

Old, New, Borrowed, Blue? The Emergence and Retention of Personal Meaning in Autobiographical Storytelling

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ABSTRACT Research on narrative identity has traditionally focused on how narrative characteristics are related to personality and well-being in adults. The present pair of studies with college students (Study 1, $n = 62$; Study 2, $n = 68$ couples) examined the dynamic conversational processes that might be part of constructing that identity. We examined the characteristics of personal meanings, operationalized as self-event connections, and the retention of those connections about important past events discussed between new romantic partners. Across the 2 studies, self-event connections that were positive and about stable aspects of the self were more likely to occur. Connections that were retained over 1 month were those that were shared by both teller and listener in an independent postconversation assessment. Discussion focuses on the processes that might contribute to the construction of narrative identity and the importance of positivity, stability, and shared connections in developing and maintaining narrative identity.

While an exciting surge in research on narrative and self has confirmed the importance of developing a coherent narrative identity as a developmental accomplishment (e.g., McAdams, 1993; McLean & Pratt, 2006), one that promotes positive psychological functioning and adjustment (e.g., Pals, 2006), far less is known about *how*

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narrative identity actually develops, which was the focus of the current study. Recently, we suggested (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007) that one important mechanism of narrative identity development is the process of telling stories about the self to others to develop, confirm, sustain, and potentially alter the *personal meaning* of one's stories (see also, e.g., Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; Thorne, 2000). That is, stories that are told are situated within particular contexts and are used to develop and maintain the self by creating meanings about the self based on past experiences (McLean et al., 2007). As our assessment in the current study was narrowly focused on the discussion of one event, our operationalization of meaning focused on how people link past events to the self, termed *self-event connections* (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007).

We situated this study in the context of newly dating romantic partners disclosing personally important stories with each other. Our aim was to identify characteristics of the self-event connections of autobiographical experiences—primarily whether they contribute to stability (old) or change (new) in the self; whether they are negative (blue), neutral, or positive in nature; whether they become shared connections between the romantic partners (borrowed); and whether connections are retained over time.

Narrative Identity

Narrative identity is conceptualized as the life story, which is a narrative with selectively appropriated past events that are woven together to form a broader story of how one came to be the person one is (McAdams, 1993). Theorists have proposed that it is the process of finding connections between these selective events and the self that is the key ingredient in constructing a life story (e.g., Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi et al., 2007). While many researchers have implicitly or explicitly examined connections made between a past event and the self as a solo venture (e.g., King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; McLean, 2008; Pals, 2006; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006), we took the perspective that making these connections is a joint process (e.g., Fivush, 2001; McLean et al., 2007; Thorne, 2004). Prior research with children and adults has shown that the ways in which we co-construct the past with others are important to the development of narrative skills (for a review, see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006), to emerging self-concept

and well-being (e.g., Bird & Reese, 2006), and to recall of events discussed (e.g., Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). Yet prior research has not focused specifically on the predictors of different *types of connections* and the predictors of what connections one *retains* over time, which were our current aims.

Our sample in the current study was composed of newly dating romantic partners. We chose this sample because we suspected that the limited length of relationship would provide room to share meaningful and novel memories. Further, we expected that because they were in a relationship, the pair would be invested in one another's developing narrative identities.

The Paradox of Continuity: Stability and Change

One of the great developmental challenges is to see the self as continuous through time as one faces inevitable changes. Chandler and others have discussed how individuals create this self-continuity by narrating experiences that exemplify how one has remained the same, as well as explaining how one has changed over time (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001; McLean, 2008; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010; Pasupathi et al., 2007; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Indeed, finding continuity in the self in terms of one's essential and stable characteristics and how one has changed and grown is critical to constructing a life story and has implications for mental health (Chandler et al., 2003). To examine this critical component of identity development and psychological functioning, we examined two kinds of self-event connections: narrating an event in a way that helps to *explain* who one is (e.g., "This even shows what a grateful person I am") or narrating an event to show how one has *changed* over time (e.g., "That experience made me a more grateful person").

Interestingly, much research on narrative development has focused on processes of growth and development, where change connections are more prominently featured (e.g., King et al., 2000; Lodi-Smith, Geise, Roberts, & Robins, 2009; McLean & Thorne, 2003; Pals, 2006). This may be due to the idea that stability is less challenging to narrative identity than is change, of which we must make sense. Indeed, from the perspective of self-verification theory, people are actively engaged in constructing their personal and social worlds to confirm their preexisting self-views (Swann,

1997). Further, this investment in self-verification is present in the target as well as others with whom one interacts—partner verification (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998); that is, we want to view ourselves as stable and we want to view others with whom we are interacting as stable. Therefore, stories of transformation may predict personal growth and individual well-being (e.g., Pals, 2006) but may not be desired by the self or the audience in social storytelling contexts. Thus, we expected that *people may be more inclined toward disclosing self-event connections that are explanatory, or about personal stability, than about personal change.*

Valence

The emotional tone of one's stories is a critical part of understanding narrative processes that contribute to identity development and to well-being because a life story by definition includes both high and low points. Yet the kinds of self-event connections one makes about past events can vary in valence. That is, a low point may have a positive self-event connection as part of the narrative. Thus, the valence of self-event connections is an important puzzle piece in understanding identity development and well-being.

Although research on valence has been primarily concerned with the valence of events, rather than self-event connections expressed in those events, it has found that meaning making, broadly defined, tends to occur in the context of negative events (e.g., McLean & Thorne, 2003), and finding a silver lining for, or redeeming, past negative events predicts positive well-being (e.g., McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Further, some retrospective research has shown that audiences are uncomfortable with more vulnerable and negative stories (Thorne & McLean, 2003), which may be one reason that negative events are commonly redeemed in American culture (McAdams, 2006). Finally, over time, people report less negative emotion in the retelling than in the initial experience, whereas positive emotion remains unchanged over retelling experiences (Pasupathi, 2003). Thus, making positive connections about the self may serve to maintain or build well-being, and we suspected that disclosing stories that contain positively valenced self-event connections may contribute to identity through social bonding and the creation of shared positive affect (McLean & Thorne, 2006; Pasupathi, 2006; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). Perhaps especially in new

romantic relationships, disclosing positive connections may be important so as not to burden the listener before knowing what kind of listener one has. Thus, we expected *positive self-event connections to be more likely to be disclosed by both teller and listener than would negative self-event connections.*

The Retention of Self-Event Connections Over Time

Although we wanted to predict characteristics of self-event connections, we also wanted to predict the teller's retention of self-event connections over time, in this case one month. This is a particularly critical question because it speaks to the process of integrating specific events into the self through creating lasting self-event connections, which we propose is a critical factor in the developing continuity in narrative identity and which is also the least studied aspect of narrative identity (McLean et al., 2007).

We note that it is difficult to make predictions about teller retention, given the scarcity of past research. However, our assessment of retention was fairly strict, and given research that does exist on retention of event details over 1 month (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010) and the continuity (or lack thereof) in life story narratives (McAdams et al., 2006; Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998), we expected retention to be low.

In terms of the characteristics of self-event connections we have just described, though we expected that change connections might be less likely to occur, we also expected that *change connections might be more likely to be remembered over time*, given that change may be disruptive for both tellers and listeners and that unexpected or disruptive events are more memorable (e.g., Rubin, 1998; Winograd, 1988). Further, given research on self-enhancement (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988), we expected that *change memories that were positive would be particularly likely to be retained.*

Because prior research has established that listeners play a major role in the construction of stories as conarrators (e.g., Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Fivush et al., 2006; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009), we also wanted to look at their role in the teller's retention of self-event connections. In the present study, we defined the listener's role in retention in two ways: (a) as a *source* of a self-event connection and (b) as having a role in recollection by "agreeing" with the teller in an independent postconversation survey about what was communicated about the teller in the conversation, which we called *shared connections.*

Source

We examined the possibility that connections made between a past event and the self could be produced by the teller or by the listener. Indeed, this is one of the most direct ways that listeners can contribute to the development of narrative identity. However, prior research has shown that over time people are generally more successful at getting others to share their preexisting self-views and that the effects of others on further shaping self-views are present, but smaller in magnitude, than the effects of one's own views (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995; McNulty & Swann, 1994; Tessler & Nelson, 1994). There are other cognitive explanations for why tellers would remember their own connections better than others, such as the "generation effect" (Slamecka & Graf, 1978). For example, we better remember stimuli that we generate ourselves, as opposed to stimuli that we read. Thus, we expected that *listener-generated connections would be less likely to be retained over time than would teller-generated connections.*

Shared Connections

We also examined connections that were shared, which we defined as those self-event connections that both the listener and the teller recalled when asked about the meaning of the story in an immediate and independent postconversation survey. That is, if both the teller and the listener reported in a solitary postconversation survey that the meaning of the story was that the teller is a grateful person, this would be termed a *shared connection*. We examined this novel aspect of conversations and narrative identity because it suggests a second important contribution that listeners may make to meaning construction and narrative identity. Specifically, shared connections get at those connections that are agreed upon by the speaker and an important other person in his or her life; thus, shared connections are personal identities that are supported in the social world. Further, shared reality theorists (Hardin & Conley, 2001; Hardin & Higgins, 1996) propose that positive social interactions, which lead to the establishment and maintenance of relationships, are facilitated by finding some kind of common ground, in this case agreement on the personal meaning of a story. Moreover, shared reality theorists also propose that information or perspectives on which members of

a relationship agree are particularly likely to be kept. Thus, we first predicted that *self-event connections that are positive and about change would be more likely to become shared* because they are less threatening and more memorable, respectively. Second, we predicted that *shared connections would be particularly likely to be retained*, based on shared reality theory and related empirical findings.

Prior work on shared reality theory has not examined the extent to which people come to share personal meanings about autobiographical experiences, and prior work on narrative identity has similarly not focused on the extent of shared meanings, particularly as examined independently of the conversational narrative itself. As a consequence, we make no a priori predictions about the frequency of shared meanings.

The Present Study

We had two broad aims in this study: predicting characteristics of self-event connections (change/stability, valence, and whether or not they are shared) and predicting teller retention of connections over time from the characteristics of those connections. To examine this, in two studies we asked newly dating romantic partners to engage in a conversation in the lab, in which one person (teller) disclosed an important past event that he or she had not disclosed to his or her partner. We assessed the presence and characteristics of self-event connections that the teller held prior to the conversation, as well as self-event connections that emerged during the conversation and immediately after for both teller and listener, and at a 1-month follow-up for the teller.

Hypotheses

1. Self-event connections that are stable and positive would be more likely to be reported than connections that are negative or about change.
2. Teller retention of connections would be predicted by the teller as the source of the connection (as opposed to the listener) and connections that were shared.
3. More positive connections and positive change connections would be more likely to become shared.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via a psychology subject pool at a public university in southern Ontario and through flyers posted on campus. Participants were required to be in a romantic relationship of fewer than 3 months in duration to participate in the study, which resulted in a sample of 62 heterosexual couples. Four couples were removed from analyses: three because of technical failures and one because they had been dating for over 3 months. Thus, the final sample included 58 couples. The mean relationship length was 2.10 months ($SD = 1.55$ weeks; range = 3 weeks to 3 months). Participants were randomly assigned to be the “teller” or the “listener,” which resulted in an even gender balance of 29 male tellers and 29 female tellers (M age of all participants = 19.15; $SD = 1.70$; range = 17–29). Teller ethnicity was reported as 26% Caucasian, 58% Asian, and 16% Other (e.g., African, Hispanic/Latino, Other), with one person not reporting ethnicity. Listener ethnicity was reported as 22% Caucasian, 50% Asian, and 28% Other. At follow-up, 90% of couples were still dating.

Procedures

Once couples arrived in the lab, they were separated into two rooms and given consent forms to read and sign after all questions about the study that participants might have had were answered by researchers. Both teller and listener filled out a demographic survey, and tellers were told to think of a memory to disclose in conversation and to answer some questions about it in a survey. Subsequently, the teller and listener were brought into the same room for the conversation. After the conversation, the couple was again separated to fill out postconversation surveys, described below. Participants were thanked, and listeners were compensated with course credit or \$10. One month later, tellers returned to the lab for an interview. After that interview, tellers were compensated with \$10 or course credit and debriefed. Debriefing was also sent to the listeners at that time point.

We note the potentially awkward experimental situation that may not capture conversations “on the hoof.” We did ask how typical the conversation was for the relationship, and the mean for tellers and listeners in both studies was above the middle point on a 5-point scale for conversation typicality (M teller = 3.19; M listener = 3.14).

Measures

We describe the relevant parts of the study assessment sections and coded variables here.

Preconversation survey (teller). Tellers were told to think of a memory that was personally important, emotional, and important to how he or she thinks of him- or herself as a person that he or she had not told the listener prior to the study. Once the teller had thought of the memory, he or she was asked to write it down, as well as to record, in an open format, why it was an important memory and what it meant to the teller.

Conversation (teller and listener). Tellers were asked to disclose the memory they had written about, and tellers and listeners were asked to have as normal a conversation as possible and to take as long as they wanted. They were left alone in a private and comfortable room, and the conversation was audio-recorded.

Postconversation survey (teller and listener). In this survey, both the teller and the listener were asked to describe the memory and report what the memory meant to the teller, what the memory said (if anything) about the teller's identity, and whether or not the teller communicated anything about the self in telling the memory.

Follow-up interview (teller). Interviews were conducted by one of four female undergraduate students and were audio-recorded. Participants were first asked to describe the memory they had disclosed during the conversation at the first session. Subsequently, participants were asked to elaborate on the meaning of the memory, if they had learned anything about themselves or the memory in the first session, and to discuss any perceived changes in the meaning of the memory.

Narrative Coding

Self-event connections. Each portion of the study (teller's preconversation written survey about the memory, the conversation, teller's and listener's postconversation survey, and teller's follow-up interview) was coded to identify any self-event connections that emerged in any of these sections of the study. Each connection was identified by two independent raters and then coded for whether it was about change or stability ($\kappa = .79$). A *stability* connection is one that explains a stable aspect of the self, one that the teller perceives as having always been there (e.g., "This event shows what an independent person I am"). A *change* is one

that explains how one's self has shifted due to the event's being discussed (e.g., "That experience made me a more independent person"). Originally, each meaning was also coded as to whether it concerned revealing an aspect of the self that was already there but that the speaker had not known about. Given the low base rate of reveal connections, we included those in change connections (see McLean, 2008; Pasupathi et al., 2007). We also coded the source of the connection as Teller or Listener (kappa = 1.00). Finally, each connection was coded for valence: negative, neutral, or positive (kappa = .85).

Shared connections and teller retention. Once connections were identified, coders determined where it *first* emerged (preconversation, conversation, postconversation surveys of teller and/or listener, or follow-up interview; kappa = 1.00). After a connection was identified, each subsequent location was then coded for whether the connection was still reported in the later assessments. That is, if a connection emerged in the conversation, teller and listener postsurveys and the follow-up interview were coded for the presence or absence of that specific connection. We coded whether the connection was absent, less elaborated than the original, the same as the original, or more elaborated than the original in each portion of the study: conversation (kappa = .96), teller postconversation survey (kappa = .89), listener postconversation survey (kappa = .69), and follow-up interview (kappa = .83). For the purposes of this study, we only examined the teller's retention of connection, in any form (less elaborated, the same, more elaborated), versus absence. Shared connections were captured by identifying those connections disclosed in conversations that were preserved, in some form, in both the teller's and listener's postconversation survey. We used a lenient, or "gist," criterion for retention and sharing.

Results

In this data set, each participant generated some number of self-event connections, and the number of those connections varied among participants. Thus, connections, the focus of our hypotheses, are nested within participants. Treating connections as units raises issues of dependency given that some participants generate more connections than others. To accommodate our focus on connections as the unit of analysis, and to account for the fact that connections are nested within participants, we employed hierarchical linear modeling. In this approach, nested models of the data are created that take into account dependencies resulting from several connections being

generated by one pair of participants. We examined Level 1 models, which predict aspects of connections themselves (i.e., change/stability, source, and valence) but do so while taking into account the nesting of connections within participants. In our tables, the intercept represents the base distribution of the outcome, and the coefficients can be interpreted as with standard regression techniques. We describe the analytic strategy for each analysis in Study 1, which is identical to Study 2, except where noted.

On average, participants generated 4.8 ($SD = 2.4$) meanings about the events, 88% from the speaker and 12% from the listener.

Predicting Characteristics of Self-Event Connections

Predicting change connections. Descriptively, of all the connections reported, 58% were about self-stability and 42% were about self-change. To examine predictors of whether people constructed stability or change connections, we modeled the distribution of our predicted outcome, type of connection, as a Bernoulli trial where 0 represented stability and 1 represented change, such that the intercept row in Table 1 reflects the base likelihood of change connections. At Level 1, we examined whether the source (listener vs. speaker) and valence (negative, neutral, or positive) of the connection were associated with change connections. As shown in

Table 1
Predicting the Likelihood of Change Connections Across Study 1 and Study 2

	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Value
Study 1 ^a			
Intercept	- 1.33	.31	- 4.3**
Source (listener)	-.86	.25	- 3.5**
Positivity	.49	.13	3.8**
Study 2 ^b			
Intercept	- 1.19	.25	- 3.3**
Source (listener)	- 1.92	.30	- 6.4**
Positivity	.46	.15	3.08**

^a*df* = 51.

^b*df* = 64.

***p* < .01.

Table 1, change connections were less likely overall (negative intercept), were less likely to originate from the listener (source effect), and were more likely to be positive (valence effect). For example, the following excerpt is based on a story about performing at the prestigious Royal Conservatory of Music:

T: To this day . . . yeah, it, but, it's important because what it did is, it, *it made me kinda who I am*. Well, it did, in terms of, ah, the effort I put into it, that, the time I was willing to put into it to make sure I was the best. Cause I'd refuse to lose.

L: (*laughs*) Of course.

T: Um, the, mostly the time in the workout, like meeting, and because of it, it applied to, now it applies to school. I'll put in the time I need to. It applies to work, and, uh, be the hardest worker. . . . Um, it applies to relationships.

L: (*laughs*) He's throwing it out there.

T: I'm just, I'm not gonna . . . I work at things, I just don't give up. Ahh, I thought that was important for you to know, about me. Cause I mean it does reflect who I am and I'm not just gonna give up at the snap of things.

In this example, the teller explains how he *became* a hard worker due to his experience with music, a positive change in his personality, which he has now applied to multiple domains.

Positivity. The valence variable was coded in an ordinal fashion, with 1 representing negative connection, 2 neutral connection, and 3 positive connection, and was modeled as predicting positivity. The average score for valence was 2.2 ($SD = .8$), indicating a skew toward positivity. Indeed, 24% of connections were coded as negative, 28% as mixed in valence, and 44% as positive. At Level 1, we first examined whether the source (listener vs. speaker) and connection type (stability, change) were associated with positivity. Results showed that connections were overall likely to be positive (as indicated by the significant, positive intercept) and (redundant with the valence analysis) that change connections were associated with

positivity, such as in the example above, but that positivity and the source of the connection were unrelated.

Predicting Which Connections Become Shared

Next, we examined whether characteristics of connections were related to the likelihood that these connections were shared, operationalized via the postconversation questionnaires completed by both the speaker and listener. Shared connections were defined as those self-event connections that both speaker and listener reported postconversation and were modeled as a Bernoulli trial with 0 indicating unshared and 1 indicating shared connections. Across all participants and connections, only 19% of connections were shared. This is reflected in Table 2 in the intercept row. Moreover, the effect of source indicates that listener-generated connections were especially unlikely to become shared. There was a trend for change connections to become shared. For example, the couple who discussed the Royal Conservatory music experience had shared connections in their postconversation surveys:

T: It [the experience] allowed me to develop skills and traits that will help me throughout my life. It represents who I am and the

Table 2
Predicting Shared Connections in Studies 1 and 2

	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Value
Study 1 ^a			
Intercept	-2.10	.31	-6.7***
Source (listener)	-.69	.19	-3.7**
Change	.42	.21	2.0 ⁺ (<i>p</i> = .05)
Positivity	.13	.14	.93
Study 2 ^b			
Intercept	-2.65	.35	-7.5***
Source (listener)	-1.74	.23	-7.7***
Change	.61	.22	2.8**
Positivity	.45	.14	3.2**

^a*df* = 51.

^b*df* = 64.

⁺ *p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

things I'm willing to do to succeed. . . . Work hard and you can literally accomplish anything.

L: It helped him develop a lot of the qualities he uses today in everyday life, school and work . . . patience and determination.

Predicting Connection Retention

Descriptively, 41% of connections that emerged at one of the earlier time points in the study (preconversation, conversation, postconversation) were retained in some fashion at follow-up (41% of these were retained in somewhat altered form, and 59% in identical form). We examined teller retention as a Bernoulli trial where 0 represented absent at follow-up and 1 represented retained. We first examined whether the source (listener vs. speaker), change connections, positivity of connection, and whether or not connections were shared by both speaker and listener postconversation were associated with retention. As shown in Table 3, via the intercept row, the overall likelihood of retention was low—most connections were not produced at follow-up. Listener-sourced connections were particularly unlikely to be retained. However, retention was much more likely when the connection had been shared, postconversation, by both speaker and listener. Returning to the Royal Conservatory example, 1 month later the teller reported that he

told her about when I played the piano in competitions and my accomplishments as well as how participating in these events played a role in the person I have become. It signifies to me that I can do anything that I put the effort into. It helped me develop a very strong work ethic which is a very important part of who I am.

In sum, the results of Study 1 suggest that stability connections and positive connections were more likely to be produced in conversations between newly dating couples, that tellers generate more connections than do listeners overall, and that, when listeners generate connections, those connections promote stability. The findings further suggest that few connections become shared, and this is especially true for listener-generated connections. However, over the course of 1 month, though connections were relatively unlikely to be

Table 3
 Predicting Retention of Connections Over 1 Month in Studies
 1 and 2

	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Value
Study 1 ^a			
Intercept	-1.17	.36	-3.3**
Source (listener)	-.81	.33	-2.5*
Change	.46	.27	1.7 ⁺
Positivity	.12	.14	.85
Shared	2.35	.33	7.1***
Study 2 ^b			
Intercept	-1.36	.38	-3.6**
Source (listener)	-1.53	.31	-5.0***
Change	.25	.29	.86
Positivity	.16	.14	1.1
Shared	2.05	.31	6.6***

^a*df* = 47.

^b*df* = 58.

⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

retained, those that were shared were more likely to be retained. Study 2 was designed to further examine questions about the characteristics and teller's retention of connections in conversational narration, but this time with variations in the goals that tellers had for disclosing their experiences.

STUDY 2

In Study 2 we sought to replicate the results of Study 1, as well as to extend the findings by introducing an experimental manipulation of teller goals. Teller goals have elsewhere been identified as key in the construction of personal meaning. In particular, goals have been identified in the narrative identity literature (see also Tversky & Marsh, 2000) as being about the self—that is, communicating oneself or trying to better understand oneself, or about entertaining others. For example, our past retrospective research has found that goals focused on the self predict a greater likelihood of sharing personal connections than goals focused on entertainment (McLean, 2005; Pasupathi, 2007). In

this study, we examined three goal conditions: to find meaning of the memory, to explain oneself, and to entertain. For modeling purposes, we contrasted meaning-seeking and self-explanation goals together with entertainment, which served as a control.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in the same manner as in Study 1, with the same requirements on length of relationship, which resulted in a sample of 68 heterosexual couples. One couple was not included because they had been dating more than 3 months. The mean relationship length was 2.31 months ($SD = 3.09$ weeks; range = 1 week to 3 months). Participants were randomly assigned to be the “teller” or the “listener,” which resulted in a fairly even gender balance of 36 male tellers and 31 female tellers (M age of all participants = 19.11; $SD = 1.92$; range = 17–29). Teller ethnicity was reported as 24% Caucasian, 34% Asian, and 42% Other (e.g., African, Hispanic/Latino, Other). Listener ethnicity was reported as 21% Caucasian, 33% Asian, and 46% Other. At follow-up, 85% of couples were still dating.

Procedures

The procedure and materials were identical to Study 1, with three exceptions. First, tellers were assigned to tell the memory they thought of and wrote down in private for one of three motivations: to entertain the listener, to explain something about the self, or to better understand the memory (meaning-seeking). The second change was that the follow-up interview was done via an Internet survey. The third change was that the conversations were both audio- and video-recorded, but only the audio recordings were used for coding. Ratings of conversation typicality were similar to Study 1 (M teller = 3.21; M listener = 3.56).

Measures

All measures were identical to Study 1, except that the same questions that were used in the follow-up interview were transcribed into a written Internet survey. Reliability for coded items was as follows: self-event connections change/stability ($\kappa = .74$); source teller/listener ($\kappa = .94$); valence ($\kappa = .81$); where connection first emerged ($\kappa = 1.00$); connection presence in conversation ($\kappa = .96$); connection presence in teller postconversation survey ($\kappa = .79$); connection presence in teller postconversation survey ($\kappa = .75$); connection presence at follow-up ($\kappa = .76$).

As a manipulation check, we examined the listener's ratings of how important he or she thought the story was to the teller, which was rated on a 5-point scale and which we have used in prior research to assess the self-reported meaning of a memory (e.g., Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009). We did not use the teller's ratings of importance as tellers were initially asked to think of an important memory; then the manipulation was introduced, and listener's ratings focus on how the story was told.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

In terms of whether our goal manipulation worked, listeners in the "self" conditions (telling to explain the self or to gain understanding) reported that they thought the memory was more important to the teller than in the entertainment condition, $F(1, 66) = 5.62, p < .05$. Thus, at least from the listener's perspective, the manipulation worked. However, examination of the overall number of self-event connections participants generated as a function of the goal conditions revealed no significant effects of goal condition on the number of connections generated ($ps > .20$).

For all analyses, we included the same variables at Level 1 as we did in Study 1, but we included our goal condition at Level 2; however, we only examined the impact of Level 2 when variance was left to be explained after accounting for Level 1.

On average, participants generated 7.5 connections ($SD = 3.3$), 68% from the speaker and 32% from the listener.

Predicting Change Connections

Descriptively, of all the connections reported, 64% were about self-stability, and 36% were about self-change. As shown in Table 1, change connections were generally unlikely, were less likely if the connections came from listeners, but were more likely if the connections were also positive. Modeling at Level 1 revealed no significant variance components remaining, $\chi^2(46) < 32, p > .38$, and no Level 2 models were conducted.

Predicting Positivity of Connections

The average score for valence was 2.3 ($SD = .82$), indicating a skew toward positivity. Indeed, 24% of connections were coded as

negative, 24% as mixed in valence, and 52% as positive. As shown in Table 4, connections were more positive than negative, change connections were more likely to be positive, and the listener-as-source had no impact on the valence of connections. Modeling at Level 1 revealed no significant variance components remaining, $\chi^2(36) < 50.0$, $p > .05$, and no Level 2 models were conducted.

Predicting Which Connections Become Shared

Overall, 84% of connections were unshared, postconversation, whereas 16% were shared. As shown in the lower portion of Table 2, shared connections were relatively unlikely, and listener-generated connections were even less likely to become shared. However, more positive connections and change connections were more likely to become shared. Modeling at Level 1 revealed no significant variance components remaining, $\chi^2(33) > 11.0$, $ps > .50$, and no Level 2 models were conducted.

Predicting Connection Teller Retention at Follow-Up

Descriptively, 27% of connections that emerged at one of the earlier time points in the study (preconversation, conversation, or postconversation) were retained in some fashion at follow-up (51% of these were retained in somewhat altered form, and 49% in identical form).

As shown in the lower portion of Table 3 below, overall, retention of connections was unlikely. This was especially true for listener-generated connections, but, as in Study 1, retention was again substantially enhanced if connections became shared after the conversation. Modeling at Level 1 revealed no significant variance

Table 4
Predicting Meaning Positivity in Study 2

	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Value
Intercept	2.20	.08	28.5***
Change	.30	.09	3.2**
Source (listener)	-.07	.09	-.70

df = 64.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

components remaining, $\chi^2(10) > 6.0$, $ps > .25$, and no Level 2 models were conducted.

In sum, though we found little relevance of our goal manipulation, we were able to show substantial replications with Study 1. In both studies, stability and positive connections were most frequent, and listeners were particularly likely to produce stability connections. Further, shared connections were unlikely across both studies, particularly for connections that came from the listener, but in both studies shared connections were more likely to be retained.

DISCUSSION

In this set of studies, we set out to better understand the processes of narrative identity development via a conversational storytelling context. We found important similarities across studies, and the findings suggested that self-event connections that highlight positivity and stability are critical parts of narrative identity development in social contexts. Further, in understanding the longer term relevance of conversations for developing and maintaining self-event connections, connections that both conversational partners share are particularly likely to be retained across time. We focus our discussion on replications across studies, limitations, and directions for future research.

Stability, Positivity, and Shared Connections

Across the board, stability connections were more prevalent in conversations between new romantic partners, compared to connections about change. This finding not only confirms self-verification theory (e.g., Swann, 1997) but also provides some important insight for narrative theorists. Research on narrative identity has focused more on the importance of narratives about change and growth, particularly in relevance to well-being (e.g., Pals, 2006), identity status development (McLean & Pratt, 2006), and age (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006), all of which suggest a kind of maturity and positive functioning that is associated with the narration of change. Thus, from a narrative identity perspective, narrating stories of change is important for a full and coherent account of how one has come to be, but these data suggest that this kind of accounting may be challenged, or challenging, in social situations.

Indeed, across both studies, tellers provided more stability connections than change, and when listeners provided connections for their partners they were also more likely to be about stability as opposed to change connections. An important goal for future research will be to examine whether there are social contexts in which change is appropriate and useful to discuss.¹ For example, examining different relationship contexts—such as long-term romantic partners, parents and children, or therapist and client—to examine whether change connections are more or less prominent will be important for future research. It is also possible that in the more solitary reminiscence contexts of written and interview studies, change connections might be more appropriate and accepted. That is, exploration of malleable, and perhaps uncertain, aspects of self is important but may be risky to do with others, especially in newly dating pairs or experimental settings (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998). Thus, in social contexts, in particular, stability connections may serve the important purpose of creating that continuity for others.

Nevertheless, change connections were sometimes communicated, and when they were, they were more likely to be positive. This may serve the dual purpose of preserving a positive sense of self and providing less of a burden on the listener when narrating the more challenging stories of change. For example, one couple talked about the teller's experience of his mother always finding a few spare moments to spend time with him when he was a child even though she had to work several jobs to support the family. The teller said,

I guess it kinda *shaped* me as a child, well, as an adult now too. *Because it shows me that if I want to show someone that I love them, I obviously have to spend time with them and no matter what, you still have to make time for the people you love.*

This story is one of change because the teller's perception is that the experience *causes* an insight for him, but it is a positive insight. Stories of positive change may also fit within the redemption script, which is widely accepted in North American culture (McAdams, 2006).

1. We did not examine the "origin" of the self-event connections in the present study because the presence of a listener and the self-event connections elicitation questions are confounded, which is the case in much prior research as well.

The question that speaks most clearly to the *processes of narrative identity development* and how we maintain continuity in the self is which connections were retained over time. Retention allows a self-event connection to exert effects in the longer term on the teller by becoming or remaining a part of one's life story—that is, not only by providing continuity in the moment of the telling but also by continuing to provide continuity by remaining part of the way the individual tells a particular story. The most robust predictor of connection retention across both studies was what we call shared connections. That is, when tellers and listeners were asked, after the conversation and solitarily, to report the meaning of the story; reporting the same connection predicts teller retention of that meaning over time. There are a variety of potential explanations for this finding. First, these connections may work the best at establishing and maintaining continuity, which is a critical task of identity development (e.g., Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). That is, retaining the same meanings that both the self and others understand may serve the purpose of creating continuity. Second, shared connections may signal the creation of a shared reality that facilitates relational closeness (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Third, these may be the connections that the couple talks about most frequently after the study is over and prior to our follow-up assessment (i.e., those that are rehearsed). Fourth, these may have been the connections that were most clearly communicated in the conversation and perhaps already important and solidified for the teller. That is, the teller may best communicate those connections that are more set in plaster and are thus likely to be retained anyway. Notably, many connections were not retained, suggesting that more work needs to be done to find which of these is the most plausible explanation for teller retention, or lack thereof. Interestingly, Study 2 had lower teller retention rates than Study 1, which suggests that when there is an intervention in the process of meaning making and conversation, it may create some instability in the meanings that participants articulate. Indeed, fewer meanings were generated in Study 1 (4.8) compared to Study 2 (7.5), suggesting that it is possible that some of those meanings in Study 2 may have been prompted by the instructions.

In terms of the relevance of these retention findings to narrative identity, we view these findings as evidence for one potential mechanism by which narrative identity is developed or maintained

(McLean et al., 2007). For example, when one tells a story about the self that is not yet integrated into one's fuller story, a conversational partner can provide validation for that story, in this case confirming the meaning postconversation, which helps to incorporate that story into one's sense of self. The latter would be an example of conversations helping to *develop* narrative identity. Another possibility is that the meaning of the story has already been integrated into one's sense of self, but the social sharing *maintains* that integration, such as the Royal Conservatory example. That is, there are also *processes of stability*, which may be partly maintained by receiving confirmation from close others. Other theorists have argued for similar processes. For example, from a shared reality perspective, when one receives social support for one's experiences, in this case stories, this provides a kind of validation for one's stories, or one's self (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Weeks & Pasupathi, in press).

Further, from a self-verification standpoint, reflected appraisals may only exert their influences once they become shared (see McNulty & Swann, 1994). In sum, these data provide some glimpses into at least one process that may be at work in creating and maintaining narrative identity in vivo.

We note that most connections were not shared, which may be due to the fact that our measure of shared connections required recall. It is possible that providing tellers and listeners with connections raised in the conversation to determine memory of those connections (a recognition paradigm) may result in more shared connections. However, the relatively low rate of shared connections also suggests that exploring unshared meanings and the relative flexibility of narrative identity is important in future research.

Though the focus in the present studies was not to understand unshared connections, and the number of unshared connections was large and variable, we offer some examples of these kinds of connections to guide future research. Elsewhere we have speculated that unshared but important experiences may be vulnerable points in people's narrative identity (Pasupathi et al., 2009), which may be similar to the phenomenon of unshared self-event connections. For example, these social interactions may serve to preserve a positive sense of self, and connections that do not serve that purpose do not become shared. In one example, a teller reported a meaning of an event in which she lied to her parents. In the preconversation assessment, she stated, "As a person it shows that I am not very open

with my mom or my dad and I deliberately lie to my parents,” and she made a similar statement in the conversation. Neither the teller nor the listener reported this in the postconversation assessment, perhaps because it reflects negatively on the teller, which is also reflected in our findings that positive connections were more common than negative connections. Similarly, in another conversation, the teller made a connection about being a “player,” which was not reported by either the listener or teller in the postconversation, perhaps because this could be conceived of as a negative aspect of the teller, as well as one that was problematic for the partner in this situation—a new romantic partner.

Another possibility for why shared connections were not retained is that listeners simply “do not get” their partners. In one conversation, the teller reported that he attempted suicide after a breakup. His meaning, reported in the preconversation survey, the conversation, and his own follow-up, was that he developed more control over his temper. The listener reported meanings concerning how special first love is, a meaning that was also discussed in the conversation. Thus, the listener appears to hang on to the meaning about first love but lose sight of the growth in personal control that the teller reports. In another case, the teller reported a memory about being set up on a date. Her meanings concerned how she has changed the way she interacts with people, as well as her own personal religious growth. Her listener did not report any of those meanings postconversation and instead reported a connection about her stubbornness. These examples suggest that listeners may not “hear” some meanings, either because they do not reflect positively on the teller or the relationship or because other meanings in some way better appeal to the listener. It is also possible that the emphasis given to certain meanings predicts sharing. That is, a higher frequency of certain meanings, or more emphasis in the narrative style, might predict shared meanings, aspects of conversations that we did not code but which may guide future research.

LIMITATIONS

Our first limitation was that our goal manipulation did not influence the frequency or nature of the connections produced by tellers in Study 2. Our previous research has shown that *retrospectively* when

people recall telling memories for the purposes of self-explanation or in the pursuit of greater understanding, those stories have more connections to the self in them than stories that were told for entertainment (McLean, 2005; McLean & Thorne, 2006; Pasupathi, 2007). Research that examines laboratory-based recall as affected by manipulated motives has shown that entertainment motives produce different recall than accuracy motives (Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky, 2004). In the current study, though we did see that listeners interpreted the stories differently in different conditions, with those stories told in the self conditions viewed as more important compared to those told in the entertainment condition, these conditions did not appear to change the number of connections that were produced or retained. There are several possible explanations for this. These stories may have already been solidified, and the motive manipulation did not change the structure of the story; that is, they were set in a kind of plaster. Importantly, the participants picked an event before the motive manipulation was induced in order to avoid confounding of event choice with goal condition. Unfortunately, this may have restricted the degree to which participants were able to shift their story to fit the condition. These interpretations suggest that there might be experimental constraints in this kind of work, such that stories cannot be created for external reasons at will but have characteristics and connections associated with them that are not easily shifted.

We also note the general rarity of connection retention for the teller. One of the questions in narrative research has been the stability of narrative identity, often discussed in comparison to other aspects of personality (e.g., McAdams et al., 2004), or over time (McAdams et al., 2006; Thorne et al., 1998). Interestingly, from a personality perspective, stability is important because personality is thought to be relatively stable (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1994). However, from a developmental perspective, identity is thought to be more malleable, particularly at this age when it is just beginning to be formed. That is, the retention of connections may be fleeting in this population because emerging adults are in the midst of developing a personal identity. While retained meanings are relevant to identity construction because they are by definition carried forward over time, and thus reflect continuities in the way people construct stories about their lives, retention is not the only aspect of conversational narration that is important for narrative identity.

We suggest that conversations pose at least two opportunities to develop narrative identity (McLean et al., 2007): (a) the creation or maintenance of connections—that is, retention—and (b) practice at meaning-making processes. In other words, we might view storytelling contexts in a broader way in that they provide a microcosm of being the person one wants to be, or is (McLean et al., 2007); that is, in telling one's stories one is enacting one's identity.

Another important limitation that we hope future research can address has to do with the participants in our studies. Newly dating romantic partner conversations were an ideal context in which to study the sharing of personal stories as the start of a line of research because we can see how listeners and tellers manage telling stories that the listener has not heard. However, we suggest that conversations between long-term romantic partners, friends, strangers, and parents and children will be quite different and equally important to understand. Indeed, given the general rarity of change connections, it will be interesting to see whether these are more common in the context of different kinds of relationships, with different kinds of investments.

Finally, we note that the aspects of self-event connections that we examined in the present studies are also potentially linked to aspects of persons, such as gender, ethnicity, and personality, but the inclusion of these characteristics was beyond the scope of this article. Although we did examine some of these characteristics in our original models and found few significant effects of “person-level” characteristics, this may have been an issue of statistical power, so this will be important for future research to examine with bigger sample sizes.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we see these studies as a first step toward understanding the *in vivo* processes of constructing a narrative identity. We do not want to suggest that these studies come out of nowhere but are instead situated in the context of what has come before—conversations in childhood in which children learn how to narrate the past in co-constructions (Tessler & Nelson, 1994), studies focused on more stable aspects of narrative identity as opposed to the process of development (McAdams et al., 2004), as well as research that is not narrative focused but instead centers on the creation of a stable sense

of self (e.g., Swann, 1997). Nevertheless, these studies offer some new insights for the study of narrative identity, namely, the importance of narrating stability and positivity, as well as working to create shared connections as a critical piece of the long-term retention of self-event connections.

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