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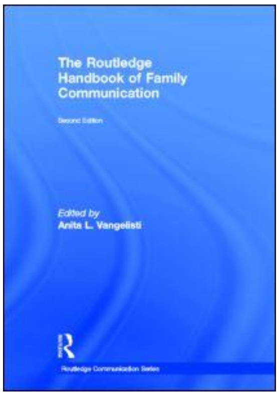
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Family Stories and Storytelling

Windows into the Family Soul

Jody Koenig Kellas and April R. Trees

Stories are ubiquitous, taken-for-granted threads in the fabric of our linguistic, cognitive, and relational lives. Humans make sense of life through narrative without even knowing it (Bruner, 1990; Fisher, 1987). Although often everyday, mundane, and repetitive, stories also serve as unique, informative units of discourse and/or modes of thought, sense-making, identity construction, and constitutive talk. Family stories draw people in, teach them lessons, and stay with them long after they've been told. They are at once entertaining and horrifying, sad and hopeful, everyday and far-reaching. They are passed down from generation to generation and pepper the daily or weekly conversations between family members. Family stories help us make sense of, celebrate, and cope with happy and difficult lived experiences. In short, stories are in many ways at the center of daily, communicated family life.

Just as "stories are data with a soul" (Brown, 2010), families are stories with souls. Stories affect and reflect what really matters to a family (Stone, 2004) and telling them constitutes the bright and dark sides of family culture and meaning (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas, Willer, & Kranstuber, 2010). According to Fiese and Winter (2009), "family stories are verbal accounts of personal experiences that are important to the family, depict rules of interaction, reflect beliefs about the trustworthiness of relationships, and impart values connected to larger social institutions" (p. 626). Family stories provide a *window* into family culture (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2005), typically through an analysis of the content, coherence, and communicative processes of the story and storytelling interaction (Fiese & Winter, 2009).

The research on family stories is embedded within an extensive body of research on narrative that spans disciplinary and paradigmatic lines. Narrative is at once known as a paradigm (Fisher, 1987), the center of a paradigmatic shift (i.e., the narrative turn, see Bochner, 2002), a method (Riessman, 2008), a genre (Ochs, 1997), and a discourse unit (Labov & Waletsky, 1967). It is also the focus of theoretical insight into the ways in which humans both make sense of, and create, identity (for a review, see Koenig Kellas, 2008).

In the current chapter, we offer a glimpse into the family soul by showing what narratives *say* and *do* in the realm of family life. We review literature on the functions of family stories in and beyond the family system, including *creating*, *socializing*, and *coping*. In addition, we issue a call for future research on family stories and storytelling that is empirically tested, theoretically driven, applied, and socially significant.

The Functions of Stories and Storytelling in Families

Researchers have identified several functions relevant to stories and storytelling within the family (e.g., Bylund, 2003; Galvin, 2003). In the section that follows, we describe the overarching themes that lend intelligibility to narrative functions specific to stories and storytelling in the family, including creating, socializing, and coping.

Creating: Constructing Individual and Family Identity

Perhaps the most noted and central function of family stories is the creation and maintenance of individual and family identities (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Stone, 2004). We are born into family stories. Although they provide a window into family culture to those outside the family (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Vangelisti et al., 1999), they also are told within the family in ways that build the identity of the family as a whole and its individual members. In her foundational work on family stories, Stone (2004) argues that family stories shape us. These stories are passed down from generation to generation, creating multigenerational threads of meaning in both family and individual identity. Of course, these narrative constructions also are situated against the backdrop of cultural master narratives about family that shape and reflect our narrative practices (Langellier & Peterson, 2004).

Constructing Family Identity

Stories told within the family are powerful means by which a family comes to construct a group identity. Family definition stories (Stone, 2004), family identity stories (Koenig Kellas, 2005), and family legacies (Stone, 2004; Thompson, Koenig Kellas, Soliz, Thompson, Epp, & Schrodt, 2009) all refer to stories that family members tell when they try to articulate who the family is. For example, stories that last across generations and teach simple, straightforward themes about family identity become *family legacies*—stories used to evaluate the overall sense of who a family is and how an individual can evaluate him or herself in relation to the family. In a study on family legacies, Thompson et al. (2009) identified three themes of positive family legacies including hard-working, caring for others, and family cohesion. In addition, Thompson et al. found that participants tended to reject negative family stories as family legacies. This is consistent with Stone (2004), who claims that family members adopt primarily positive legacies that promote their preferred image of the family. Generally, even when negative, "humdrum," or "unattractive" characteristics emerge in family stories, they are combined with positive family qualities to "demonstrate that the family is indeed 'special' and in some way superior to all other families" (Stone, 2004, p. 35). Thus, family stories make the family unique, and families embrace, tell, and retell the stories that knit together that special family identity.

The themes of such family stories serve an evaluative function, providing insight into what makes people happy or unhappy in their families and offering telling information about family culture. Vangelisti et al. (1999), for example, found that individuals who told family stories containing themes such as togetherness, care, humor, reconstruction, or adaptability were more satisfied with their families, whereas people whose stories contained themes of hostility, divergent values, chaos, personality attributes, or hostility were more dissatisfied. Similarly, families whose identity stories were told around the theme of stress were much less satisfied than those whose story themes revolved around accomplishment (Koenig Kellas, 2005).

Storytelling *interaction* may tell us just as much about a family's culture as the thematic content of the narrative. For example, the interactional behaviors that characterize family storytelling also predict elements of family culture such as cohesion, adaptability, and satisfaction (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). In a study of jointly told family identity stories, Koenig Kellas (2005) found that families who identified as a storytelling family (i.e., told stories together and often), families who engaged in high levels of perspective-taking during the joint storytelling episodes, and families who produced more statements about who members are in relation to the family as a whole, also reported higher levels of family functioning. Thus, storytelling creates multigenerational possibilities for perpetuating and/or (re)framing family identity through content and process.

Langellier and Peterson's (2006) narrative performance theory focuses on the performative, discursive production of family through family storytelling. As a discursive means by which people "do" family, storytelling is both a performance in the family (i.e., something the family performs) and is performative (i.e., a way of constructing family identity). Narrative performance theory focuses on the meanings relevant to family story content (content-ordering), the labor and process of family storytelling such as *who* tells *what when* (task-ordering), and the ways in which the content and process of stories are innovated and interpreted within particular sociohistorical conditions across generations (group-ordering). In their research, Langellier and Peterson (1993; 2004) demonstrate the ways in which storytelling performs family as small group culture, including attempts to tell good stories, produce good families, and potentially sanction, control, and critique family members.

In sum, families are systems in which the interaction processes, patterns, legacies, and themes of family stories all have implications for reflecting and affecting family culture. Family identity stories are living, breathing, negotiated stories transactionally constructed among family members. These processes matter to understanding how we narratively inherit (Goodall, 2005) and pass on individual and family identities.

Constructing Individual Identity

Just as families inherit stories that construct a sense of family identity, family stories also help individuals to understand, articulate, and construct their own sense of individual identity (Stone, 2004). According to Stone (2004), "We are shaped by our families' notions of our identities … and among the primary vehicles families use to mirror us to ourselves are the family stories we hear about ourselves" (p. 167).

In his theory of narrative identity, McAdams (1993) positions identity as narratively constructed. We make sense of who we are through the multiple images, characters, and stories that impact us across our lives. The relationship between infants and their parents sets the stage for the lasting tone of their personal myth. In the pre-school years, images of important characters, such as parents, may become enduring images that affect the adult life story. Adolescents become independent myth-makers, and young adults focus on developing a solid sense of their own life story character(s). In older adulthood, individuals think more about the generativity of their personal myths. McAdams further explains, "The stories we create influence the stories of other people, those stories give rise to still others, and soon we find meaning and connection within a web of storymaking and story living" (p. 37). Family members and the stories they tell are intimately woven into the web of our individual narrative identity.

Although many of the stories we hear and tell about ourselves reflect unique parts of our individual life stories (McAdams, 1993), much research has focused on *creation stories* (Galvin, 2003)—birth narratives, adoption narratives, and marital origin stories. These canonical stories help construct a sense of individual and couple identity.

Birth Stories

According to Galvin (2003), "a child's birth or 'entrance' story defines who the child is, narrates the process by which he or she was born into the family, and contributes to the family. It contains messages of desire, emotion, significance, and expectations" (p. 241). Parents share these stories with their children, and children weave them into their personal myths.

Birth stories are at once representations of women as (emergent) mothers and representations of children and how they can understand themselves in relation to the family. Reese (1996) claims that birth stories serve as the first chapter in individuals' overall life stories and therefore provide children with their first story from which to evaluate self. Over time these stories become part of the fabric of individuals' life stories (McAdams, 1993) and have implications for children's self-esteem and well-being (Friedlander, 1999). Hayden, Singer, and Chrisler (2006), for example, found that the more often daughters reported having heard their birth story, the more descriptive it was, and the more positive it was, the higher daughters reported their self-esteem and mother–daughter attachment to be.

Non-traditional Family "Birth" Stories

Not all families fit the master narrative of heterosexual romantic love, marriage, and the procreation of biological children. Instead, increasingly "non-traditional," discourse-dependent (Galvin, 2006) families rely on narratives and storytelling to help family members (and outsiders) make sense of how they came to be (see also Koenig Kellas, Willer et al., 2010). Adoptive, foster, same-sex, and stepfamilies often must do extra "narrative work" in order to help children come to terms with the family form and their place in it. For example, Becker-Weidman and Shell (2010) suggest that helping children with trauma-attachment problems (e.g., foster children, children adopted from orphanages, children who were adopted out of abusive situations) restory their personal myths can have significant healing benefits. They recommend that parents consistently tell "claiming stories," or stories about how the child entered into the family, as a method of helping the child become socialized to the family and restory a preferred individual life story or personal identity.

Research on narratively creating identity in adoptive families also focuses on these claiming stories (also known as entrance stories, Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001, or creation stories, Galvin, 2003). Perhaps not surprisingly, adoptive parents identify positive motivations and functions for telling adoption stories to their children, whereas adoptees list both positive and negative elements of hearing and interpreting stories about adoption. For example, in describing the stories they tell their adopted children, parents reported emphasizing themes such as destiny, compelling connection, rescue, legitimacy

(Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001), providing a complete history, and positively reinforcing the child and his or her place in the family (Harrigan, 2010). Parents demonstrate a thoughtful and concerted effort to portray birth parents in a positive light while at the same time reassuring the child that they were wanted, special, and that the parents and the family will be a permanent "forever family" (Harrigan, 2010, p. 33; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Adolescent and adult adoptees, on the other hand, include a balance of both positive and negative themes in their versions of entrance stories, such as openness, being chosen, fate, and rescue, but also deception, an uncomfortable sense of difference, and anxiety about reconnecting with birthparents (Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011). It is possible that not all parents devote careful attention to helping adoptees craft their entrance narratives or it may be the parent and adoptee stories differ because of factors such as their role in the family and identity formation.

Although far less researched and far less told, stepfamilies and same-sex parented families also make sense of their beginnings through narrative mechanisms. Koenig Kellas et al. (2009), for example, found five frames through which stepfamilies narratively reconstructed their stepfamily beginnings, including sudden (rushed, secretive), dark-sided (scandalous, complicated), ambivalent (a mix of highs and lows), idealized (easy transition to feeling like a family), and incremental (organized, clear, and open communication). Participants who told idealized family beginning stories were more satisfied than those who told dark-sided or sudden stories. Although these results are not particularly surprising, they do point to the importance of story framing. Members of discourse dependent families, such as stepfamilies or same-sex headed families, can craft stories that counter the predominant master narratives that privilege biological nuclear families (e.g., Jones, 2003).

Marital Origin Stories

Whereas birth and entrance narratives focus primarily on the identity of one family member, marital origin stories set the tone for a foundational family relationship. Research on couples' stories about how they met, fell in love, and got married demonstrates that "how a couple views its past predicts its future" (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992, p. 295) and helps to explain its current marital functioning (see Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004).

Using the oral history interview (OHI), for example, Buehlman and her colleagues (1992) found that both content and process variables, including low levels of fondness toward the spouse, glorifying the struggle, and we-ness, and high levels of negativity, chaos, and disappointment in the marriage predicted divorce. *Marital bond*, "a score ascertained from marital storytelling behaviors and representing positive perceptions of one's spouse and relationship," has been negatively related to loneliness, depression, and feeling flooded, and positively related to marital satisfaction (Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010, p. 57).

Holmberg, Orbuch, and Veroff (2004) and colleagues also have examined the thematic and process-oriented nature of couples telling their origin story. Their research shows that couples negotiate joint narratives through varying degrees of conflict, continuation, collaboration, confirmation, and nonresponsive interactional behaviors and that similarity in storytelling behavior predicts well-being. Moreover, they found that spouses' happiness "was closely connected to the kinds of stories they told, the feelings they attributed to their discussion, the issues and problems that became the foci of their concerns, and even how 'good' a story they told" (Holmberg et al., 2004, p. 101). Both the content and process of marital origin stories matters for the health and well-being of the couple. Telling canonical stories, such as birth, adoption, or marriage stories, often becomes ritualized interaction, which further contributes to the creation of family culture and identity.

Ritualizing Family Identity Through Storytelling

Rituals are jointly enacted relational practices that are repeated and have symbolic meaning for relational members (see Bruess & Pearson, 1997, for a review). Both rituals and stories create family identity and meaning (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004) such that "storytelling ritually and routinely enacts a family and enhances its stories of experience" (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 34).

This happens in a number of ways. First, the telling of (certain) family stories may become ritualistic in the family. For example, parents might tell their child his or her birth story every year on his or her birthday or spouses may relive the story of the wedding day each year on their anniversary. Second, the family's way of telling the story may become ritualistic. For instance, several parents of internationally adopted children in Harrigan's (2010) research often used the same artifacts (e.g., videos, photos) each time they told their child the adoption entrance narrative. The same words, gestures, pauses for dramatic effect, punchlines, and story morals might be delivered in a manner that become just as meaningful as the story itself.

Third, family stories are often told during the practice of other family rituals. Fiese and Marjinsky (1999), for example, observed that, "The repetitive nature of patterned routines, such as dinnertime, often leads to the creation of distinct images of how family members interact with each other" (p. 53). Blum-Kulka (1993) found cultural differences in the storytelling rituals at dinnertime such that American family stories focused more on the present and happenings outside the home, whereas Israeli families tended to emphasize more the past, happenings within the home, and the whole family as the protagonist.

Finally, we tell stories *about* family rituals (e.g., Christmas traditions, yearly vacations). Telling the story about a family ritual can help create a sense of family identity by reminding members of the practices they hold dear.

Summary

Stories are told and retold ritualistically in the family. Family storytelling affects and reflects an overall sense of family identity, perpetuates family legacies across generations, and helps shape individual identities by helping children make sense of who they are in relation to the family. In understanding the construction of individual and family identity through family stories, both content and process matter.

Socializing: Teaching Lessons Through Storytelling

In addition to the construction of identity, telling family stories also functions to socialize family members to the rules and norms of family life. Reminiscing about a family's past entertains but also teaches. The stories that parents and grandparents tell about their childhood (e.g., Fiese & Bickham, 2004), stories that parents tell about their children (e.g., Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001), and stories told within the family about shared experiences (Stone, 2004) socialize children into cultural and familial expectations for what to value and how to behave. Parents' interaction with children as they reminisce together also helps children develop narrative skills and contributes to children's emotional, cognitive, and social development (e.g., Bohanek, Marin, & Fivush, 2008; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997).

Lessons to be Learned in Family Stories

Family stories teach lessons about values (Fiese & Bickham, 2004), appropriate behavior (Miller et al., 2001), and how to enact roles in the family (Fiese & Bickham, 2004; Gallo, 2009). These family socialization stories reflect cultural as well as familial values (Miller et al., 2001). They can be multigenerational, told by or with grandparents (Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994) and/or parents (Fiese & Bickham, 2004; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995). Family socialization stories include narratives about childhood experiences, transgressions, and health legacies.

Childhood Stories Across Generations

Both parents and grandparents tell stories about their own childhoods in order to communicate moral values in addition to developing family histories and sustaining connections across generations (Fiese & Bickham, 2004). Fiese and Bickham (2004) examined parents' stories about childhood and found that affiliation was the most common theme in parents' stories, emphasizing the value and importance parents place on family and connections. Parents also taught lessons through stories about family roles and routines, valuing hard work, and avoiding trouble by not following the parents' example (Fiese & Bickham).

Narrative socialization is a gendered process in the family. For example, fathers tend to tell more stories of achievement and independence than do mothers, particularly when children are preschool age and male (Fiese & Bickham, 2004; Fiese & Skillman, 2000, Fiese et al., 1995). Moreover, fathers tell, and sons hear, stories with stronger themes of autonomy than the stories mothers tell and daughters hear (Fiese & Skillman, 2000). Similarly, Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) found that grandmothers told grandchildren stories focused on family development when talking about what is important in life more frequently than grandfathers did. These sex differences reinforce the practices of gender socialization that seem to pervade the process of family storytelling. Family stories have been referred to as the woman's sphere (Stone, 2004), and Reese (1996) claims that women place more importance on autobiography and life history than men. Thus, males and females seem to be socialized to, and through, family narratives differently.

Transgression Narratives

Stories about getting into trouble or bad behavior also appear in research on narrative contributions to children's moral development. These include stories parents tell about their own childhood, but also co-narrated stories about the child's rule violations. Miller and colleagues (e.g., Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Miller et al., 2001), for example, studied variations in how stories of children's cultural code violations were told in Taiwanese and Euro-American families. Taiwanese parents were more likely to tell the story of their child's transgressions than their own, be directly critical of the child, make the rule violation the central point of the transgression story, and end the story with an explicit statement about what should be learned from it (Miller et al., 1996; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997). Euro-American parents, however, tended to minimize transgression narratives and, when they were told, focus on the humorous aspects as well as positive assessments of the child (Miller et al., 1996; Miller et al., 2001). Additionally, Euro-American parents were much more likely than Taiwanese parents to tell stories of their own transgressions in childhood as a way to teach a lesson to their child about how to behave and assure children of the possibility of redemption in the future. These narrative differences reflect cultural understandings of the self, the parent–child relationship, and the use of narrative socialization practices.

Health Legacies

Family storytelling communicates general messages about values, but stories in the family construct meanings for how to understand family health experiences more specifically as well (Gallo, 2009; Manoogian, Harter, & Denham, 2010). Stone (2004) shows that clusters or collections of family stories paint a picture of the family's overall orientation toward illness (e.g., as the only way to get attention; as prohibited; as blameworthy). Additionally, narratives about illness set up family expectations for the roles family members take in coping with health problems (Gallo, 2009). For example, Alemán and Helfrich (2010) co-constructed mother–daughter stories with themes such as loss, denial, anxiety, and care, as ways of coping with what it means to be a member of a family with a narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2005) of matriarchal dementia.

Finally, stories "instruct us about what to notice and how to judge actions and outcomes" (Manoogian et al., 2010, p. 41). Manoogian et al.'s research on the health legacies of families with Type 2 diabetes observed both the power of family stories and the possibilities of renegotiating family understandings through narrative. Intergenerational lynchpins, for example, shared stories about family members' experience with diabetes as lessons about how to manage the disease differently from the past, whereas intergenerational buffers tried to silence family stories about illness. As a part of socialization, family stories reveal and influence health practices.

Reminiscing and Child Development

Parents not only tell stories, they also teach children how to become (good) storytellers. How parents interact with children as they reminisce about past events contributes to children's narrative skill development and other developmental outcomes (e.g., emotional development, Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997; perceptions of the self, Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006; autobiographical memory, Nelson & Fivush, 2004). For very young children who do not yet have narrative skills, parental reminiscing about the past helps to teach children what goes into a good story (e.g., context information; evaluative material). Additionally, as parents collaborate with children to tell their stories, they create a scaffold for children to practice the skills necessary to create a culturally appropriate, coherent, complete story.

A central focus in this research has been on parental elaboration, or the degree to which parents include detail, ask questions, provide and seek information, and comment on children's contributions (Fivush, 2006; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). Less elaborative parents tend to ask repetitive questions and provide minimal detail when telling stories themselves (Fivush, 2006; Haden et al., 1997). Elaboration encourages children to provide more information or detail in the stories that they are telling (Fivush, 2006; Peterson & McCabe, 2004). For example, children with more elaborative mothers learn to create more coherent and detailed stories with greater inclusion of their own perspective when they begin telling their own stories independently (Peterson & McCabe, 2004).

Moreover, the content of parents' narratives also contributes to narrative skill development. Haden et al. (1997), for example, found that mothers' use of evaluations (e.g., feelings and other types of sense-making) when reminiscing with children predicted young children's incorporation of evaluation into their independent narratives a year and a half later. Research also suggests sex (see Fivush, 2006, for a review) and cultural (see Wang, 2004, for a review) differences in these narrative processes. Overall, the research on parent–child reminiscing demonstrates that the content and process of parental storytelling with children affects outcomes important to child development, including emotional development and narrative skill.

Summary

Both stories and storytelling in the family teach children important cultural and familial lessons about what good behavior is as well as what a good story looks like. Additionally, developing narrative skill through co-constructing narratives together has important consequences for children's emotional and cognitive development. Thus, socialization through family narratives is important to developing morals, values, lessons, and communication competence relevant both within and outside the family.

Coping: Making Sense of Stressors

In addition to creating and communicating family culture and identity and teaching children lessons, stories also function to facilitate coping in the family. Family members facing a stressor (e.g., illness, divorce) tell interdependent or shared (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006) stories about their experiences, and these narratives can help family members to make sense of difficult life events. In addition, the content of family stories sends "potent messages concerning admired behaviors and preferred solutions in times of crisis and transitions" (Gallo, 2009, p. 4). Two major areas of research on family storytelling in times of stress or crisis include research on family sense-making in jointly told stories and research on family narrative therapy.

Family Sense-Making

Previous research shows that putting one's experience into words through narrative writing may create coherent meaning for the experience, help one develop a sense of control over the problem, encourage the processing of feelings, or mitigate the negative effects of suppressing feelings and thoughts (Sloan & Marx, 2004). Although much research on expressive writing has focused on the benefits of putting individual trauma into story form, several researchers have extended the focus on narrating difficulty to consider how the family makes sense of its world together through shared stories (e.g., Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Koenig Kellas, Trees et al., 2010; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009) and stories that children tell with the help of their parents (e.g., Bohanek et al., 2008; Sales & Fivush, 2005).

Families vary in the degree to which they develop shared meaning in their stories of stress (Bohanek et al., 2006; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). Some families collaboratively construct a shared understanding, coming to a family-level evaluation of stressful events and what they mean (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). In other families, stories reflect individual meaning-making, with each family member offering his or her particular understanding of what the experience means. Finally, telling a story does not automatically ensure sense-making, and Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) observed some families with incomplete sense-making whose narratives contained no conclusions for either the family or the individual. They found that interactional sense-making behaviors during joint storytelling, including engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence, facilitate collaborative sense-making processes. Similarly, Kiser, Baumgardner, and Dorado (2010) suggested a coordinated perspective emerges in family stories by developing a storyline with relevant parts of family members' experiences included, appreciating multiple points of view, creating space for multiple family members to contribute, and constructing a shared frame.

Creating a coherent, complete narrative that hangs together can create order out of complex, messy, confusing events (Fivush, Hazzard, Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2003; Koenig Kellas, 2008). More coherent stories about coping with pediatric asthma and its effects on family life, for example, related to better problem-solving and family functioning (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2003). Additionally, coherence in couples' jointly told stories of marital stress predicted husbands' better mental health (Koenig Kellas, Trees et al., 2010).

Family members also need to be attentive to issues of power and control in family stories (Kiser et al., 2010), providing space for multiple family members to contribute their perspective. Not everyone in the family necessarily experiences a stressor in the same way. Given this, joint family storytelling creates opportunities to recognize and learn from the perspectives of others in the family (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). This can contribute to well-being also. For example, couples' balanced and dynamic turn-taking predicted fewer mental health symptoms for husbands, and wives' perspective-taking predicted less perceived stress for husbands (Koenig Kellas, Trees et al., 2010).

Finally, affective communication (e.g., labeling emotions) and cognitive processing words (e.g., causal explanations) appear to be important elements in joint narrative sense-making between parents and children (Kiser et al., 2010; Sales & Fivush, 2005). Using more emotion words in narratives about emotional experiences, for example, can facilitate emotion regulation and adjustment (Bohanek et al., 2008; Oppenheim et al., 1997), particularly positive emotion words (Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006). Emotion words, however, do not always predict positive coping outcomes. Sales and Fivush (2005), for example, found that emotion words were helpful in conjunction with causal explanations for experiences but detrimental when they occurred without causal sense-making. In sum, a growing body of research shows that jointly telling family stories about difficulties can help family members create meaning out of complexity, develop hope, and cope with family difficulty, stress, and trauma.

Family Narrative Therapy

Hope plays a significant role in family narrative therapy, a second major line of research on narrative coping in the family. Family trauma can disrupt family stories and storytelling skills (Kiser et al., 2010), and narrative therapy (Monk, 1997; White, 2007) helps families take problematic narratives and reframe them, creating more generative stories for the family. Creating a new story, in part, gives families new language to talk about their problem and recasts family members as active agents in the story rather than helpless participants without control (Gallo, 2009; White, 2007).

Narrative therapy encourages families to rethink what they include in the story they tell about themselves and reframe the storyline, changing the language they use to talk about the problem. Often families' stories about stressful experiences are problem-saturated, focusing on the difficulties, problems, and barriers to solutions that families may face and placing blame on specific characters in the story. Because of this, externalizing the problem becomes one key part of narrative therapy (Kiser et al., 2010; Ramey, Tarulli, Frijters, & Fisher, 2009; White, 2007). Externalizing uses the language of the story to separate family members from the problem (e.g., by giving the problem a label) and to identify other possibilities in the experience of the problem or contradictory stories (e.g., times when the family successfully overcame the problem or exceptions to their typical experience with it) (Ramey et al., 2009). Externalizing the problem in their stories aids family members in gaining control over the problem instead of being the problem. This process also helps family members identify "sparkling moments," or exemplary times when good things happened, that are helpful in constructing an alternative narrative (Monk, 1997; White, 2007).

Ultimately, then, narrative therapy assists families in re-storying their experience, creating new narratives that construct a different life story in relationship to the stressors faced by the family. Rather than problem-saturated narratives that focus blame on an individual, alternative stories construct family members as separate from, and working together against, the problem (Monk, 1997; White, 2007). Positive experiences or past moments of triumph over the problem that otherwise have been overlooked become the building blocks of these new stories (Monk, 1997). Creating alternative narratives helps families develop new strategies for coping with life stressors, improving their problem-solving skills when faced with setbacks. The value of re-storying rests on the belief that families "change their lives by changing their stories" (Gallo, 2009, p. 10).

Summary

As a sense-making process, family storytelling constructs an understanding of family stressors and what they mean both for individuals and for the family as a whole. Narrating difficulty in the family offers the possibility of organizing, making sense of, and creating coherence out of chaos. Families facing trauma or difficulty can, through narrative therapy processes, restory their experience to develop a different understanding of the problem faced and the family's ability to respond to and cope with that problem.

Foreshadowing: Directions for Future Research

Given the significance of narrative in our relational lives, research on family stories and story telling offers a significant avenue for understanding family identity and sense-making processes. Although the literature on family stories across disciplines is already substantial, we believe there are a number of empirical, theoretical, and applied directions for future research that would add to our understanding of family stories and storytelling.

Empirical Directions

Although we have outlined many characteristics, processes, practices, and functions associated with family stories, research has just begun to scratch the surface of these often taken for granted constructions. First, we need additional research from family communication scholars on stories that emerge in everyday family talk. Several scholars have debated the utility and worth of big stories (e.g., canonical, life stories, Freeman, 2006) versus small stories (e.g., everyday stories, Bamberg, 2006), and research has examined small stories in specific contexts on a relatively small scale (e.g., dinnertime, Blum-Kulka, 1993). We also need to understand how the content and process of everyday storytelling in families is patterned, functional, and related to family culture. With video and diary methods we may be able to gage even better the ways in which stories act as interactions that build a vision of the family and help family members share each other's worlds.

This also means focusing more attention on the context within which family stories occur. Much of the research on family narratives focuses on the content or process of the stories themselves (Fiese & Winter, 2009), but we know less about the situational and interactional contexts in which they take place. What are the interaction sequences within which narratives occur (what elicits them, how are they responded to); who tells stories to whom about what in what settings following what norms? For example, stories can be used as a tool for giving advice (e.g., Manoogian et al., 2010). Understanding the circumstances under which these types of narratives emerge (effectively and ineffectively) in the family would provide insight into this process of support. Moreover, understanding how socialization narratives surface in conversations between parents and children (e.g., about the use of drugs or alcohol) in combination with their longitudinal effects would give parents and practitioners information about effective socialization practices.

Finally, researchers, practitioners, and family members would benefit from better empirical evidence about the benefits and risks of storytelling in families. Koenig Kellas (2005) found modest empirical support for the idea that "a family who tells stories together, stays together" (i.e., storytelling families reported higher levels of satisfaction and functioning). Yet we also know that storytelling in families can have undesirable outcomes such as discrepancy and control (see Koenig Kellas, Willer et al., 2010). Intervention studies that compare families who are encouraged to tell stories together with control groups might better illuminate the possible benefits (e.g., increased cohesion) and possible risks (e.g., increased conflict) of encouraging the practice of family storytelling.

Theoretical Directions

Narrative research has been somewhat atheoretical (Koenig Kellas, 2008). Although we do have some well-established theories and bodies of literature, the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1987) is more closely tied to rhetorical than family analyses. Moreover, Langellier and Peterson's (2006) narrative performance theory is an important contribution to understanding the performing and performative nature of family identity. At the same time, its roots in semiotic phenomenology and performance allow certain investigations and preclude others. Well-established bodies of research in other fields are informative (e.g., the expressive writing paradigm, Pennebaker, 1997; the life story approach, McAdams, 1993), but these often overlook an analysis of the communication of stories. Thus, communication theories aimed at understanding family storytelling are currently lacking and sorely needed.

Applied Directions

Perhaps the most exciting potential for family narrative scholarship lies in its applied potential. How, for example, can the ideas of narrative therapy (e.g., reframing) be adapted and used by families not in therapy? How can we teach families to elicit, listen to, collaborate in, and/or respond to stories that might help family members cope with difficulty? Based on the principles of narrative therapy, for example, Willer (2009) conducted a narrative metaphor intervention in which adolescent girls told stories and drew metaphors about a time another girl was mean to them and found links between the intervention and girls' mental health over time. Willer designed the intervention specifically so it would be accessible to nonexperts, such as teachers, counselors, and parents. More research needs to take an interdisciplinary and applied focus and seek out ways to help families narratively help themselves.

Our research on interactional sense-making (e.g., Koenig Kellas, Trees et al., 2010; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009) suggests that perspective-taking may be an aspect of joint storytelling particularly suited to helping families. When families use narratives to make sense of identity and stressors, the ability to attend to and confirm another's perspective is consistently predictive of family and individual health. Thus, we might design interventions and training sessions for couples and families on how to better take one another's narrative perspective.

Research on narrative medicine has already begun to make these connections. Charon (2006), for example, outlines the ways in which she helps her patients comply, cope with illness, and make sense of diagnoses by listening to, writing down, and sharing with the patient the story he or she tells during the office visit. Similarly, Trees, Koenig Kellas, and Roche (2010) explored ways in which family genetic counselors might use family narrative to help families author their stories about genetic disorders. Stories are powerful relational, sense-making, identity-building tools that may help families better connect and cope. Family communication researchers need to empirically and theoretically test their power.

Conclusion

Families are stories with souls. The research on family stories supports the notion that stories are at the center of a myriad family functions. Although sometimes overlooked, stories play a powerful role in families and storytelling processes affect and reflect family culture. Future research is needed to build upon the foundations outlined in this chapter and harness the interdisciplinary, empirical, theoretical, and applied possibilities of family narratives and storytelling.

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