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Stress at encoding, context at retrieval, and children's narrative content



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ABSTRACT

Research concerning the relations between stress and children's memory has been primarily correlational and focused on memory volume and accuracy. In the current study, we experimentally manipulated 7- and 8-year-olds' and 12- to 14-year-olds' experienced stress during a to-be-remembered event to examine the effects of stress on the *content* of their memory. We further manipulated the degree of interviewer support at retrieval to determine whether it moderated the effects of stress at encoding on memory. Children's age, gender, stress at encoding, and interviewer support all influenced the type of information included in their narrative reports. Most notably, across ages, children who experienced a more stressful event but were questioned in a supportive manner provided the largest ratio of terms representing internal states such as those about cognitions and emotions. Results suggest that how children process past events may be influenced by both the nature of the event itself and the context within which it is recalled.

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Introduction

Communicating about past events is an integral part of our culture (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). The act of reminiscing merges important events into our life histories, helps to direct our future behavior, and enhances social bonds (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; Nelson, 1993; Pillemer, 1992). The

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content of our narratives about the past also influences how we organize memory and how we come to understand, respond to, and cope with our experiences (see Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Indeed, variations in narrative content have been linked to psychological and physical well-being, especially when recounting negative, stressful prior experiences (Bird & Reese, 2006; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997; Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007; Rubin, 2011; Rude, Gortner, & Pennebaker, 2004).

Despite these links, and despite the importance of narrative content for a range of outcomes, we know relatively little about what factors influence that content, especially during childhood, a time when narrative skills undergo rapid developmental change.

The overarching purpose of the current investigation was to examine how stress during a to-be-remembered event influences the content of children's and adolescents' event narratives. We were further interested in whether the context at retrieval, namely the provision of support, would increase narrative markers of active emotional processing, particularly when the to-be-remembered event was more rather than less stressful. We manipulated stress at encoding to draw causal inferences about the effects of stress per se and manipulated the provision of support by an interviewer at retrieval to determine whether comfort while describing a past event, directly and in conjunction with encoding stress, affected narrative content. Finally, we included children and adolescents to identify developmental changes in children's narrative content about a stressful experience.

Internal state language and stress at encoding

In research focused on narrative content, a distinction is often made between language that refers to factual details (i.e., objectively verifiable features of a past event) and language that refers to internal states (i.e., subjective interpretation of the event such as thoughts and feelings elicited) (see Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). Factual details have been studied extensively in domains such as education and eyewitness testimony, and results have led to improved theoretical understanding of memory development and to policy advancements in applied settings. Internal state details, although less well studied, are also of significant theoretical and practical interest. Theoretically, internal state language has implications for understanding emotion knowledge and evaluating different models of coping; practically, the use of internal state terms has been linked to active processing of emotional content and health functioning across the lifespan (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; Fivush, Sales, & Bohanek, 2008; Nelson, 1993; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2008).

Internal state language first appears, albeit in a rudimentary form, in children's event narratives early in development (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Bretherton & Beeghly, 1982), with the sophistication and frequency of internal state language continuing to increase across childhood and into adolescence. Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010), for instance, interviewed 8- and 9-year-olds, 12- and 13-year-olds, and 16- and 17-year-olds about positive and negative experiences. As might be expected, the amount of information included in their narratives increased with age. Of note, however, this increase was due largely to more frequent "interpretive content" elaborations, that is, internal state words reflecting children's interpretations and understanding of their experiences.

Some research has focused not on age differences in internal state language use but instead on how the nature of a to-be-remembered event shapes internal state language use. Findings consistently suggest that narratives about negative events contain a greater amount of internal state language than those about positive events (Baker-Ward, Eaton, & Banks, 2005; Bohanek, Fivush, & Walker, 2005; Fivush et al., 2008). However, findings are less clear as to how the intensity of emotions experienced during a negative event influences internal state language. Some studies find that children use more internal state language when discussing more stressful or arousing events relative to less arousing negative events (e.g., Fivush, Hazzard, Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2003; Fivush et al., 2008). Fivush and colleagues (2003), for example, asked children to narrate about a past event. Afterward, the authors categorized the event children described as either a high-stress experience (e.g., witnessing a gunfight) or a low-stress experience (e.g., nonserious illness). Children who described the high-stress experience used more internal state language than children who described the low-stress experience. Yet, other studies have reported the opposite, namely, lower internal state language use when recounting more rather than less stressful experiences (Peterson & Biggs, 1998; Sales, Fivush, Parker,

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