Emerging Identities: Narrative and Self from Early Childhood to Early Adolescence

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You know when you were younger how everything seems so like happy and stuff? (Uh huh) You kind of wake up.
(11-year old telling a researcher about a life-changing event)

This chapter is about when and how we begin to draw meaning from important events in our lives. Although children may indeed "wake up" to a new level of self-reflection in adolescence, we will argue that these newfound realizations are built upon experiences and capacities that have been developing from early childhood. We will also propose that the ability to draw meaning from life events is present much earlier in development than previously assumed, at the very latest by early adolescence, and possibly even earlier.

Our approach to self-understanding is grounded in narrative. A primary way that we learn about ourselves is through the stories that we tell to others about ourselves and through the stories that we hear about ourselves from others (McAdams, 1993, 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Singer, 1995). Eventually, these stories about self coalesce into a life story. We define a life story as a dynamic collection of self-defining memories that are in narrative form and that can be organized with respect to major lifetime periods (see Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004). Thus, a definitive life story does not exist for any individual. Rather, we reorganize the chapters in our stories throughout our lives, and we select different events to include in those chapters depending upon our audience and our current perspectives (Linde, 1993; McAdams et al., 2006).

At what point in development is it possible to "have" (and to tell) a life story? If we adopt a dynamic view, we never really "get" a life story; instead, we are always in the process of revision. Although Habermas and Bluck (2000) originally argued that true life stories are not possible before mid-adolescence, at around age 15, there has actually been a dearth of research on life stories in preadolescent samples. Although there have been prior attempts to elicit life stories from preadolescents,

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children failed to respond to the researcher's prompts or they narrated individual or generalized events, not a story of their whole life (e.g., Engel, 1999).

Habermas and de Silveira (in press) recently overcame some of the obstacles in prior research and successfully elicited life stories from children as young as 8. In the largest and most systematic study of life story development to date, they asked over 100 German 8–20-year olds to tell the story of their whole life to a researcher after first writing down 7 important life events. Using this structured procedure, even the 8-year olds were able to tell a life story. Furthermore, Habermas and de Silveira also found that the life story developed in several important ways from middle childhood to early adulthood. First, and perhaps not surprisingly, the length of participants' life stories increased in a linear fashion with age, so all content analyses were conducted on the proportion of different elements that participants of different ages included in their life stories. One of the most striking qualitative changes with development occurred in the participants' inclusion in their life stories of causal connections between distant past events and their current personality. Only 20% of the 8-year olds ever made these connections in their life stories, but over 75% of the 12- to 20-year olds made these connections, which seem vital in drawing meaning from life events for self. Another critical development in the life story was the inclusion of "biographical arguments." Biographical arguments comprise insights about life events and attributing one's behavior to characteristics such as one's youth or prior experiences. There was a dramatic development in the appearance of these biographical arguments in the life story between 12 and 16 years. Other aspects of the life story continued to develop even beyond age 16, including causal connections to distant life events, statements of formative experiences, and complex cognitive reasoning. Finally, overall coherence of the life story developed in a linear pattern from 8 to 20 years.

Habermas and de Silveira's (in press) data provide important new evidence about the development of the life story from middle childhood to adulthood. Clearly, the life story is developing in both quantitative and qualitative ways across these ages. Instead of conceiving of the life story as present at mid-adolescence, and absent before that age (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), we agree that Habermas and de Silveira's new developmental approach is a more productive way of understanding the life story. In fact, we propose that the developmental precursors to the life story have been emerging from early childhood, when parents and children create narratives together about children's early experiences (c.f. Baddeley & Singer, 2007). The most illuminating approach will be to track the development of these seeds of the life story as they grow into its fullest form.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: First, we review likely precursors of the life story that arise from parent–child interactions in early childhood, and we present new longitudinal evidence linking young adolescents' narratives about early memories to mother–child reminiscing in early childhood. Second, we present a new method of assessing the life story in 8–12-year olds. This new method, which we call the Emerging Life Story Interview (ELSI), is adapted from McAdams' Life Story Interview (1995) and is aimed at exploring how children and adolescents begin to organize their life stories and draw meaning from life events. We then present new evidence that emerging life story abilities are related to the self-concept in early

adolescence. In research with adults, coherence and level of insight in life stories are linked to identity formation (McLean & Pratt, 2006), personality traits (Blagov & Singer, 2004; McAdams et al., 2004), and well-being (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). Drawing upon our knowledge of the development of personal narratives and self from early childhood, we hypothesize that these links between the life story and self-concept may already be present in early adolescence.

The Development of Personal Narratives from Early Childhood

Personal narratives begin almost as soon as children begin to talk, in the second year of life, when they reference personally experienced past events (Fenson et al., 1993; Reese, 1999). These early references to the past usually consist of one- or two-word utterances. For instance, one 18-month old said "Hand. Door." while showing his uncle his finger that he had pinched in a door 6 days earlier (Reese, 1999, p. 233). Children's early talk about the past is already emotional and evaluative (Miller & Sperry, 1988) and in this sense it already contains the seeds of meaning making or what Fivush (2001) called a "subjective perspective." Children do get more competent at telling a coherent story about a past event such that by age 3.5, they can narrate a simple story about a single event from the past to a naïve listener. Their past-event narratives continue to get more sophisticated, and more interesting, into middle childhood and early adolescence (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; see Reese et al., 2009 for a review).

Parents, and especially primary caregiver mothers, provide critical support for children's personal narratives and their ability to draw meaning from those events over the early childhood period. Mothers who structure conversations about the past in a highly elaborative and evaluative fashion help their children to tell richer and more evaluative narratives about the past (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006 for a review). These past-event discussions are not just about what happened, but about the meaning of the event for both participants. For instance, mothers who provided their 3-year-old children with more evaluative information about past events, such as emotional states (you were *sad*) and subjective judgments (you looked *pretty*), had children who went on to include more evaluative information in their personal narratives to a researcher by age 5 (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997).

Just as McAdams (1996) predicted in his initial hypotheses about the origins of the life story, these qualitative differences in the evaluative aspect of early childhood reminiscing are grounded in the attachment relationship between child and mother (Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Newcombe & Reese, 2004; Reese & Farrant, 2003; for reviews see Reese, Newcombe, & Bird, 2006; Laible, 2004). Children who are securely attached to their mothers experience an early reminiscing environment that is more evaluative, although not necessarily richer in orienting devices to the *where*, *when*, and *who* of the past (Newcombe & Reese, 2004). Most critically, only securely attached children internalize their mothers' evaluative style of reminiscing by the end of the early childhood period. In Newcombe and Reese's

longitudinal analysis from ages 1.5–4 years, there were no reciprocal links across time in the evaluative reminiscing of insecurely attached children and their mothers. In these dyads, the child's level of evaluative reminiscing was not a function of the mother's level of evaluation. The contrast in the amount and quality of evaluative talk in dyads with securely attached and insecurely attached children is evident in the following examples. The first excerpt is from a conversation between a mother and her securely attached child about a bird dying in the backyard. Evaluative comments are italicized.

M: Do you remember what happened last, a couple of days ago, when you were playing in the sandpit?
C: No.
M: Do you remember what happened to the bird?
C: What? Yes, it (unintelligible) it died.
M: It died, didn't it? Well, how did it die?
C: Because it hurt itself.
M: How did it hurt itself?
C: It flew past it.
M: It flew past it.
C: You, and it hit it. [break in conversation] . . ..
M: How did it hurt itself?
C: Because it, um, it, it hit meself on the nose.
M: Yeah. It flew into the window, didn't it? And it got hurt. And then what did we do?
C: What?
C: Bury it.
M: We buried it.
C: *I li-, I don't like burying things*.
M: *No, it was a bit sad, wasn't it?*
C: *I don't care if it's sad, because I hate birds.*
M: *You were a bit upset, weren't you?*
C: *No, I wasn't.*
M: *But then you decided you weren't upset. Cos it was a bit much*.
C: *No, I was only sad upset because I didn't want to um, put my red flower in the little place*.
M: *Yeah.*
C: *Yes.*
M: *It was nice that you gave him a flower though*.

The mother first takes the child through the whole event and then highlights its emotional aspects. The child and mother at first disagree about the emotions the child experienced during the event, but by the end the mother accepts the child's interpretation that she was primarily upset about putting a flower on the bird's grave, not about the bird's death. In contrast, the following excerpt from a mother and her

insecurely attached child is almost curiously devoid of emotion, although the event (watching a bull being slaughtered) is potentially upsetting for the child.

M: Tell me, tell me about the tractor the other day. What did Daddy use the tractor for at, at the Galloway's? [1] Can you remember that?
C: Mum!
M: Why did Daddy take the tractor up to Galloway's?
C: No.
M: Can you remember why?
C: No.
M: What had he, what had, what had Paul Galloway done?
C: No.
. . .. [off topic talk]
M: What did yo-, what did Daddy do with Paul? With the tractor?
C: He, he putted the big, big bulls on the thing.
M: And what did Paul do with them?
C: He was cutting the guts out.
M: He was cutting the guts out was he?
C: Yes.
M: Yeah. Can you remember that?
C: Yes.
M: And did, what did they do with it?
C: Um, I don't know.
M: Where, what did Daddy do with it?
M: He took a tractor down, and what did he do with the big bull?
C: They, he put, he hooked them up on the thing.
M: What thing?
C: On the, um, trees.
M: Yeah. [break in conversation]. . .Yeah, what took, and, and, and what did, and what did Daddy use?
C: I don't know.
M: And what did Galloway use? Galloway used a big, big? (pause). What did he use? What did he use to get the guts out?
C: I don't know!
M: Did he use a fork?
C: Yes. No.
M: What did he use?
C: I don't know!
M: Did he use a spoon?
C: No.
M: You didn't see him use a big? (pause) Knife. You didn't see him use a big knife? Ohh.

[1] All names in conversational excerpts are pseudonyms.

The mother in this excerpt goes into great detail about the tool used to remove the bull's guts, complete with a disturbing dinnertime analogy, but she does not explore any emotional or evaluative aspects of the event with the child. Reese (2008) found that mothers who were less elaborative and confirming in their reminiscing style with their children were also less coherent in the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). Coherence in the AAI is a marker of parents' insecure orientation with respect to their own early childhood experiences. Parents who were more secure and coherent with respect to their own early childhood instead talked more openly and elaboratively with their children about the child's early experiences.

Mothers can, however, be trained to reminisce in more elaborative and evaluative ways with their preschoolers, and their children go on to provide richer narratives of their lives with others (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999). Reese and Newcombe (2007) trained one group of mothers to adopt a more elaborative reminiscing style with their toddlers. Although parents were not specifically trained to become more evaluative in their reminiscing, they generalized the training such that by the time their children were preschoolers, the trained mothers were also more evaluative in their reminiscing in comparison to a group of untrained mothers. At age 2.5, after 1 year of intervention, children of the trained mothers included more memory information in their conversations with mothers about the past compared to children of untrained mothers. At age 3.5, children of trained mothers told richer and more accurate stories of the past to a researcher compared to children of untrained mothers, but only if the children had started the study with more advanced levels of self-awareness. Thus, maternal talk about the past can enhance children's personal narratives, but these effects may depend upon the social-cognitive levels of the child. Children who have a firmer sense of self may be better able to incorporate their mothers' talk into their own personal narratives. Thus, self-concept, life-event narratives, and the child's early narrative environment are all linked from early childhood (see McLean et al., 2007; Reese, 2002).

By the beginning of the school years, children have developed a style of discussing personal narratives about individual events (Haden et al., 1997; Reese, Haden & Fivush, 1993). At this age in many cultures, children are telling personal narratives using a classic high-point structure, in which a series of complicating actions build to a high point, which is evaluated and then resolved. For instance, Peterson and McCabe (1983) noted that over half of the 9-year olds in their sample adopted a high-point structure in their personal narratives, although even higher levels of structure for individual narratives are achieved in adolescence (O'Kearney, Speyer, & Kenardy, 2007). Much less is known about how children's personal narratives continue to be socialized by adults during the school years, but it is likely that narrative socialization continues to take place at home and at school. Teachers prefer personal narratives to be succinct and to have a point that is readily apparent to the audience (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981). Individual differences in parents' styles of discussing past events also continue to exist into middle childhood and adolescence (Fivush, Bohanek, Robertson, & Duke, 2004; Weeks & Pasupathi, this volume). Some families jointly collaborate in their family storytelling by building upon each other's contributions. In contrast, other families' stories are more one-sided, either

from a parent's or an adolescent's perspective, or are even disharmonious, with a parent or an adolescent disagreeing about the other's perspective on the event.

We do not know at present whether the parents who were elaborative and evaluative with their children during the preschool years become collaborative in their style of discussing past events during middle childhood, although we predict that this would be the case. We are aware of only one study to date that has followed children's reminiscing over the transition from early childhood to adolescence. Jack, MacDonald, Reese, and Hayne (in press) demonstrated that adolescents had earlier first memories if their mothers had reminisced with them in a more elaborative way in early childhood. However, the empirical link between mothers' subjective perspective toward the past during early childhood and adolescents' later subjective perspective on their lives has not been established.

Personal Narratives and Self-Concept in Childhood

In narrative theories of identity, a subjective perspective on events is an essential part of the self-concept. Clarifying one's perspective on an event is a means of establishing a self. Accordingly, autobiographical memory theorists contend that personal narratives are linked to self-understanding throughout development (Bird & Reese, 2008; Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

By as early as the preschool years, children appear to possess a psychological and multidimensional view of the self. Eder (1990) designed the Children's Self View Questionnaire (CSVQ) to assess children's psychological selves using an engaging puppet task with minimal verbal demands. Even 3.5-year olds were able to provide consistent reports over short periods of such psychological dimensions as their achievement orientation, risk-taking, need for social closeness, etc. Most important for the present argument, children's psychological selves are linked to discussions of past events with their mothers by the preschool years. Preschool children with a more organized self-concept on the CSVQ experience conversations about past events with their mothers that are more emotional in general and specifically in which negative emotions are explained in greater depth (Bird & Reese, 2006; Welch-Ross, Fasig, & Farrar, 1999). The reason for this link is not yet clear, but one possibility is that children who experience richer conversations about past events, especially about the meaning of the past, are better able to draw upon specific personally relevant memories when building up a generalized concept of self. Take, for example, a mother who emphasizes the child's bravery when discussing past scary experiences. If enough scary experiences are discussed in this way, the child will eventually build up a concept of self as brave and self-reliant. Of course, the converse could also be true. A child who has a concept of self as brave might be more likely to notice and emphasize his or her bravery in new experiences. Thus, the direction of influence between personal memories and self-concept almost certainly goes both ways, but it is primarily the way events are interpreted, not the objective facts of the event, that is most important for self. For instance, although adults' overall elaborations about a past event are critical for children's memory for the facts of

the event (e.g., McGuigan & Salmon, 2004), it is instead the emotional content of parents' reminiscing that is important for the child's self-concept. In-depth discussions of the emotional aspects of negative events appear to be particularly important for children's self-understanding (Bird & Reese, 2006; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008; McLean et al., 2007).

Discussions of the past are not only simply linked to the organization of the child's self-concept, but also to children's well-being, as measured via their self-esteem. Mothers who emphasize positive aspects of past events, whether the events themselves were negative or positive, have children with higher self-esteem at ages 5 and 6 (Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007). This link between a focus on positive emotions in family storytelling and children's self-esteem was also evident in a sample of preadolescent children (Marin et al., 2008).

In sum, personal narratives and self-concept are linked in complex ways from early childhood. The ability to tell a personal narrative initially depends both upon the child's growing self-awareness and their reminiscing environment. In the preschool years, and continuing into the school years, personal narratives and self-concept continue to be linked through parent–child reminiscing and especially via the exploration of the emotional aspects of events.

At least two significant gaps remain in this body of research, however. First, although theorists posit that the early reminiscing environment is critical for adolescents' and adults' narrative identities, research has not yet established a direct link between mother–child reminiscing in early childhood and adolescents' personal narratives. Jack et al. (in press) showed that mothers who were relatively more elaborative with their children in early childhood had adolescents with *earlier* first memories, but did not conduct a narrative analysis of adolescents' early memories. In our first study, we analyzed the subjective perspective of these same adolescents' narratives of their childhood memories and specifically the emotional content of those narratives, in relation to the emotional content of mother–child conversations about the past during early childhood.

A second gap in this body of research is the link between children's life stories (not simply single-event narratives) and their well-being. A small number of studies focus on the link between narratives of single events in childhood and adolescence and the self-concept (e.g., Marin et al., 2008; McLean & Breen, 2009; Reese et al., 2007), but to date, researchers of the life story in childhood and adolescence have not included well-being measures. Thus, studies of the life story and well-being in adolescence are needed to bridge the gap between research on personal narratives and self-concept in childhood and research on narrative identity and well-being in adulthood.

Study 1: A Subjective Perspective in Adolescence as a Function of Mother–Child Reminiscing in Early Childhood

To address the first gap in this literature, we explored the origins of adolescents' subjective perspective in early mother–child reminiscing with the same sample of mothers and adolescents from Jack et al. (in press). We predicted that adolescents

who adopted a more subjective perspective by including more emotions in their narratives of early memories would have mothers who had discussed more emotions during reminiscing in early childhood. We were specifically interested in mothers' focus on young children's negative emotions because it is these exchanges that are theorized to be most important for the child's growing self-concept (Bird & Reese, 2006). Positive emotions do not need to be resolved, but negative emotions need to be explored in more depth for young children to make sense of them.

The participants in this study were originally recruited to take part in a longitudinal study of young children's emerging autobiographical memory skills (MacDonald, 1997). In this study, 20 mother–child dyads were visited at home on 5 occasions when the children were 24–40 months of age. At each time-point, mothers were asked to discuss a number of past events that they had recently experienced with their children. The researcher asked the mothers to talk to their children as they normally would when discussing things that have happened in the past. These conversations were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Only the conversations recorded at the 40-month time-point are included in the analyses reported here.

Approximately 10 years later, when these children were 12–13 years old, they were invited to participate in a follow-up study on autobiographical memory development. Seventeen adolescent participants visited the university with a parent to take part in an individual interview about their memories for events that happened at different times in their lives. For each participant, a personal timeline was constructed on colored poster board, featuring several photographs of the participant at different ages (see Tustin & Hayne, 2009, for details about the timeline procedure). The researcher began each interview by explaining to the participant that he or she would be asked to describe some memories for past events. The researcher reviewed the sequence of the timeline with the participant, explaining that the timeline started at the participant's birth and stopped at the participant's present age, and represented his or her whole life so far. The timeline activity was performed to reinforce the notion of a linear time sequence and to provide an external cue for thinking about memories from different epochs of the participant's life.

During the interview, the researcher asked the participant to recall and describe events that happened at various ages. Specifically, each participant was asked to nominate and describe in detail one event that had happened within the last month or so and one event from each of ages 10, 5, 3, and before 3 years of age. The participant also recalled and described parent-nominated events from each of these target ages. During the interview, the researcher also asked the participant to describe his or her earliest memory.

In these event discussions, the researcher first gave the participant the opportunity for free recall by providing general prompts (e.g., "Tell me about [the event]," followed by "Can you remember anything else about [the event]") until the participant had reported all that he or she could remember. The researcher then asked four specific questions about the memory: "Who else was there?," "Where were you?," "What did you do?," and "How did you feel?" The questions were followed by another opportunity for free recall, e.g., "Is there anything else that you can

remember now that you would like to tell me about [the event]?" until the participant could recall no more. These interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Codes were totalled across free and prompted recall.

One of the adolescents who visited for the follow-up memory study was not visited at the 40-month time-point of the original longitudinal study, so the analyses reported here include the 16 participants who participated at both the 40-month and adolescent time-points. Mothers and children discussed different numbers of events at 40 months, as did adolescents at the follow-up interview, so all codes were computed as averages per event for each participant. We coded for subjective perspective (Fivush, 2001) by noting the number of maternal and adolescent references to the child's emotions (You were *sad*) and the valence of each emotion as positive or negative. Bird and Reese (2006) found that references to others' emotions, and evaluative references (It was a *fun* time), were not as critical for children's self-understanding as were references to the child's emotions. Reliability between two independent coders on 25% of the mother–child transcripts at 40 months and 25% of the adolescent transcripts was $\kappa = 0.77$ and $\kappa = 0.82$, respectively. One of the coders coded the remaining transcripts.

We then conducted Pearson correlations between mothers' references to children's emotions and adolescents' references to their own emotions, both positive and negative. Our prediction was that mothers' references to the child's past negative emotions would provide the strongest link to adolescents' later subjective perspective on their memories, but we also analyzed mothers' and adolescents' total references to children's emotions (see Table 2.1 for bivariate correlations). Mothers' total references to children's emotions during past-event conversations at 40 months of age marginally predicted adolescents' references to their own emotions ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.10$) and significantly predicted adolescents' references to positive emotions ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.05$). In particular, mothers' early references to children's negative

Table 2.1 Bivariate correlations among mother, child, and adolescent references to children's and adolescents' positive and negative emotions

		Children's references to their own emotions at 40 months			Adolescents' references to their own emotions at 12–13 years		
		Total emotions	Positive emotions	Negative emotions	Total emotions	Positive emotions	Negative emotions
Mothers' references to children's emotions at 40 months	Total emotions	0.52**	0.44*	0.52**	0.45*	0.55**	0.24
	Positive emotions	0.36	0.28	0.39	−0.05	−0.09	0.01
	Negative emotions	0.43*	0.37	0.42	0.61**	0.77***	0.31

*$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

emotions best predicted adolescents' references to their own emotions ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.05$), especially their own positive emotions ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.01$) at the follow-up memory interview.

Children's references to their own emotions at 40 months, however, were not significantly correlated with their emotion references as adolescents (*r*s ranged from −0.10 to 0.39, n.s.). Even when controlling for children's own emotion references at the 40-month time-point, mothers' early references to children's negative emotions still predicted the adolescents' references to their own emotions ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.05$), especially their positive emotions ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, mothers' earlier references to the child's emotions were directly linked to adolescents' emotion references 10 years later.

In line with our predictions and with past research and theory (Bird & Reese, 2006), it was mothers' focus on the child's negative emotions during early childhood that best predicted a richer subjective perspective in adolescence. Given that our specific focus on emotion words was a relatively restricted measure of subjective perspective, the strength of the observed correlations is noteworthy. We did not anticipate, however, that mothers' references to children's negative emotions would be such a strong predictor of adolescents' *positive* emotions. It appears that discussing negative emotions in early childhood may actually lead to a more positive portrayal of life events later on. If it is the case that mothers help children resolve negative emotions in early childhood, and not simply highlight these negative emotions, then it is possible that these early conversations about negative emotions are helping children to find the good in the bad: the proverbial silver lining. Taylor and Armor (1996) theorized that the ability to find meaning in negative experiences is part of a larger human tendency toward positive illusions about past experiences, the future, and the self. These optimistic tendencies in turn bolster a sense of self-efficacy, which is theorized to lead to active coping with life events. In line with this theory, the positive resolution of negative experiences is linked to greater well-being in adults (King & Miner, 2000; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). However, in our first study, we did not have an independent measure of the adolescents' self-concept or well-being, so these links between the early narrative environment, coping, and well-being in adolescence are only hypothetical at present. We turn now to new data on the concurrent link between personal narratives and adolescents' developing self-concepts.

As we mentioned previously, a limitation of the work on personal narratives and self-concept in childhood and adolescence is that, to date, only single personal memories have been assessed. According to Habermas and Bluck (2000), it is the way that multiple events are organized into a life story that reflects and shapes our sense of who we are. We must be able to connect apparently disparate events in order to draw some greater meaning from those events for our identities. Habermas and colleagues have explored the development of the ability to integrate multiple life events into a coherent life story (Habermas & de Silveira, in press; Habermas & Paha, 2001), but existing research is only beginning to explore the link between life story coherence and self-concept in adolescent samples (e.g., McLean & Breen, 2009). In the following, we attempt to address this gap in the literature by (1) proposing a

method of assessing organization and meaning making in the emerging life story in early adolescence; and (2) exploring the links between the emerging life story and adolescents' well-being, specifically their sense of self-worth.

Study 2: The Emerging Life Story and Well-Being in Early Adolescence

Our aim was to develop a new method of assessing the emerging life story that could be used with 8–12-year olds. Habermas and de Silveira (in press) successfully elicited life stories from children as young as 8 years, but their objective was to obtain a story of the whole life and not to specifically probe the organization of those stories into lifetime periods. With help from William Friedman, and drawing upon McAdam's (1993) Life Story Interview, we designed the Emerging Life Story Interview (ELSI). The ELSI has two parts. The first part assesses the child's or adolescent's ability to organize life events into lifetime periods. Conway et al. (2004) proposed that the long-term self consists of both autobiographical and conceptual components. The individual's ability to organize life events into lifetime periods is evidence of the conceptual component of the long-term self. In contrast, the individual's ability to substantiate each lifetime period with examples of general and specific events is evidence of the autobiographical component of the long-term self and of the integration of these different levels of autobiographical knowledge. The second part of the ELSI assesses the child's or adolescent's ability to draw meaning from life events, which we and other theorists believe is the primary motivation for telling life stories (Fivush, 2001; McLean et al., 2007). We modeled this part of the task after McAdam's (1993) turning point narratives and Singer's (1995) self-defining memories. The entire interview took around 20–25 minutes with our current cross-sectional sample of 62 8–12-year-old New Zealand children. Here we present the results only from the 24 adolescents in the sample (the 12-year olds).

After a brief warm-up chat with the adolescent in a family laboratory, the researcher says:

> I'd like to get to know you better and to hear about some of the important things that have happened to you. The first thing we're going to do is that I'm going to ask you to think about your life as if it were a story in a book. If you wanted to tell your life like a story in a book, what would the chapters be? Think about how your life would be divided into different chapters. Let's start with your life right now. What would be the chapter that you're in now? What are some of the things that would be in that chapter?

Participants are then prompted to go as far backward in time as they wish to name all the chapters in their lives and to relate a few events from each chapter, although researchers do not prompt for full recall of these individual events. Then participants are encouraged to go forward in time from their first chapter to make sure that they have touched upon all the important periods in their lives. Throughout the task, the researcher interacts with the child in an interested and natural way by confirming

children's responses and asking for more detail as appropriate, similar to McAdam's (1995) procedure. Our preliminary scoring of the chapter task consists of counting the number of chapters containing at least one specific memory. Specific memories are rated higher than general memories in our scheme because they are evidence of a more sophisticated integration of the conceptual and autobiographical components of the long-term self (Conway et al., 2004; Han, Leichtman & Wang, 1998). Thus, if participants nominated six chapters but supported their chapters with only general memories, they would receive a score of zero. They would receive a score of 6 if each nominated chapter was supported by at least one specific memory from that period. Our developmental prediction is that children who are able to structure their lives in a more detailed way are building the framework of an organized life story that will emerge fully in adolescence. We also hypothesize that a more organized life story will allow children and adolescents to extract meaning from life events more easily.

The chapter task also serves as a warm-up for the second part of the ELSI, which is a discussion of life-changing events. Our piloting suggested that the younger children in our sample might not understand or respond to a prompt about self-defining memories. Thus we framed our question in terms of "life-changing events," but the task itself is drawn from Singer and Moffitt's (1991–1992) and McLean and Thorne's (2003) self-defining memory procedure. At the end of the chapter task, the interviewer prompts children, "Now try to think of one particular thing that happened in an earlier chapter that changed your life. It should be something that happened to you that's still really important to you now." When participants decide upon an event, the interviewer asks them questions about who was there, how they felt, how others felt, and most importantly, "How did this event change your life?" Participants are asked to provide two life-changing events. We scored these life-changing events for the highest level of insight achieved across both memories using McLean and Pratt's (2006) scheme. Level of insight on a 4-point scale ranged from no meaning achieved (0); lesson learned (1); vague meaning (2); to insight (3) (see Table 2.2, for examples). Participants also completed the global self-worth scale from Harter's (1982) Self-Perception Profile, and at the end of the study, the researcher administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, III-B (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) to measure differences in adolescents' verbal abilities.

So far 24 young New Zealand adolescents ($M = 12.5$ years, SD = 0.43; 14 girls) have participated as part of a larger study of time concepts and autobiographical memory, conducted in collaboration with William Friedman. The sample is primarily composed of European New Zealanders (91%). The study took place in a family room in a university laboratory with the adolescent's parent in an adjoining room but out of earshot. The primary researcher who interviewed the adolescents was female. Chapter tasks and life-changing events were recorded on digital voice recorders and the life-changing events were transcribed for coding. Reliability between two independent coders on 25% of the transcripts for the chapter task was 92% for the number of chapters with specific memories. Reliability between two independent coders on 25% of the transcripts for the life-changing event task was $\kappa = 0.75$ for level of insight.

Table 2.2 Examples of life-changing events and levels of insight in early adolescence

Level of insight	Example
No meaning (0)	Life-changing event: Starting a new sport *I went through all the different grades, and then I got selected for Metro. And then I got into Metro, and [sic: it] started taking up a lot more of my time.*
Lesson learned (1)	Life-changing event: Telling a lie and getting in trouble *It taught me never tell, tell lies, especially coz you'll get caught out.*
Vague insight (2)	Life-changing event: Parents' divorce *I just think I do things differently, and that just changed you like if your parents were still together. You might, it'll just be a different sort of like, like you wouldn't have two homes, if you get bored at one, you just go to the other one and things. It's changed when I do things and how I do things.*
Insight (3)	Life-changing event: Getting bullied *I used to be really good at like maths and things, and then when I got bullied, it all stopped. And I wasn't good at like things. I was always had probably that bullying in my head that really meanness of it. And umm so I think if I didn't get bullied back then I'd probably be smarter than I am now.*

Adolescents nominated an average of six chapters in the chapter task, with a range from 3 to 10. On average, 2.88 of each adolescent's chapters contained a specific memory, with a range of 0–9. On their life-changing events, participants achieved an average level of insight of 1.43 for their highest score across the two memories. Average global self-worth was 20 with a range from 15 to 24. The average standardized PPVT score was 107, so verbal ability was slightly above average.

We conducted correlations among the ELSI scores (organization of the life story in the chapter portion and insight into the life-changing events) and adolescents' self-esteem and verbal ability (see Table 2.3). Our first prediction was that adolescents with a more organized life story would have a stronger sense of self-worth. We also predicted that adolescents who achieved higher levels of meaning making in the life-changing event narratives would have higher levels of self worth, although the literature is mixed on this point. One study with preadolescents found that

Table 2.3 Correlations among young adolescents' life story organization, insight, self-esteem, and verbal ability ($N = 24$)

	Insight	Self-esteem	Verbal ability
Organization	−0.17	0.41*	0.01
Insight		−0.31	0.02
Self-esteem			−0.04

*$p < 0\ .05$

greater levels of meaning-making when writing about stressful events were actually associated with lower levels of well-being (Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, & Brewin, 2007). As King (2001) pointed out, understanding does not always lead to happiness. Insights can be painful, causing regret and self-doubt instead of well-being.

Indeed, our prediction of a positive link between the life story and well-being was borne out only for the organization of the life story. Adolescents who nominated a greater number of chapters containing at least one specific memory reported higher self-esteem, but level of insight into the life-changing events was not significantly correlated with self-esteem. Contrary to predictions, adolescents' organization of the life story on the chapter task was not correlated with their level of insight achieved. Verbal ability was not correlated with any measure.

Thus, the organization of the life story, but not the level of insight, was concurrently linked to well-being in early adolescence. Adolescents with a more organized life story reported higher levels of self-esteem. This relationship was not a function of adolescents' verbal skill. There are several possible reasons we did not find a link between level of insight and higher self-worth. First, in line with Fivush et al. (2007), it is possible that insight and well-being only become positively linked later in adolescence, when the ability to draw meaning from events and apply it to one's self-concept is more sophisticated. It is also possible that there are gender differences in this relation. In research with a larger sample of older adolescents (McLean & Breen, 2009), the relationship between meaning and self-esteem was moderated by gender. We were not able to assess gender differences with our small sample, but as we enlarge our sample, we will explore possible gender differences in accounting for this absence of a correlation between insight and self-worth. In future work with this sample, we will also explore the role of the family's storytelling style in the link between the organization of life stories and well-being. We expect that adolescents who have a more organized and evaluative life story also experience more collaborative and evaluative storytelling in the home.

These results are important in several ways. To our knowledge, this is the first evidence that the structure of the emerging life story is connected to well-being in a young adolescent sample. Similar to findings with adults (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Bauer et al., 2005), young adolescents who have a more organized and detailed life story experience higher levels of self-worth. We cannot at present interpret the direction of this effect. The organization of the life story may be instrumental in self-esteem, or high self-esteem may enable adolescents to tell more organized life stories. We are currently conducting the ELSI with two samples of young adolescents that we have followed from age 1.5 years (see Reese, 2002; Reese & Newcombe, 2007) and for whom we have previously collected information on their early reminiscing environment and their self-understanding. In line with McLean et al.'s (2007) model, we predict that the link between the life story and adolescents' self-understanding is most likely bidirectional and will be mediated by their early reminiscing environment. Adolescents who experienced a richer and more evaluative reminiscing environment in early childhood are expected to

have more organized and detailed life stories, to be better able to draw meaning from life events and to have a stronger sense of self-worth. It is also possible that there are gender differences in the relations between narrative identity and well-being (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, in press), perhaps as a function of differences in the early reminiscing environments for boys and girls.

Our results are also important from a methodological point of view. Taken together with Habermas and colleagues' work with 8–12-year olds, we conclude that it is possible to elicit a life story prior to mid-adolescence (Habermas & Paha, 2001; Habermas & de Silveira, in press). We will continue to analyze our data with the younger children in the project to ascertain whether this task works equally well in middle childhood as it does in early adolescence. We believe that the ELSI is a particularly promising tool for capturing the emerging life story in younger samples. At around 20–25 minutes on average, the ELSI is much easier and quicker to conduct than a standard life story assessment. Habermas and de Silveira (in press) estimated that their life story measure took only 15 minutes, but that estimate did not include the time for participants to nominate and write down seven important life events prior to the life story narrative. The ELSI has face validity and was readily understood and engaged in by children and young adolescents, in contrast to more traditional methods that are not easily understood by children, are more effortful, or involve writing, which is still difficult or unappealing for a number of participants in this age range. Moreover, the ELSI is fairly easily scored and coded. The children's responses to the chapter portion can be noted on a form during the interview and then checked later against the recording, so that only the life-changing event portion needs to be fully transcribed for coding. Other significant life events, such as high points and low points, could be added to the protocol as desired (Baerger & McAdams, 1999). The entire interview would still take under half an hour.

We plan to extend our use of the ELSI in several ways in future research. First, we will document developmental changes in the emerging life story over the 8–12-year period with the full sample. We expect to find few changes in the overall number of chapters produced with age, but we expect large developmental changes in the number of chapters that are supported by specific memories. We argue that the ability to nominate a specific memory for a chapter is evidence of children's ability to see the bigger picture of their lives and to substantiate that big picture with a specific example from that life period. We will also explore deeper ways of scoring the chapter task. For instance, we could examine the way in which children and adolescents organized their stories at different ages. Did they organize their lives according to true lifetime periods (schools, places lived) or simply by chronological age, regardless of life themes? One 8-year-old pilot participant started a new chapter for every even-numbered year of his life (When I was Born; When I was Two; When I was Four, etc.). At the end of the interview, he noted, "I just went up in twos. I can't think of anything from when I was 7 or 3 or 5." In contrast, the young adolescents in our sample typically organized their lives in more conventional ways, such as by the schools they had attended or places they had lived.

Implications

Our work on the emerging life story is still developing, so it is too soon to draw firm conclusions. However, we believe that eventually our findings will have implications for theories of identity and self-concept development. If the life story indeed emerges from the stories that parents and children tell in early childhood and if these stories simultaneously shape children's self-concept, then perhaps the struggle to form an identity in late adolescence is not as discontinuous a development as some theorists have proposed (e.g., Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 2006). The challenge in future research with longitudinal samples will be to find ways to capture both continuity and change in the self-concept over time (Bird & Reese, 2008). One advantage of adopting a narrative approach to the study of self-development is that personal narratives are present from very early in childhood, and thus the way that the self is portrayed through narrative can be examined using similar methods across a wide span of ages. Measuring continuity in the self-concept over time with more traditional measures is difficult because different methods are used with participants of different ages, thus overestimating qualitative change and underestimating quantitative changes with age. Narratives provide us with a way of understanding the self, as well as a way of potentially shaping the self-concept. McAdams (2006) claimed that life narratives access the most unique aspects of personality in adults.

On a practical note for teachers who are seeking methods of eliciting the life story as a way of exploring the autobiographical genre with their younger students, it appears that structured methods are more successful than simply asking children to tell the story of their life. A number of these structured methods are now available, including Habermas and de Silveira's (in press) method of having participants write down seven important memories prior to narrating the life story and Jack et al.'s (in press) method of creating a timeline with photos from different ages prior to eliciting event narratives. Methods such as the ELSI that encourage young adolescents to organize those events with respect to lifetime periods, and to highlight some life events over others, could be particularly useful for guiding young writers and storytellers in Gricean principles of meaning and conciseness in the life story.

We end with the caveat that these conclusions and recommendations may not necessarily be appropriate for non-European adolescents. Research on the life stories of non-European adolescents is scant. In one of the few existing studies, Chandler and Proulx (2008) reported a positive link between self-continuity and well-being in First Nations Canadian adolescents. First Nations youth who were at lower risk of suicide emphasized continuities between their past and present selves, whereas 80% of actively suicidal youth could see little continuity in their past and present selves; by extension, they could not conceive of a future self. These results seem consistent with the positive link between life story coherence and well-being found in adult samples (Baerger & McAdams, 1999) and in our second study here. However, when compared to non-Aboriginal youth, First Nations adolescents on the whole had different concepts of continuity between their past and present selves. Whereas European Canadians adopted an "essentialist" stance in which they were essentially the same person over time, First Nations adolescents endorsed a more

"relational" position in which true change was possible, but common themes or threads could be identified across different instantiations of the self. Thus, although coherence in the life story may be linked to well-being across cultures and across developmental periods, the form that coherence takes in the life story may differ in important ways across ages and cultures.

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