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When Remembering is Not Enough:  
Reflecting on Self-Defining Memories in Late Adolescence

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Abstract

This study examined which kinds of self-defining memories show spontaneous references to larger meanings, and listener responses to two kinds of meaning, lessons and insights. Narratives of three self-defining memories and episodes of telling the memories to others were collected from each of 168 late adolescents ( $M$  age=19). Narratives were coded for event type (relationship, mortality, achievement, and leisure), and for references to tension, and to meaning (lesson or insight). Narratives of memorable episodes of having told the memories to others were coded for listener response (positive or negative). References to meaning emerged in one-fourth of the memory narratives, and meaning was more common for self-defining memory narratives that contained references to tension. Memories that reportedly had not been told to others in the past showed the same proportion of meaning as did memories that had been told to others (23%), with insights more prevalent than lessons. For memories that had been told to others, insights were more likely to be accepted by listeners than lessons. Implications were discussed for understanding the development of meaning in self-defining memories and the collaborative construction of identity.

When Remembering is Not Enough:  
Reflecting on Self-Defining Memories in Late Adolescence

[We should try to live life twice] as we encounter it day by day...Lacking this second life, we neither carry over consciously what is valuable from the past, nor successfully dominate the future; we fail to bring to it the energy and insight we have potentially acquired in the act of living: rather, we let ourselves be carried along by the tide, bobbing helplessly up and down like a corked bottle, with a message inside that may never come to shore. (Mumford, 1951, pp. 267-268)

When is remembering enough and when is reflection required? Until recently, studies of autobiographical memory primarily focused on remembering, not reflection. With the turn toward narrative in psychology (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1988), reflections on the meaning of lived experience have begun to take center stage. The turn toward narrative is partly a turn toward meaning premised on the assumption that the meanings that people make of their past can shape their future. The act of drawing meaning from an event is presumed to require ability and effort, a capacity for abstract thinking, and the desire to do so.

Within the nascent field of memory reflection are two streams of systematic research. One stream, originating in Alfred Adler's (1927) individual psychology, explores how individuals make meaning of their personal past and develop stories to live by, a process that promotes a cohesive sense of identity (McAdams, 1993; see also King & Patterson, 2000; McAdams, 1988; McLean & Thorne, in press; Singer & Blagov, in press). The other stream, emerging from socio-cultural and narrative practice theories, explores how communities participate in defining the meaning of lived experience (e.g., Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001; Nelson & Fivush, 2000; Thorne & McLean, 2003). The present study is situated in the confluence of these streams.

The process of self-reflection is thought to begin in earnest in late adolescence, paralleling the development of a more unified or cohesive sense of self (Erikson, 1968; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Harter & Monsour, 1992; McAdams, 1988). The social networks of late adolescents are particularly broad and diverse (Carstensen, 1995), affording myriad opportunities to communicate one's past to others, some of whose lives have barely intersected. For late adolescents, self-defining memories should be prime candidates for reflection because such memories theoretically lie at the heart of the self-concept, and are important for constructing identity to oneself and others (Singer & Blagov, in press). To date, however, surprisingly little is known about which kinds of self-defining memories press for reflection, or how listeners contribute to adolescents' efforts to make meaning of their most salient past experiences. These questions are the focus of the present study.

*The Prevalence of Meaning in Late Adolescents' Self-Defining Memories*

Studies of meaning-making are relatively new to research on personal memory. Past research primarily has focused on motivational themes within a past event narrative rather than the larger meanings that are made by stepping back from the event to reflect upon its implications, such as connections to other past events, or to one's present sense of self. As noted

by McLean and Thorne (in press), there are a few notable exceptions to the dearth of systematic research on meaning-making, and these studies have conceptualized meaning-making as *lesson learning* (McCabe, Capron, & Peterson, 1991; Pratt, Norris, Arnold, & Filyer, 1999). McCabe et al. (1991) studied lesson learning by asking college students to recall 3 of their earliest childhood and earliest adolescent memories in an interview setting. Lesson learning was found to be more prevalent in early adolescent than early childhood memories. Lessons included learning that spray painting one's name does not lead to positive outcomes, that people will get hurt when racing cars, and that it is important to learn whom to trust. Using questionnaires and interviews, Pratt et al. (1999) compared lesson-learning in cross-sectional samples of early, middle, and older adults. Self-reported lessons were found to increase with age. Furthermore, the quality of lessons learned in middle and late adulthood seemed to be more broadly reflective and more indicative of the kinds of insights found in well-formed life stories (McAdams, 1988).

Although the above studies referred to meaning-making as "lesson-learning," there appeared to be a qualitative difference in the breadth of reflection displayed by adolescents and older adults. Adolescents' lessons seemed to be more specific to a situation or behavior, whereas older adults' lessons seemed to be more broadly reflective. McLean & Thorne (in press) referred to specific meanings as *lessons* and larger meanings as *insights*, a distinction which we carry forward in the present study.

*Lesson learning* refers to learning a specific lesson from an event that could direct future behavior in similar situations. Lessons are fairly concrete. *Gaining insight* refers to reflecting upon the larger implications of the event for one's construal of self, of another person, or one's relationship to someone else; with insight, there is often some kind of transformation in one's understanding of oneself or one's relationships with others. Take, for example, an event in which a son throws eggs at his mom. If the son comments that he learned never to throw eggs at mom again, he claims to have learned a lesson. On the other hand, if the son comments that he realized that he has an anger management problem, his realization counts as gaining insight because it extends beyond eggs and beyond mom.

Theoretical claims that autobiographical reasoning begins in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1988) suggest that late adolescents can interpret past events in terms of either insights or lessons. This possibility was confirmed in a recent study of self-defining relationship memories (McLean & Thorne, in press), which found that lessons and insights were about equally prevalent for a sample of late adolescents. The first purpose of this study was to compare the base rate of meaning in relationship memories to the base rate in other kinds of self-defining memories--mortality, achievement, and leisure events, drawn from this same sample of late adolescents.

### *Tension in Memories and Effort Towards Meaning*

Our prior study of relationship memories (McLean & Thorne, in press) found that efforts toward meaning more often emerged when the memory narrative contained a reference to interpersonal conflict, such as an argument with a parent or peer. The meanings that were made of such events included learning not to argue with a parent (a lesson), or coming to view oneself as self-sufficient (an insight). Relationship narratives that did not reference conflicting goals were usually about pleasant encounters, such as falling in love. These happy events seemed to be

meaningful in themselves, tending not to require efforts to explain how the event related to larger areas of one's life.

Why might conflictual relationship events, or stressful life events in general, seem to promote self-reflection? Evidence from social-psychological studies suggests that it is adaptive to reflect more thoroughly on stressful than non-stressful events. Careful processing of stressful events can potentially lessen the tension associated with recall of the event, and engender efforts to avoid such events in the future (Taylor, 1991; see review by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). To date, however, few studies have examined variations among events with regard to their tendency to promote reflection. Not all stressful self-defining memory narratives contain references to meaning. For example, in our study of relationship memories (McLean & Thorne, in press), the correlation between conflict memories and meaning-making was modest,  $r(88) = .39, p < .001$ .

The second purpose of this study was to examine which kinds of stressful events *were* are most likely to be associated with reports of meaning. We examined the association of tension and meaning separately for mortality, relationship, achievement, and leisure events. Of these four kinds of events, mortality events would seem to be the most likely to contain reports of tension, and therefore meaning, since the life-threatening concerns in such events seem highly likely to involve stress. Leisure events, such as memorable vacations, should be the least likely to involve tension and hence show sparse reports of meaning. Achievement and relationship events were expected to show a more mixed picture with regard to tension and hence to show a more moderate presence of meaning.

### *The Social Construction of Meaning*

Whereas memory narratives containing tension may press for meaning, the people to whom memories are told may also press for meaning. Listeners tend to want to know the point of the story, or why the reporter has chosen to tell it (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Although a reporter can choose not to tell a memory, many highly memorable events do get told to others, and on numerous occasions. The more emotionally disruptive the event, the more likely it is to be rehearsed covertly, and to be overtly shared with others. In a questionnaire survey of six European samples ranging from 16 to 69 years of age, Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, and Boca (1991) found that the more emotionally disruptive the original event, the more likely it was to be rehearsed privately as well as shared with others. The majority of highly disruptive events reportedly were first shared with others within a day of the event. The authors speculated that sharing highly emotional events helps to clarify their meanings by assessing others' reactions to the events. However, the authors did not study the meanings that were made of the events, or whether told memories showed a higher presence of meaning than non-told memories.

Experimental studies have begun to discover interesting differences in the impact of attentive versus distracted listeners on memory for details of events, and the perception of events as self-typical (Pasupathi, Stallworth, & Murdoch, 1998; Pasupathi & Rich, 2003). However, this research has not examined the larger meanings that are made of highly memorable events. Observational studies of listener's contributions to narratives about the personal past have tended to focus on conversations between parents and young children (e.g., Fivush et al., 2000). The emphasis has been on how children learn to construct emotions about the event, such as whether the child felt angry or sad, rather than the larger meanings that are constructed about the event.

Recently, however, narrative practice research has begun to examine the emergence of lesson-learning in home environments (Miller et al., 2001). Communities differ in the degree to which parents recount their own childhood misdeeds and those of their children in an effort to teach the child a lesson. American mothers have been found recount their own misdeeds rather than emphasizing the misdeeds of the child, in an effort to protect the child's self-esteem. Narrative practice research does not appear to have focused on the transmission of insights, perhaps because the children in these studies are so young, or perhaps because the distinction between lessons and insights is relatively new to narrative research.

Overall, it seems reasonable to expect that lessons and insights reflect, in some way or another, the kinds of understandings that are favored by valued communities. Many religions and cultures seem to favor narratives of redemption, in which a negative experience or adverse life trajectory is transformed into a positive outcome (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Overall, insights may sit well with listeners more so than lessons because insights convey growth in self-understanding (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). Insights transform bad into good, with hopeful implications for the future. Lessons, on the other hand, emphasize transgressive behavior which has presumably ceased, but which has not explicitly been transformed into a positive direction for the future. We therefore expected insights, relative to lessons, to be more often accepted by listeners.

Unlike prior studies of narrative practice, the present study was retrospective. The study employed the self-defining memory questionnaire that has been useful in prior studies of individual memory (e.g., Singer & Salovey, 1993). Because the standard questionnaire does not focus on contexts in which the memory has been told, we included additional queries to determine whether the participant had ever told the memory in the past, and, if so, to elicit a description of a memorable episode of having told the memory to someone else. Soliciting a telling narrative in addition to the standard event narrative allowed us to explore issues that are relevant to both individual and social processes of meaning-making.

The study examined four questions: 1) the base rate of meaning in particular kinds of self-defining events, and in events which reportedly had been told in the past versus those that had not, 2) the association between tension in memory narratives and references to meaning, 3) for memories which included a telling narrative, the relative prevalence of meaning in the event narrative versus telling narrative, and 4) listener responses to lessons and to insights.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 504 self-defining memory narratives collected from 168 college students (65% women). Students were between the ages of 18 and 23 ( $M = 19.5$  years,  $SD = 1.3$  years), and were enrolled at a public university in Northern California in which research participation fulfilled a requirement in various psychology courses. The majority (72%) of the participants self-identified as European-American, 14% as Asian, 10% as Latino/a, and 4% as other ethnic backgrounds. To control for differences in the number of self-defining memories reported, the sample included only participants who reported the requested 3 self-defining memories.<sup>1</sup> Analyses initially were conducted for the entire sample as well as separately for the three largest ethnic groups (European-American, Asian, and Latino/a). Patterns were similar for each ethnic group so findings are reported for the entire sample.<sup>2</sup>

### *Self-defining Memory Questionnaire*

Participants responded to a questionnaire that elicited descriptions of 3 self-defining memories. The first page of the questionnaire described features of a self-defining memory, adapted from Singer & Moffitt, (1991/1992). A self-defining memory was defined as at least one year old, a memory of a specific event<sup>3</sup> in one's life that helps oneself and significant others to understand who one is as a person, leads to strong feelings, and has been thought about many times.

On each of the next 3 pages of the questionnaire, participants were asked to describe a self-defining memory, including a caption for the event, their age at the time of the event, where they were, whom they were with, what happened, and how they and any others present responded to the event. They were asked to include details that would help an imagined friend see and feel as they did. After providing this *event narrative*, they were then asked with how many people they had shared the memory, and, if they had a specific memory of having told the event to someone else, to describe the memorable telling of the event, or *telling narrative*. Thus, each self-defining memory was described in an event narrative, and memories that had been told in the past might also include a telling narrative.

### *Coding of Memory Narratives*

Each of the 504 memory narratives was transcribed from the hand-written questionnaires. Life events and tension were coded from the event narrative, meaning was coded wherever it was found (in either the event or telling narrative), and listener response was coded from the telling narrative. All coding categories were nominal, i.e., were identified as either present or absent in the narrative.

*Life events.* Each self-defining event narrative was coded into 1 of 4 categories of life events based on criteria delineated in Thorne and McLean (2001; see also Thorne & McLean, 2002). *Relationship events* described a particular interpersonal encounter, usually with a parent or peer, and themes often involved new or renewed intimacy, separation, or tension. Concerns with life and death structured narratives of *mortality events*, such as severe accidents, physical or sexual assaults, or deaths of loved ones. *Achievement events* emphasized effortful attempts at mastering vocational, physical, social, or spiritual goals, such as getting in to college, excelling at sports or leadership, or converting to a new religion. *Leisure events* centered on recreational activities



such as hobbies, celebrations, travel, or sports; emphasis was on recreation, play, or exploration rather than mastery.

*Tension.* Tension was defined as present or absent on the basis of the event narrative. Tension was indicated by any explicit report of discomfort, disagreement or unease on the part of any character during the event. The following narrative exemplifies tension; specific instances are shown in italics:

We always assume that our parents are going to love and take care of us forever, until this is challenged. Me and my mother have always argued quite a bit, but this one time I think changed me quite a bit. We were *arguing* about our normal thing, but I pushed my luck. My mom has a real sore spot about her sister, and I started poking at it. She must of cracked, because *she said flat out that she really didn't like the person I was. That she really didn't like me. There is nothing like receiving that kind of blow.*

Tension was defined as *absent* when there was no explicit report of discomfort, disagreement or unease on the part of any character during the event. The following narrative contains no reference to tension.

Ann and I were walking along the beach just talking and having fun. Both of us were very flirty and often tickling each other. We were just friends at the time not really expecting anything to happen between us. I was very happy to be with her just cuddling because it was cold and she somehow forgot her jacket. The whole night I felt as if she was my girlfriend. Eventually we became together and both agreed that the walk on the beach pretty much set the spark between us.

*Meaning.* Two kinds of meaning, learning lessons and gaining insight, were coded based on criteria developed by McLean & Thorne (2001; see also McLean & Thorne, in press). The categories were defined as mutually exclusive, and were coded for presence or absence. Meaning could emerge in either the event or telling portion of the narrative, and its location was noted. *Lesson learning* was defined as a reference to having learned a specific lesson from the event that had implications for subsequent behavior in similar situations. The following telling narrative contains an example of lesson learning; the lesson, to refrain from any vivid telling of one's depression, is shown italics:

As my feelings of depression and inferiority were creeping up on me I tried to tell my girlfriend. I described terrible visions that my mind was forcing upon me and that I was afraid for my own sanity. All this frightened her. It did so much more harm than good, that *I refrain from telling people about it in any more than vague terms.*

*Gaining insight* was coded if the reporter inferred a meaning from the event that extended beyond the specific behavior or situation to larger areas of one's life. Narratives coded as gaining insight typically referred to transformations of self or relationships. Insight was defined as super-ordinate to lesson learning; that is, if both lesson learning and gaining insight were present, the narrative was coded as gaining insight. The following event narrative reports an insight about a mortality event; the insight is shown in italics:

I got in a fight with mom, she pulled a spark plug in my car, and I drove to the park across street and looked under hood. A man came and helped and then asked if I wanted to hang out and talk about what was bothering me. I got in his car and he started asking me sexual questions and then he said, “You’re gonna have sex with me or I’ll kill you.” When he slowed down I jumped out of the car and ran up a hill and over into a neighborhood where I found sanctuary at a house. *It’s a long story, but I learned that I love myself enough and am capable enough to take care of myself.*

*Listener response.* The listener’s response was coded on the basis of the telling narrative, if one was provided. Listener response was identified holistically on the basis of references to the reporter’s own feelings about the telling as well as references to the listener’s reaction. Listener responses were coded as either positive or negative. A *positive response* to the narrative was signaled by indications that the reporter was fully satisfied with the listener’s reaction, or by reports that the listener showed a clear positive, accepting or understanding, response to the telling. The following telling narrative contains a positive listener response, shown in italics.

My friend asked me about whether I had ever had a peak experience and I described it [hiking in Arches Park and feeling a connection with God]. I was very excited and intense about telling him about my experience, and he responded in a similar way. *He was interested and intrigued.*

A *negative response* was signaled by the listener’s reported failure to accept, sympathize with, or understand the reporter’s point of view. Listener responses that were mixed, that is, partly negative and partly positive, were counted as negative because they were not clearly positive. The following telling narrative exemplifies a negative listener response. The event narrative described a momentous athletic triumph in which the reporter realized he was capable of earning respect in the world, an insight. The negative listener response is shown in italics:

Due to the many changes I have gone through in how I want to define myself, I have only shared this particular memory with one individual with whom I felt very comfortable. It was like the second time we talked and she later became my girlfriend. She also had played basketball in high school and I knew she could relate to the feelings surrounding this memory. I was 19 when I told her. I have probably told other people but this was the first context in which I was trying to give her (someone) a picture of what defines me. *I remember that it didn’t seem like a big deal to her and she played it off as some kind of male dominated importance thing and that was that.*

The narratives initially were coded by the first or second author, who discussed difficult narratives with each other to reach a consensus. An independent reliability coder, who was told that this was simply a descriptive study, coded 25% of the memory narratives. Acceptable levels of reliability were achieved for each category. For life events, the overall kappa was .94, ranging from .85 to 1.00. For tension, kappa = .80, for meaning, kappa = .79, and for listener response, kappa = .84.

## Results

### *Plan of Analyses*

The focal analyses compared proportions of particular combinations of memory features, using memories rather than individuals as the unit of analysis. This strategy was chosen to preserve the integrity of particular memory patterns, e.g., insights, with positive listener responses, without producing the miniscule proportions that would occur if average percentages across individuals rather than memory frequencies were used as the unit of analysis. Due to the dichotomous nature of the memory features and the dependent nature of the responses (each participant provided 3 memories), we employed the McNemar test for paired proportions (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). Although this test is commonly used to assess differences in proportions due to time lapse, it may be used to assess differences in proportions with other kinds of dependent or correlated observations.<sup>4</sup> The strength of the association in the 2 x 2 contingency table was assessed with the phi coefficient, signified by  $r(\phi)$  (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

### *Descriptive Proportions of Event Categories, Tension, and Meaning*

Table 1 shows the frequency of each event category, and the proportion of memories within each event category that showed a presence of tension, and a presence of meaning (lessons or insights). With regard to event type, relationship memories were the most prevalent (44%), followed by mortality (24%), leisure (17%), and achievement memories (13%).<sup>5</sup> These findings with regard to event type have been discussed in a prior report (Thorne & McLean, 2002).

Meaning was present in 23% of the memories overall. In the context of particular kinds of events, meaning was the most prevalent in mortality and relationship narratives, which showed very similar proportions of meaning (27% and 29%, respectively), followed by achievement narratives (16%), and leisure narratives (3%).

With regard to kind of meaning, insights were more prevalent than lessons in the overall sample (15% vs. 8%, respectively), and for the subset of mortality narratives (21% insights, 6% lessons), and achievement narratives (13% insights, 3% lessons). For relationship narratives, however, the proportion of insights and lessons was similar (16% insights, 13% lessons). Meaning was sparse in leisure memories (2% insights, 1% lessons).

Tension was present in 69% of the memory narratives overall. Tension varied for event categories, with mortality narratives showing 100% tension, relationship narratives 70%, achievement narratives 48%, and leisure narratives 38%.

### *Told versus Non-told Memories and Meaning*

Of the total sample of memories, (94%) included a report of whether the memory had ever been told in the past. The majority of the memories (88%) reportedly had been told in the past. Figure 1 compares the frequency of told and non-told memories that reported meaning, either lessons or insights. Surprisingly, the same proportion of meaning (lessons + insights) was found in the told memories (23%), and non-told memories (23%), each with more insights (15%) than lessons (8%). In the overall sample, the proportion of insights significantly exceeded the proportion of lessons, McNemar Chi-Square = 7.89,  $p < .01$ .

### *The Association between Tension and Meaning*

The phi coefficient,  $r(\phi)$  (Glass & Hopkins, 1996), was used to assess the association between tension and meaning. As expected, tension was significantly associated with the presence of meaning in the overall sample ( $n = 504$ ),  $r(\phi) = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ . The association between tension and meaning was also statistically significant for the subset of told memories ( $n = 413$ ),  $r(\phi) = .20$ ,  $p < .000$ , and the subset of non-told memories ( $n = 58$ ),  $r(\phi) = .25$ ,  $p < .06$ . In the overall sample, the association between tension and meaning was also significant for each kind of meaning: insights,  $r(\phi) = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and lessons,  $r(\phi) = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ . Cases were insufficient in number to conduct a separate analysis for non-told memories.

In examining the association of tension and meaning for particular kinds of events, we found that the association primarily derived from relationship narratives. For relationship narratives ( $n = 224$ ), tension was significantly associated with meaning overall,  $r(\phi) = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ , and with insights,  $r(\phi) = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ , and lessons,  $r(\phi) = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ . All mortality narratives contained tension, which precluded testing for an association with meaning, and the meaning/memory frequency ratios for achievement and leisure narratives were too small to examine statistically. Overall, the modest association between tension and meaning in relationship memories, combined with the finding that all mortality memories contained tension but only 27% contained meaning, suggests that other processes besides tension contributed to meaning in self-defining memory narratives.

### *Event Narratives, Telling Narratives, and Meaning*

Twenty percent of the memories that reportedly had been told in the past provided no narrative of a memorable telling episode. For these memories, meaning could only emerge in the event narrative, and 14% of the event narratives showed a presence of meaning. For the other 80% of memories, meaning could emerge in either the event narrative or the telling narrative. Overall, for memories with a telling narrative ( $n = 333$ ), we found a 26% presence of meaning. This meaning was equally distributed between the event narrative (14%) and the telling narrative (12%), McNemar Chi-Square = .05,  $p = ns$ . Thus, the inclusion of a telling narrative provided an additional opportunity to explain the meaning of the memory, beyond the 14% base rate of meaning that was provided in the event narrative.

To explore whether the quality of meaning differed depending on its location in the event or telling narrative, we focused solely on memories that contained meaning ( $n = 114$ ). Insights ( $n = 72$ ) were significantly more prevalent in the event narrative (68%) than telling narrative (32%), McNemar Chi-Square = 8.68,  $p < .01$ . Lessons ( $n = 42$ ), in contrast, were equally prevalent in the event (49%) and telling (51%) narrative, McNemar Chi-Square = .000,  $p = ns$ . These findings are shown in Figure 2.

In summary, meaning was equally prevalent in told and non-told memories. However, for memories that had been told in the past, memories with a telling narrative provided an additional opportunity to report meaning, and showed as much meaning as did event narratives. With regard to quality of meaning, telling narratives contained similar portions of lessons and insights. Insights, on the other hand, were primarily found in the event narrative. This finding suggests that insights, more so than lessons, were incorporated in the cognitive representation of the event.

### *Meaning and Listener Responses*

The final question concerned listener responses to meanings. Ninety-one percent (302/333) of the memories with telling narratives included a listener response that could be reliably coded as either positive or negative. Consistent with the overall sample of memories, most of the memories with listener responses contained no explicit reports of meaning (74%). Memories with no meaning ( $n = 223$ ) showed more positive (66%) than negative responses (34%). A similar pattern was found for memory narratives that contained insights ( $n = 50$ ), with 68% positive and 32% negative responses, McNemar Chi-Square = 5.78,  $p < .05$ . Memories with lessons ( $n = 29$ ), however, showed more negative (59%) than positive responses (41%); this trend, however, was based on relatively fewer cases and was not statistically significant, McNemar Chi-Square = .55,  $p = ns$ . These findings are shown in Figure 3.

Because listener response was reported in the telling narrative, meanings that emerged in the telling narrative could more confidently be viewed as having evoked the listener response than meanings that emerged in the event narrative. Thus, a more stringent procedure was to focus on memories in which meaning emerged in the telling narrative. For these memories (20 lessons and 18 insights), lessons showed more negative (65%) than positive (35%) listener responses. The reverse pattern was found for insights, which showed more positive (72%) than negative (28%) responses. This pattern was statistically significant, McNemar Chi-Square = 5.27,  $p < .05$ . These findings are shown in Figure 4.

Thus, although insights usually emerged in the event narrative, insights received a positive listener response regardless of where the insight emerged. Lessons were equally distributed in the event and telling narratives, and lessons in the telling narrative more often received a negative listener response.<sup>6</sup>

### *Summary*

As expected, the presence of tension in an event narrative was positively associated with reports of meaning. Mortality events and relationship events showed the highest presence of tension and the highest presence of meaning. However, the association between tension and meaning was moderate,  $r(\phi) = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ . Several notable findings emerged with regard to meaning and memory telling. Surprisingly, meaning was equally present (23%) in memories that reportedly had and had not been told in the past. However, among events that had been told, events that described a memorable telling of the narrative showed a higher prevalence of meaning (26%) than did narratives that did not describe a telling (14%). Insights most often appeared in the event narrative, whereas lessons were equally distributed in the event and telling narratives. As expected, insights were associated with positive listener responses and lessons with negative responses. The memories that showed the closest temporal connection between meaning and listener response, those in which the meaning emerged in the telling narrative, also showed positive responses to insights and negative responses to lessons.

### *Narrative Examples*

In this section, we present cases that exemplified the major findings in an effort to enrich our understanding of important patterns in the quantitative data. We were particularly interested in how meanings emerged in the non-told memories, and in the role of the listener in the emergence of lessons and insights in telling narratives.

*Meaning in non-told memories.* As was true of told memories, most of the non-told memories occurred in the presence of others. However, the non-told memories reportedly had not been overtly discussed with others at the time, or since. One such event, from a 22-yr.-old woman, was about learning how to drive at age 15. Italics have been added:

[Event narrative] I was driving with my father in the passenger seat in my hometown on a long narrow road. *Even though my father was with me, I felt as though I was alone and in charge.* This was the first time I felt this way with my father, what I now call independence. I was proud of myself but I felt like I was in too much of a control position—I suddenly backed out of this position and let my father take over and so he did willingly after telling me I was doing fine.

The italicized portion, above, suggested that the insight of independence emerged as a feeling of being alone and in charge. Her father's apparent sensitivity to her shifting need for independence and support seemed to encourage this newfound feeling of being in charge.

A second non-told memory, from a 19-yr.-old woman, described attending the funeral of the brother of a friend at age 12. Again, we italicize the portion of the narrative that helps us to understand how the meaning emerged:

[Event narrative] I was in the seventh grade when a good friend called me up after school crying. Her 24-year-old brother had been in a car accident and was dead....This was not only my first experience with death, but it was someone that was too young to die....This experience changed me in that I was much more honest with my feelings toward my friends and family. *I remember her saying that she had told her brother she loved him just before he left that night and how glad she was she had gotten the chance to say it one last time.* Now, even when I'm fighting with loved ones I always let them know I care about them because you never know what's going to happen.

The insight that she should be more open in expressing her fondness for loved ones seemed to stem directly from what her friend had said, although the teller reported having told the memory to no one. Surprisingly, the reporter elaborated the meaning of the memory in the telling narrative portion of the questionnaire, although she said the memory had never been told

[Telling narrative] I feel bad talking about me sharing the memory because I wasn't the one that really suffered. It just gave me a bigger appreciation of my life and situation. It really wasn't my experience to talk about, *at least not near her.* I do think about it every day though.

Possibly the teller did tell the memory to others ("at least not near her"). However, she did feel that the memory was not hers to tell, and the insight was somewhat inappropriately appropriated.

These two examples seemed fairly typical of the meanings that emerged in non-told memories. The motivations for not telling the memories to others seemed to center on a distinction between self and other; in one case, the insight of independence emerged partly by not sharing the memory; in the other case, the memory did not seem rightfully hers and the insight seemed almost illegitimately obtained. Although the meanings emerged in social contexts, the meaning entailed a

distinction between self and other that was maintained by not telling, or claiming to not have told, the memory to others.

*Told memories: Positive responses to insights.* A vivid example of an insight developing through telling occurred in the context of therapy. The participant was a 20-year-old woman. The event, which occurred at age 9, involved sitting on a park bench between her bickering parents, who asked her to decide who should get what in the divorce. The telling occurred during a therapy session at age 18. References to the insight are in italics:

[Telling narrative] We [therapist and I] were talking about *why I always end up taking care of my parents and being in the middle*. So I told her how I remember being in the park. She heard me out and then reacted as angry at my parents—which surprised me because it had never occurred to me to be angry before. Then as I went over all the shit they put me in the middle of unnecessarily they really could have split up their things without me sitting in between them. *I began to decide that it was time they got over it. If they were married for 20 years they really needed to start dealing with each other. So I stopped being the middle-man. I became neutral who didn't want to hear about it and they could just call the other one—it wasn't my job anymore.*

The insight began to emerge when the therapist took an angry position toward the parents, at which point the client "began to decide" to stop being the middle-man; the insight was planted in the therapy session and seemed to have evolved in the subsequent 2 years.

A second example, from another 20 year-old female, illustrates several stages in the process of developing an insight. The insight began to dawn in the event narrative, when her "usually quiet and good natured" older brother got angry with her for being unfair to their parents:

[Event narrative] ...I told him that he did not understand, that my actions towards my parents had nothing to do with them. At that point I broke down sobbing and told him everything. He stared at me in disbelief. That was the first time I ever really talked to my brother.

The telling episode in which the insight was reported happened 3 years later, suggesting that the insight was long in coming. Telling the insight to the roommate appeared to change her relationship with him, and seemed to verify the transformative power of the insight. The insight is shown in italics:

[Telling narrative] [My best friend and I] were walking around downtown, talking about our families—*I told him that I felt I was just beginning to be able to talk to my family, that I had trouble communicating, how I kept things inside, etc. I told this story to illustrate a landmark in my life—letting someone close to me inside and how happy it made me to finally know I could talk to my brother despite our differences.* I think he (my friend) just looked at me and smiled. *I smiled back—I think we both knew that my telling of the story meant I was ready to let him in.*

The majority of insights, however, emerged in the event narrative. Although such memories usually included a telling narrative, these telling narratives tended to elaborate how the story of

the insight was used to define the self to others. One example, from an 18-year old male, concerned the death of his mother when he was 13. He described the event as a turning point, one that made him become more responsible:

[Event narrative] I was awoken in the middle of the night to a sound, "Wake up, your mom's passing." I watched her die that night in front of my very eyes. *Ever since I have had to deal with a new life, one of responsible inquiry.*

The telling narrative essentially described the function of the self-defining event in conveying his transformed self to close friends:

[Telling narrative] I have told this strictly to friends, because I don't want it to be a story that makes people feel sorry for me, but *a story that lets people know what I have been through and what I have had to learn.* I told people shortly after and a long time after, they were sympathetic and understanding.

*Told memories: Negative responses to lessons.* It will be recalled that lessons were associated with negative listener responses. One illustrative example involved a self-defining event of joyriding with friends and narrowly avoiding a dangerous situation. The telling narrative ended with the statement: "I think we learned a good lesson and most of the people we tell think that we're pretty dumb."

Some other negative responses to lessons suggested similar sentiments of culpability or remorse on the part of the teller, as if the teller did not deserve a positive response. One event narrative contained a vivid recount being caught lying on a resume, and how the lie "really screwed up things at work." The lesson emerged in the telling narrative, which was not a specific event but a summary of numerous times in which the event was told to others. Repeatedly telling the event to others seemed to function as a confession and assurance that she had learned her lesson. In describing having learned a lesson ("I will never do that again!"), the reporter added that she felt "worthless telling it," suggesting that a positive response was neither wanted nor deserved; rather, she tells the event to others to remind herself to be honest with people.

[Telling narrative] I tell a lot of folks about this event and this memory because I learned a lot from it. I don't lie anymore ever. I am really honest about why I don't lie too. Most folks have similar memories which they also share. I feel pretty worthless when I tell the story. It was a really lame thing to do. It helps me to remember always to be honest with folks. I started telling folks about my experience about two weeks after it happened.

### Discussion

The present findings contribute to understanding which kinds of self-defining events are fertile ground for reflection in late adolescents' self-defining memories, and the role of listeners in promoting meaning-making. Meaning was the most prevalent in mortality and relationship events. This finding partly could be explained by the greater presence of tension in these events than in achievement and leisure events, which showed less tension and less meaning. The association between tension and meaning was expected on the basis of findings that stressful events are processed more thoroughly in an effort to promote adaptation (Taylor, 1991).



However, the obtained association between tension and meaning was moderate. For example, although all of the mortality events referred to experiences of tension, only 27% of mortality events contained meaning. Some of the mortality events did not seem to engender the kind of identity struggle that would seem to promote efforts toward meaning. For example, reports of a near-death car accident contained ample references to unease but the upshot was relief rather than a lesson learned or an insight gained. The method of assessing tension should be fine-tuned in future work to more adequately capture the cognitive and emotional struggle that is referenced in descriptions of the identity crisis (Erikson, 1968).

The relatively sparse presence of meaning in the overall sample of self-defining memories (23%) may reflect the youth of the sample. On the other hand, our method of soliciting self-defining memories may have underestimated the presence of meaning by privileging ease of retrieval over reflection. Undergraduates faced with a task of supplying 3 self-defining memories may have found it easier to report a highly vivid memory than a highly vivid and highly meaningful memory, since we did not explicitly ask for reports of meaning. Although there have apparently been no studies of self-defining memories in older adults, the present method may also yield fairly sparse reports of meaning for older age groups, not only because it privileges ease of retrieval, but also because positive memories are particularly prevalent for older adults, for whom emotion regulation, more so than information gain, is emphasized in reminiscence (Carstensen, 1995). We also know, from our prior study of relationship events (McLean & Thorne, in press) and from the leisure memories in the present study, that positive events do not tend to press for larger meanings. Highly positive memories that have not involved struggle may function as oases in the self-concept system, where remembering is sufficient and reflection is not required. Instead of working to make meaning of such blissful events, one may simply bask in the warmth engendered by the memory itself.

Community concerns may also contribute to the press to make meaning of stressful events, because such events can disturb others as well as oneself. Parents have been found to teach children how to manage negative emotional experiences like fear, sadness, and anger (e.g., Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000); apparently, one does not need to teach a child how to express an experience that is not disturbing, but does need to teach a child how to handle stress because of the damage it could cause self and others. Unlike stressful events, positive events do not pose a threat to other's well-being and do not seem to press for transformation into a more positive meaning. Events such as parental divorce, deaths, and near-deaths, would seem to be prime candidates for community meaning-making because it is important to manage the kind of emotions that can be extremely burdensome for individuals and loved ones (Thorne & McLean, 2003).

### *Listener Contributions to Meaning-Making*

Our primary hypothesis with regard to listener contributions to meaning was that insights would be more positively received than lessons. The findings supported this expectation. Insights, regardless of whether they emerged in the event narrative or telling narrative, were associated with more positive responses than were lessons, which were associated with more negative listener responses.

Analyses of the location of meaning in the event versus telling narrative suggested the intriguing possibility that insights are cognitively more integral to event representations than are

lessons. Insights more often emerged in the event narrative, whereas lessons emerged equally often in the event and telling narrative. This finding suggested that the originating event, such as the death of a loved one or a bitter argument with a friend, anchored the insight or perhaps helped one to remember the insight more clearly. That is, the insight did not seem to exist by itself but rather needed the originating event to convey the explanatory force of the meaning. In addition, insights were described as developing slowly, over the course of years, seeded in the event and continuing to develop in subsequent situations, including situations in which the memory was told to others. Lessons, on the other hand, seemed to develop more abruptly, to be almost scripted reactions to a transgression. Lessons were statements that one should have done better, an explicit self-scolding that sometimes seemed to be accentuated by recounting the story to someone else. Reporting a listener's negative response seemed to indicate a lingering psychological unease with the memory. Reports of meanings that were met with negative listener responses were particularly intriguing because they seemed to signal an identity issue that was still percolating for the reporter. Future research could profitably focus on self-reflections that reportedly meet with a less than enthusiastic listener response.

Although our questionnaire solicited a separation of the original event from the telling event, retrospective reports are obviously no substitute for direct observation. Perusal of meanings that emerged in telling narratives provided useful leads for identifying contexts in which valued others, including parents, close friends, and therapists, contributed to the meaning-making process. However, the narratives suggested that a one-shot observational study may not be sufficient to understand the development of meaning, particularly insights, because time for percolation and reflection seemed to be a crucial ingredient to forming an insight.

Prior studies of narrative practices have focused on children's telling of events, and the meanings in such studies have focused on lessons, not insights (e.g., Miller et al., 2001). The present study expands this literature to older samples and to insights. Our findings for lessons may seem surprising given that European-American parents have been observed to publicly avoid calling attention to their children's transgressions; however, such parents do report their own transgressions, apparently in an effort to humanize themselves to their kids (Miller et al., 2001). Possibly, our late adolescents were exhibiting the behavior of parents towards self-transgressions, rather than the behavior of parents towards children's transgressions. It remains an open question as to whether parents try to teach children about insights, and whether insights become psychologically meaningful in adolescence, paralleling the emergence of a more coherent sense of self (Harter & Monsour, 1992).

The most surprising finding in the present study was that memories which reportedly had never been told in the past, although relatively sparse (12% of the sample), showed the same proportion of meaning as memories that had been told in the past. On the surface, this finding suggests that insights and lessons can develop in a social vacuum. However, closer inspection of told versus non-told memory narratives suggested a more nuanced interpretation. The motivations for not telling the memories to others seemed to center on a distinction between self and other that was integral to the meaning of the memory. In one case, for example, an insight about one's independence emerged in part by not sharing the memory with the person who provided the occasion for the independence, her father. In another case, the insight did not seem rightfully one's own because it had been appropriated from something that a friend had said about how she had coped with her brother's death. Although these insights emerged in social

contexts, the insights pivoted on a distinction between self and other that was maintained by not telling, or by feeling one should not tell, the memory to others.

Overall, this study suggests that the landscape of late adolescents' self-defining memories is fairly sparse with reflections, perhaps understandably for individuals who are on the verge of adulthood. Tension in events partially contributed to efforts toward meaning, but a more refined coding category that targeted the presence of cognitive-emotional struggle may have been more discriminating. The emergence of meaning was sometimes subtle and private, and was sometimes exquisitely overt in stories of receiving identity assistance from others. Such momentous moments of meaning-making constitute an important domain for understanding identity as a personal and collaborative construction.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The sample size initially consisted of 197 participants. To equalize the number of memories per participant, 29 participants (15%) were excluded because they reported fewer than 3 memories.

<sup>2</sup> Our prior studies of this collection of self-defining memories focused on narratives of relationship events (McLean & Thorne, in press) and mortality events (Thorne & McLean, 2003), and excluded ethnic minority groups, resulting in somewhat different sample sizes than the present study. The present sample is the most inclusive.

<sup>3</sup> Events that are at least 1-year-old are more likely to remain memorable than are very recent events (Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, & Betz, 1996). Also, instead of using the phrase "memory of a specific event in your life," Singer & Moffitt (1991/1992) used the term "memory from your life." Otherwise, our description of a self-defining memory was the same as that of Singer and Moffitt.

<sup>4</sup> To illustrate the application of the McNemar test, we compare the proportion of memories showing lessons and the proportion showing insights. Each memory was coded twice, as a lesson (no, yes) and as an insight (no, yes). These two categories were by definition mutually exclusive, although this condition is not necessary for use of the McNemar test. Of the 504 cases (memories), 390 cases showed neither lessons nor insights (0,0), 72 cases were lessons and not insights (1,0), 42 cases were not lessons but were insights (0, 1), and no cases were both lessons and insights (1,1). The McNemar test compares the frequencies in the diagonal cells, i.e., the number of cases showing (0,1) and (1,0), since these are the only cells which are informative. The squared difference in these 2 frequencies is divided by the sum of the 2 frequencies to compute the value of the McNemar Chi-Square, which in this case is 7.89,  $p < .01$ .

<sup>5</sup> For the subset of memories that showed meaning ( $n = 114$ ), the same pattern emerged: Meaning was disproportionately contributed by relationship memories (58%), followed by mortality (30%), achievement (9%), and leisure memories (3%).

<sup>6</sup> Independent  $t$ -tests revealed no significant gender differences in frequencies of each event type, tension, meaning (lessons, insights, and overall), or negative listener responses. The only significant gender difference occurred for frequency of positive listener responses,  $t(166) = -2.62$ ,  $p < .01$ , with females reporting relatively more memories with positive listener responses,  $M = 1.31$  vs.  $.91$ , for females and males, respectively.

Table 1

*Percentage of Meanings and Tension for each Category of Life Event*


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Event category	Frequency	Tension %	Meaning %		
			Lessons	Insights	Overall
Relationship	224	.70	.13	.16	.29
Mortality	122	1.00	.07	.21	.27
Leisure	86	.38	.01	.02	.03
Achievement	66	.48	.03	.13	.16
Total	498	.69	.08	.15	.23

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*Note:* Six memory narratives could not be coded into one of the event categories. Memory frequency refers to memories that included at minimum an event narrative.



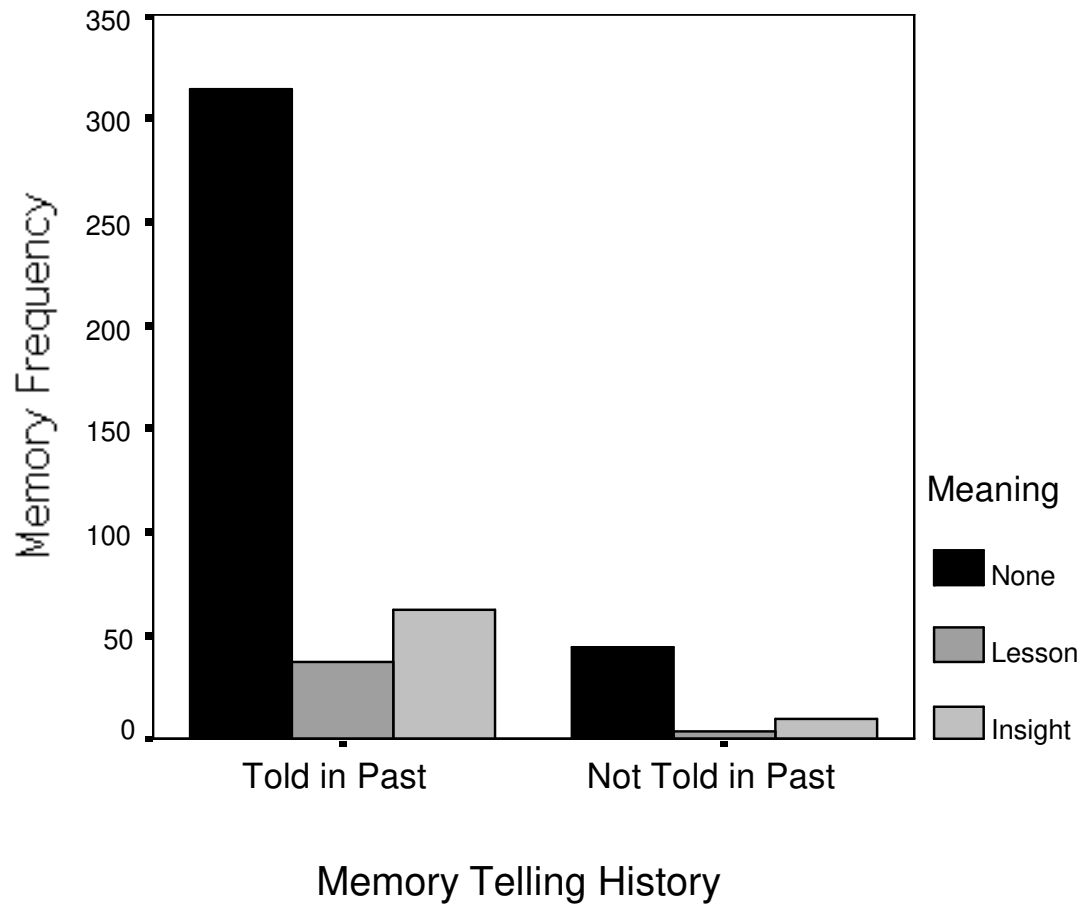
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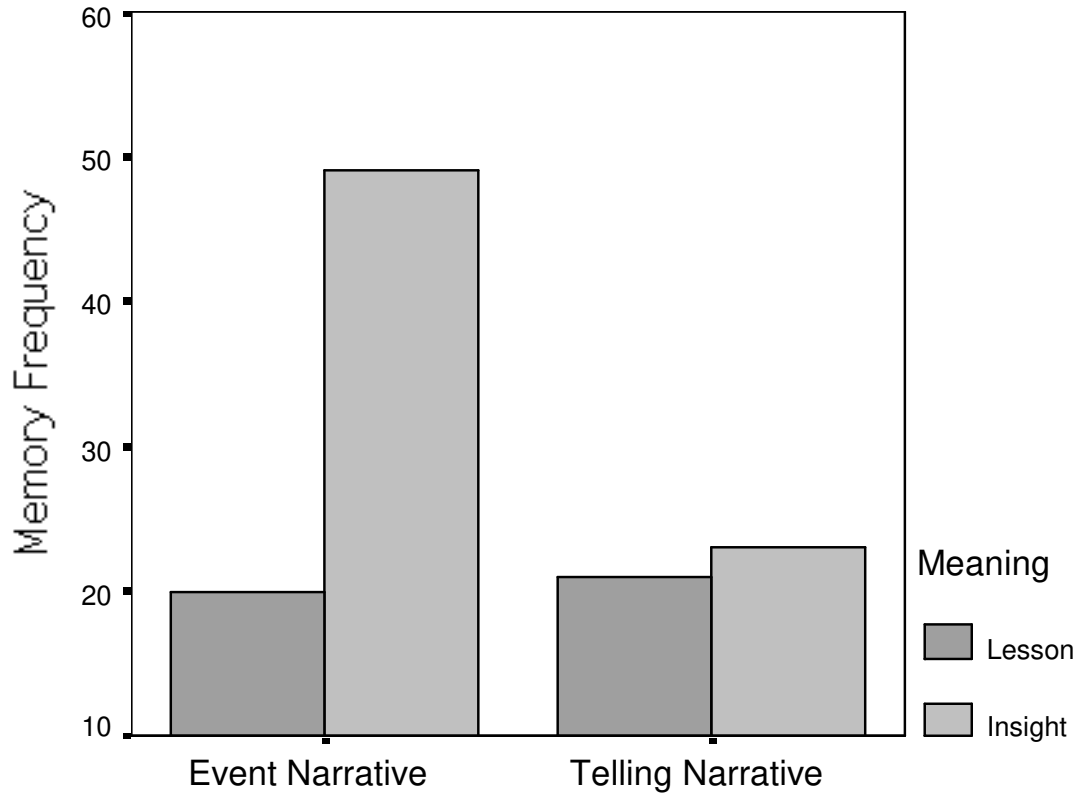
*Figure 1.* Frequency of each kind of meaning in told ( $n = 414$ ) versus non-told ( $n = 57$ ) memories.

*Figure 2.* Frequency of lessons and insights located in event narratives ( $n = 70$ ) versus telling narratives ( $n = 44$ ).

*Figure 3.* Frequency of negative and positive listener responses in memories showing no meaning ( $n = 223$ ), lessons ( $n = 29$ ), and insights ( $n = 50$ ).

*Figure 4.* Listener responses to meanings that emerged in the telling narrative: Frequency of negative and positive responses to lessons ( $n = 20$ ) and insights ( $n = 18$ ).





Meaning in Event or Telling Narrative

