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Intergenerational narratives and identity across development

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational narratives are the stories that parents and grandparents share with their children about their own past experiences growing up. We argue from the foundational perspectives of Eriksonian life-span theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and the sociocultural model of autobiographical memory that intergenerational narratives, although often overlooked by researchers of narrative identity development, play an important role in the family storytelling process that serves many functions for the elder generations who tell them and the younger generations who hear them. We focus on where these narratives fit within the larger body of literature on narrative identity at two developmental periods of interest: midlife and adolescence. We review evidence suggesting that intergenerational narratives influence the psychosocial development of individuals, serving as constructions of identity and a means of achieving a sense of generativity, in ways that may also contribute to family identity and individual well-being.

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The intergenerational self in narrative identity

Storytelling is a universal human activity. Whether stories are told to give instruction on how one ought to live in a society (Thorne, 2004) or to share one's day with family members at the dinner table

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(Bohanek et al., 2009), narratives are the way that individuals make sense of their lives (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Broadly speaking, narratives are culturally canonical linguistic forms (Chafe, 1990; Labov, 1982) that simultaneously shape how individuals understand their lived experience (Bruner, 1990, 1991; Ricoeur, 1991) and structure the sharing of experiences with, to, and from others (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). More narrowly, from the McAdams (2001) life narrative model, which we adopt here, personal narratives coalesce the past, present and future into a coherent narrative identity in order to create a sense of unity and purpose across time.

There is substantial evidence that the ways in which individuals express and understand their own personal experiences are related to identity and well-being (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2015; Waters & Fivush, 2015). In this paper, we expand the literature by exploring another critically important type of identity narrative that has received little research attention. Intergenerational narratives are the stories that parents and grandparents pass down about their experiences to their children. Intergenerational narratives sit at the nexus of personal and collective memories, in that they are lived experiences being told by the older generation, and received stories about the familial past to the younger generation (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008; Fivush & Merrill, accepted; Reese & Fivush, 2008). These stories, shared within a variety of contexts, hold a unique position within the larger body of research on narrative development and have implications for individual identity and well-being, for both the generation telling and the generation hearing these stories.

In this review, we propose that intergenerational narratives contribute to the construction of identity in ways that facilitate psychosocial development at multiple stages of the life span. Our objective is to develop an integrative theoretical model of intergenerational narratives, and review preliminary data, in order to facilitate further research. To develop our arguments, we first provide the theoretical foundations, drawing from three developmental theories of interest: Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1968), Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), and Nelson and Fivush's sociocultural model of autobiographical memory (2004). We then very briefly describe extant literature on narrative identity, which focuses on personal narratives. In the third section, we integrate the first two sections, showing how personal and family stories are situated in social cultural contexts. This somewhat extended background is necessary to motivate the fourth section, in which we provide the evidence for the importance of *intergenerational* narratives, both for the older generations who tell these stories and for the younger generations who hear these stories. We draw on literature from multiple perspectives to support our arguments. We emphasize that research on intergenerational narratives is in its infancy. We further note that, because most of the relevant research has been conducted with homogeneous European American families who are fairly well-functioning, interpretations must be made with great caution. Thus, in the final section, in the context of summarizing themes that emerge throughout the review, we further develop diverse directions for future research.

Theoretical foundations

To lay out the theoretical foundation of the intergenerational self in narrative, we draw from three developmental theories. In the first of these theories, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, developing individuals are posited to experience normative "crises" at different stages of the life span (Erikson, 1963, 1968). These psychosocial challenges must be successfully resolved to achieve a fulfilled sense of self. At each of these points, the individual faces a challenge that needs to be resolved through coordinating the self of the past, present and future in ways that allow for healthy identity and functioning, and this is accomplished, at least partly, through a narrative understanding of the self through time. There are two stages in particular which may be most relevant for intergenerational narrative, the stages of "Identity vs. Role Confusion" in adolescence, and the stages of "Generativity vs. Stagnation" in middle age. At both developmental time points, relations between autobiographical memory and identity are foregrounded. In adolescence, the ability to reason about the past becomes more fully developed, at the same time when individuals are exploring possible future identities (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). In midlife, autobiographical memory is used as a tool of reflection, of looking back and constructing a sense of purpose and meaning in life (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). We will describe how intergenerational narratives may function to inform identity processes in adolescence and to enhance generativity in midlife.

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