



## Original article

## Gender differences in adolescent birth narratives

Jennifer Andrews<sup>a,\*</sup>, Widaad Zaman<sup>b</sup>, Natalie Merrill<sup>c</sup>, Marshall Duke<sup>c</sup>, Robyn Fivush<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA, USA<sup>b</sup> University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA<sup>c</sup> Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 21 April 2015

Received in revised form 9 September 2015

Accepted 9 October 2015

Available online 19 October 2015

## Keywords:

Human sex differences

Narratives

Birth stories

Male

Female

Adolescents (13–16 years old)

## ABSTRACT

Birth stories are a crucial autobiographical narrative for anchoring the life story. Yet they are not personally recalled, but received knowledge, and are therefore unique in that they occupy an intermediary role between family history and stories of self. Despite this theoretical significance, they have remained largely unexamined, especially from the perspective of the child. In this study, we examined birth narratives from 61 mostly white, broadly middle class adolescents from two-parent, opposite gender families, between the ages of 13 and 16. Based on previous research on gender differences in autobiographical narratives, the birth narratives were coded for elaboration, coherence, internal states, and connectedness. As predicted, females' narratives were higher on all of these variables than were males' narratives. We further examined relations between adolescents' birth narratives and measures of family expressiveness and knowledge of family history. Adolescents with more connected stories containing more thoughts and emotions showed higher family expressiveness, and more elaborated, contextually coherent birth stories were related to more knowledge of family history. Limitations, applications, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

© 2015 Society for Applied Research in Memory and Cognition. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Birth stories are a crucial autobiographical narrative for anchoring the life story, a narrative repeatedly shown to reveal important aspects of individual identity and perspective (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; McAdams, 1985, 2001). Birth narratives are unique within the life story because they are received knowledge, and therefore occupy an intermediary role between family history and stories of self. They are of special interest for memory research because, despite being personally experienced, they cannot be personally recalled. They also mark the beginning of the individual's entry into the world and into the family, and are therefore of great theoretical interest. The birth story is not only important for the individual who experienced it, but it is important for the family as whole in welcoming a new member, and as such, this family story may help the child start the journey to individual identity (Reese & Neha, 2015). Examining birth narratives therefore has the potential to yield information important to understanding the development of identity as it is tied to the familial context (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

The way we construct narratives of our experiences is fundamental to a sense of self (McAdams, 2001; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007), and the story of one's birth, though often

unacknowledged as such, makes an invaluable contribution to the process of constructing a self (Reese, 1996; Soparkar, 1998). A child's birth is also a major life event and source of meaning-making for the entire family (see examples in McAdams, 1993; Oppenheim, Wamboldt, Gavin, & Renouf, 1996) and thus often becomes a biographical and celebratory marker for families to construct narratives that contribute to a child's burgeoning identity (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980; Fiese & Winter, 2009; Reese, Hayne, & MacDonald, 2008). As such, the birth story functions as one of the most important biographical events in the life story (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Habermas & Paha, 2001) and is a particularly crucial anchor for constructing a sense of self (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008; Habermas, Ehlert-Lerche, & de Silveira, 2009).

A critical component of identity is gender. Female identity is stereotypically defined as more relational and emotionally expressive than male identity (Gergen, 2001; Gilligan, 1982). Intriguingly, there is substantial evidence that autobiographical narratives differ by gender, such that adult females report more coherent, elaborated narratives that are more focused on social connection and contain more internal states language, both thoughts and emotions, than do males (see Gryzman & Hudson, 2013, for a review), suggesting relations between gender differences in autobiographical narratives and gendered identity. Gender differences in autobiographical narratives begin early in development and increase during

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 404 681 7562.

E-mail address: [jandrews@morehouse.edu](mailto:jandrews@morehouse.edu) (J. Andrews).

adolescence, as individuals begin to construct an overarching life story (e.g. Fivush, Bohanek, Zaman, & Grapin, 2012; Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010).

These differences may be socialized during early parent–child reminiscing, which is also gendered. Both mothers and fathers are more elaborate and emotionally expressive when reminiscing with daughters than with sons (Fivush & Zaman, 2013; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996), and parents also reminisce about social events, emotions, and relationships more often with daughters than with sons (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Fiese & Skillman, 2000; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Zaman, Merrill, Barmore, & Fivush, 2014). Thus early gender differences in maternal and child reminiscing may be part of how a culture-typed gendered identity is socialized (see Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Fivush & Zaman, 2013, for further arguments). In adolescence, when identity becomes a major developmental task (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2003), gender differences in autobiographical narratives may contribute to a gendered sense of self (Fivush & Zaman, 2013).

An intriguing question given these patterns is whether birth stories would also differ by gender. Yet, to date no research has examined possible gender differences in adolescents' birth narratives. Because these are received stories rather than recalled events, it is important to examine whether we would see the same gender differences in birth narratives as in personal narratives; if this were the case, it would suggest that individuals are reconstructing their experiences from a gendered lens, and thus forming a life story based as much on gendered reconstruction as on the events as experienced (see Zaman & Fivush, 2011, for related theoretical arguments).

There are at least two interrelated reasons why adolescents' birth narratives might differ by gender. First, as these are received stories, it may be that mothers tell gendered stories to their children. That is, just as mothers are more coherent, elaborate, emotionally expressive and socially oriented in their co-constructed narratives about their child's personal experiences with daughters than with sons, mothers may tell their daughters birth stories in analogous ways, especially because of the salience of birth for females. Second, because girls and boys are socialized into gendered narrative styles, it may be that girls and boys tell stories about their births that are reconstructed to mirror the style in which they tell their personally experienced stories. Both explanations, which are not mutually exclusive, would predict that girls tell stories of their birth that are more coherent, more elaborated, more socially connected, and focus more on internal states than do boys. This is an important question as it has implications for the way in which a gendered identity may be constructed.

Furthermore, because birth narratives are told within the family context, and are important for family identity, we also examined whether or not birth narratives related to broader measures of family knowledge and family expressiveness, defined as the extent to which families experience and express both positive and negative emotions during everyday interactions (Halberstadt, Dennis, & Hess, 2011). The familial context is essential for the development of identity and for an understanding of self as continuous in time (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Norris, Kuiack, & Pratt, 2004; Pratt & Fiese, 2004), and parental reminiscing is a critical factor in the development of children's autobiographical memory (see Nelson & Fivush, 2004, for a review). In the case of birth narratives, parental reminiscing is especially important, since the stories of our birth are told to us most often by our parents (usually by our mothers).

Because birth stories are received, it may be that adolescents within families that are more expressive and talk more about family history generally are more likely to know the story of their birth. That is, regardless of gender, those families that engage in more expressive family storytelling would be more likely to tell

and elaborate on the adolescent's birth story. There is emerging evidence that adolescents who know more of their family history tell personal narratives that are more elaborated and expressive (see Fivush, Bohanek, & Marin, 2010, for a review). Thus in this study, we extended this question to relations between the birth story and measures of family expressiveness and knowledge of family history.

Despite its significance, few psychological studies to date have systematically investigated the birth narrative. Reese et al. (2008) examined differences in mothers telling birth narratives between Maori and Pakeha mothers, and found that Maori mothers used more elaboration and internal states language when relating birth stories to their children, following predictions based on their oral tradition; however, gender differences were not assessed.

In a similar study, Reese and Neha (2015) examined reminiscing styles in a variety of narratives among Maori women with their children and found that elaboration was more pronounced in everyday events narratives than in birth stories or stories about cultural rituals and misbehaviors. Furthermore, maternal reminiscing for all of the narratives (including birth stories) correlated with their children's memory across conversations. The only gender differences that were investigated were carried out across narrative type (i.e. analyses were not specific to birth stories), revealing a general trend where girls recalled more than boys across all conversations with their mothers.

In the only known study to compare mothers' and daughter's birth stories, sixty-one daughters from a small liberal arts college in the U.S. between the ages of 18 and 26 described their birth narratives, which were compared with their mothers' accounts (Hayden, Singer, & Chrisler, 2006). Although the authors did not examine the content of the narratives per se, they found that daughters who knew their birth stories were better adjusted than the daughters who did not know their birth story, as indicated by measures of self-esteem and attachment, and that raters who were blind to participant identity made more congruent matches between mother–daughter birth narratives for daughters with higher scores on self-esteem and attachment measures than those with lower scores on these measures. Given the sample, gender differences could not be assessed in this study, further underscoring the need to investigate gender differences specific to birth narratives.

Therefore, our objectives with this research were to explore potential gender differences in adolescents' stories about their birth and to examine relations to indices of family knowledge and expressiveness. We chose to examine adolescents because this is the critical developmental period for the formation of a life story, and it is when individuals begin their life story with their birth (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Based on previous findings of gender differences in autobiographical narratives, we examined birth narratives for coherence, elaboration, social connectedness and the inclusion of internal states, both thoughts and emotions. We predicted that girls would tell more coherent, elaborated, and socially connected birth stories with more emotion and cognition words than would boys. In addition we examined relations between adolescents' birth stories and measures of family expressiveness and knowledge of family history. We predicted that, across gender, adolescents who knew more of their family history and had family relationships characterized by higher expressiveness would tell more coherent, elaborated, expressive and socially connected stories about their birth than adolescents lower on these dimensions.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

The birth narratives were collected as part of a larger study of family narratives. Sixty-five opposite gender, two-parent families

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/881557>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/881557>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)