All uses of specific emotion words (e.g., sad, happy, angry) were counted. These were further coded into positive and negative emotion.
3. General affect. These are general expressions of affect, such as “It was cool” and “That was hard on me.” These were further coded into positive and negative affect.

Internal states were only coded if they referred to thoughts and emotions experienced about the event itself, either during the event or in the present (e.g., “I really wanted to go to that party”; “And I'm still sad about that.”). Internal state language was not coded if it referred to thoughts and emotions related to the memory process itself (e.g., “I can't believe I remembered that.”; “I think I remember that but I'm not sure.”) Initially, internal state language was coded for whether it referred to the adolescent or another, but because the majority referred to the adolescent this category was combined in all analyses.

Reliability

The internal states coding scheme was developed by two researchers, who then independently coded 20 to 25% of the narratives for reliability. The remaining narratives were coded by one of the two trained researchers. Cohen's Kappa for affective states was .91; for the emotion words it was .84, and for cognitive states it was .91.

Results

The major questions of interest were whether adolescent girls and boys differ in their use of internal states language in narratives of emotional events, and further, how girls' and boys' internal states language might be related to their social and emotional well-being. While we recognize the controversy in the field of narrative research as to whether frequencies are the correct metric for data analysis, we argue that the sheer amount of a particular type of language is reliably predictive of later outcomes, including child language, narrative measures, and emotional development (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1986; Laible, 2004a, 2004b; Reese, 1995). Yet, we recognize that there is a great deal of variability in the length of children's personal narratives. Thus, all of our analyses are presented first with frequency data and then with narrative length as a covariate. Differences resulting from these two approaches are discussed.

To place these analyses in context, we first describe the types of events that children selected to narrate, followed by descriptive statistics on the narrative and well-being measures. For the narrative variables, the mean of the two positive events and the two negative events were used in all analyses. We then present data examining gender differences in internal states language, and finally, gendered patterns of relations between internal states language and adolescents' well-being.

Description of events

Adolescents' narratives of personal experiences fell into several broad categories. Categories were not mutually exclusive as some stories centered on multiple themes. Table 1 displays the number and percentage of males and females that narrated stories in these various categories. As can be seen, there were many more similarities across gender than differences between gender, with the majority of positive narratives focused on achievement and animals and the majority of negative narratives describing accidents or mishaps, failures, and hardships endured. However, there was some suggestion that females told more positive stories about peers than did males. Within the negative narratives, more females than males chose to talk about a death or illness, whereas more males chose to talk about a fight or argument.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the means of the internalizing and externalizing scales on the Youth Self Report. No gender differences were found for either scale. Table 3 presents the means of the narrative variables by gender¹. Females told longer narratives than did males, ($F(1, 60) = 6.25, p < .05$), but there was no significant difference between the positive and negative narratives in length. Although we hypothesized that the younger adolescents' use of internal state language might not be as frequent as that of the older adolescents, and that perhaps the relations to well-being would differ across the age groups, preliminary analyses revealed no consistent or meaningful patterns by age. Therefore, in all subsequent analyses, the two age groups are collapsed.

Gender differences in internal states language

General affect and specific emotion words were coded for whether they expressed both positive and negative emotion. Thus, $2(\text{gender}) \times 2(\text{valence of the event})$ mixed model analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with gender as a between-subjects variable and valence of the event as a repeated measures variable, were conducted separately for positive and negative affect, as well as positive and negative emotion words. For affect, not surprisingly, positive narratives contained more positive affect than negative narratives, ($F(1, 60) = 41.09, p < .01$), and negative narratives contained more negative affect than positive narratives, ($F(1, 60) = 7.07, p < .01$). Similarly, positive narratives contained more specific positive emotion words than did negative narratives, ($F(1, 60) = 37.20, p < .01$), and negative narratives contained more specific negative emotion words than did positive

¹Preliminary analyses examining the relations between narrative variables and internalizing and externalizing behaviors were conducted on all 66 children. However, there were no significant relations. Because all significant findings were revealed in analyses by gender, data are presented for boys and girls separately. Results on analyses across all children are available from the first author.

narratives, ($F(1, 60) = 8.97, p < .01$). However, there were also gender differences, such that, across event type, females expressed more positive affect than did males, ($F(1, 60) = 11.37, p < .01$), more negative affect, ($F(1, 60) = 5.65, p < .05$), more specific positive emotion words, ($F(1, 60) = 8.57, p < .01$) and tended to use more specific negative emotion words, ($F(1, 60) = 3.22, p = .08$). Females also expressed more cognitive processing words than males in their narratives, ($F(1, 60) = 4.41, p < .05$), but there were no effects of event valence and no interaction for cognitive processing words.

All internal state analyses were also conducted using the mean number of words in both the positive and negative narratives together as covariates. With both of these controls in the models, for positive affect, females expressed more positive affect across event types than did males ($F(1, 58) = 4.46, p < .05$). For positive emotion, the finding that females included more positive emotion than males across events was reduced to the trend level ($F(1, 58) = 3.10, p = .08$), as was the main effect of valence for negative affect ($F(1, 58) = 3.20, p = .08$). There were no other main effects of gender or valence, and no interactions, for any other internal state variable.

Relations between adolescents' narratives and well-being

Initial correlations between narrative length and the well-being measures did not reveal any significant relations, and therefore narrative length was not controlled for in the final analyses. Correlations between each narrative variable and children's internalizing and externalizing scores on the Youth Self Report are shown in Table 4 by gender. Boys who used more cognitive words and expressed more negative emotion in their negative event narratives, and more cognitive words, more negative emotion and more negative affect in their positive event narratives showed lower internalizing behaviors. There were no relations between the narrative variables and the Youth Self Report for girls.

Discussion

We examined gender differences in personal narratives in relation to emotional well-being during adolescence, a critical period for the development of identity and emotional regulation (Erikson, 1980; Harter, 1999). Mirroring previous research with different age groups, we found that females narrated both positive and negative personal experiences in more emotional ways. Also, females included more cognitive processing words indicative of self-reflection. Relations to well-being were also gendered. Adolescent males who told personal narratives richer in internal state language displayed higher levels of well-being, but there were no relations between internal state language in personal narratives and well-being for adolescent females.

Previous research with both younger children and with adults indicates that females tell more emotionally rich personal narratives (Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003; Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Cross & Madson, 1997; Davis, 1999; Fivush & Buckner, 2003). We replicated and extended this finding with adolescents. Using a broader conceptualization of emotional language, we found that adolescent females told personal narratives that included more specific emotion words, as well as more expressions of general affect, although these findings were related to length of the narrative. However, we argue that this is a theoretically

meaningful finding as this was not a time-limited task, and adolescents were free to narrate events in any way and for as long as they chose. The finding that females choose to tell longer and more emotionally imbued narratives than do males suggests that they are more interested and engaged in telling and sharing the emotional experiences of their lives than are males (Cross & Madson, 1997). Moreover, that this finding emerges from early childhood through adulthood suggest that this is a consistent gender difference across the lifespan (Buckner & Fivush, 1998). Still, even controlling for length, females told personal narratives that included more positive affect and tended to include more specific positive emotion than did males.

Females also included more cognitive processing words in their narratives than did males, although again, when controlling for length of the narrative, this difference did not reach significance. Cognitive processing words suggest reflection on the event and a sense of “working through” and evaluating meaning (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; Pennebaker, 1997). Further, in expressive writing interventions, higher use of cognitive processing words is related to subsequent well-being, regardless of the length of the narratives, suggesting that length is not the critical variable, but rather the ability to cognitively reflect on the event (Frattaroli, 2006). We further note that females include more internal state language in their narratives than do males even though females nominate similar types of events to narrate as do males. Thus the gender difference does not seem to be a function of the types of events that are selected, but rather a different focus even when narrating similar events. That females focus on what Bruner (1990) has called the “landscape of consciousness,” including more emotion and more cognitive processing words, suggests that females are working harder to understand what their experiences mean for the self than are males (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). This kind of language in personal narratives points to females’ greater inclination to think about past events and to create more coherent evaluative understandings of one’s past. Indeed, females report thinking about the past more frequently than do males and to use past experiences in order to understand the self and current situations more so than do males (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Pillemer, 1998), although as discussed below, this may not be in the service of increasing well-being, at least in adolescence.

Further, there were no effects of valence on internal state language. We had predicted based on previous research that both females and males would include more cognitive processing words in their narratives of negative events than positive events, as negative events create a problem to be solved and aversive affect to be regulated. That we did not find this effect suggests that positive events may also be reflected upon as a way to understand the self and emotional experiences. Certainly, thinking about and sharing the positive events of our lives is critical for well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). Perhaps adolescents reflect on the positive events of their lives in the service of creating a healthy adult identity (Bohanek, 2006).

Relations between internal state language in narratives and concurrent well-being might support this interpretation, at least for males. Adolescent males who told both positive and negative events imbued with more internal state language displayed higher levels of well-being. Specifically, the use of cognitive processing words and negative emotion in both narratives of positive and negative events was related to lower levels of self-reported internalizing behaviors. This finding suggests that male adolescents who have a more

complex emotional understanding, by expressing negative emotion even in the context of positive events, and reflect more on their experience through the use of cognitive processing words, may be better able to regulate their internal emotional experience. However, there were no relations between adolescent females' use of internal state language in their narratives and their self-reported well-being. There are at least two possible explanations of this gender difference.

First, this may be developmental phenomenon. Females are more advanced in their understanding of emotion and emotional regulation more generally (Brody & Hall, 1993), as also indicated by their higher use of internal state language. Perhaps adolescent males, who are just beginning to have a more sophisticated understanding of their internal life, as expressed in these narratives, show higher well-being than their male peers who do not yet display this understanding. However, this explanation would still not fully explain why there are no relations for females. Complicating the interpretation even further, using a different empirical definition of meaning-making, recent longitudinal research by McLean and Breen (2008) suggests that young adolescent males who express meaning-making in their personal narratives concurrently show *lower* levels of well-being but later in early adulthood show higher levels of identity achievement. Adolescence is clearly a period of rapid and labile emotional development (Arnett, 1999), and relations between narratives and well-being are likely to be complex. The research to date indicates that gender is a critical variable in this process, but exactly how this plays out developmentally awaits further longitudinal research across a wider age range.

A second possibility is that males, in general, benefit more from expressing internal states in personal narratives than do females. Within the expressive writing paradigm, in which adults are asked to narrate stressful events of their lives multiple times, males tend to show greater health benefits than do females (Frattaroli, 2006). However, there are no clear reasons why males should benefit more than females. A limitation of both the expressive writing research and this study is that internal state language was coded out of context. That is, the number of times specific types of words appeared in the narratives was counted, but the context within which those words were embedded was not considered. Exploring the context may reveal that males and females are in fact expressing, explaining, integrating, or resolving these emotional events differently, thus providing insight as to why the inclusion of internal states language is related to fewer internalizing behaviors in boys, but no relations were found for girls.

Thus, in many ways, our findings raise more questions than they answer. Patterns of gender differences in use of internal state language within the narratives fits with previous theory and research, but relations between internal state language and well-being remains puzzling. Of course, there are several limitations that also must be acknowledged. First, as already alluded to, our work examined the frequency of internal states language without regard to the context in which it was embedded. Second, our data are not longitudinal, and we cannot infer direction of effects. In addition, we chose to focus on the transition from early to middle adolescence when narrative development reaches critical milestones (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). This limited the ages of the children in our sample and future work should incorporate a wider age range to test whether the relations between internal state language

and child well-being changes over time. Finally, the children in this sample were relatively well-adjusted; future research should examine these relations among a wider variety of children including adolescents who are at risk for emotional difficulties.

Despite these limitations, our overall findings add to the small but important literature examining relations between narrative meaning-making and well-being in adolescence. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of a healthy adult identity, and the ways in which adolescents narrate the emotional events of their lives provide a window into how they are creating sense and meaning of these events. Our results point to the importance both of this process and the role of gender.

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Table 1

Narrative themes categorized by valence and gender.

	Boys	Girls
<i>Positive Narrative</i>		
Achievement	33 (51%)	36 (55%)
Peers	5 (8%)	11 (17%)
Family	11 (17%)	7 (11%)
Animals	15 (23%)	11 (17%)
Other	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
<i>Negative Narrative</i>		
Death/illness	16 (24%)	25 (37%)
Accident/mishap	20 (29%)	16 (24%)
Failure	7 (10%)	8 (12%)
Fight/argument	11 (16%)	5 (7%)
Punishment	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Hardship	13 (19%)	14 (21%)

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Table 2

Means (and standard deviations) for Youth Self Report by gender.

	Boys	Girls
<i>YSR</i>		
Internalizing	52.69 (8.81)	53.67 (8.55)
Externalizing	49.62 (8.83)	49.00 (7.95)

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Table 3

Means (and standard deviations) for narrative variables by gender.

	Boys		Girls	
	Neg Narr	Pos Narr	Neg Narr	Pos Narr
<i>Narrative Variables</i>				
Number of Words	166.82 (103.61)	174.03 (124.24)	284.11 (247.13)	254.79 (175.25)
Cognitive Words	2.03 (2.45)	2.05 (2.55)	3.48 (3.72)	4.11 (4.42)
Positive Affect	.34 (.60)	1.89 (1.43)	1.39 (1.73)	3.94 (3.74)
Positive Emotion	.10 (.24)	.79 (.80)	.69 (1.05)	1.55 (1.59)
Negative Affect	2.15 (2.64)	1.29 (.96)	4.29 (5.86)	2.24 (1.60)
Negative Emotion	1.69 (2.31)	1.02 (1.81)	3.02 (3.96)	2.05 (2.66)

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Table 4

Correlations between child rating scales and child narratives

	Boys		Girls	
	YSR: Int	YSR: Ext	YSR: Int	YSR: Ext
<i>Neg Narr</i>				
Cog Wds	-.42*	.08	.05	.16
Pos Aff	-.23	.13	.25	.27
Pos Emo	-.06	.21	.26	.31
Neg Aff	-.31	-.02	.20	.18
Neg Emo	-.44*	-.13	.27	.06
<i>Pos Narr</i>				
Cog Wds	-.48**	.03	.05	.25
Pos Aff	-.38 ⁺	-.03	.07	.18
Pos Emo	.06	.10	.09	.28
Neg Aff	-.54**	-.07	.21	.29
Neg Emo	-.47*	.03	.17	.28

ns = nonsignificant

⁺*p* .10**P* .05***p* .01