

# Late Adolescents' Self-Defining Memories About Relationships

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This study examined late adolescents' self-defining memories about relationships. Participants were 88 European Americans (mean age = 19 years) who reported 3 self-defining memories of their choosing and were selected for the study because they reported a memory about parents and/or peers. Memory narratives were coded for themes of separation, closeness, and conflict and for 2 kinds of meaning: learning lessons and gaining insight. Parent memories emphasized separation more so than peer memories, which emphasized closeness. Within parent memories, however, separation and closeness were equally prevalent. Parent separation was exemplified by experiences of parental divorce, parent closeness by comforting a grieving parent, and peer closeness by episodes of first-time romance. Conflict was more prevalent in parent than peer memories and was associated with meaning-making. Findings are discussed in terms of the usefulness of self-defining memories for illuminating contexts of relationship development in late adolescence and for understanding the emergence of identity and the life story.

In recent years, cognitive psychologists have identified adolescence as the developmental era in which personal memories are the most dense (Rubin, Rahhal, & Poon, 1998). This age period also marks the transition to adult attachments and the emergence of identity through the life story (Ainsworth, 1989; McAdams, 1993). Exploring the content of this high density of memorable events may deepen our understanding of how adolescents achieve autonomy and connectedness within relationships that are important for personal identity (Collins, 1995; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). The present study appears to be one of the first efforts to explore the kinds of concerns that emerge in late adolescents' self-defining memories about parents and peers. Drawing from literature on adolescent development, we examined the prevalence of separation, closeness, and conflict in self-defining relationship memories. Then, drawing from literature on the development of the life story, we explored the larger meanings that late adolescents made of these past events.

## Themes of Separation and Closeness

Adolescence has been viewed as a period in which parent–child relationships are transformed, not only by strivings toward sepa-

ration from parents but also by strivings toward greater mutuality and connectedness (Collins, 1997; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). For example, Grotevant and Cooper (1985) found that asserting one's individuality was important for identity exploration but only when feelings of mutuality and connectedness with others were also expressed. The feelings of separation that occur between adolescents and their parents are part of the process of establishing autonomy but not at the expense of the parent–child bond (Collins, 1995). Emotional closeness is not only important for relational development but can also provide a safe haven for identity exploration.

Transformations in parent–child relationships appear to occur with changes in peer relationships. Peer relationships tend to increase in importance and intimacy during adolescence (Cooper & Cooper, 1992; Sullivan, 1953), and it is often within peer relationships that adolescents first feel reciprocal equality (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The experience of reciprocity and mutuality in peer relationships may encourage adolescents to renegotiate relationships with parents toward more egalitarian ways of relating (Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

Prior research on adolescent development has primarily examined the complementary roles of parents and peers through the use of observational or survey methods. The present study explored themes of separation and closeness that emerged in adolescents' self-defining memories of relationships with parents and peers to see what could be learned from the vantage point of self-defining experiences.

## Conflict in Adolescent Relationships

All memorable events can be expected to involve some degree of conflict or emotional upheaval, because momentous events disrupt routines (Rimé, Mesquita, Phillipot, & Boca, 1991). However, we expected that conflict would be more prevalent in parent memories than in peer memories because of the longer history of dependence in parent–child relationships and because of adolescents' heightened efforts toward autonomy and mutuality in such relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Laursen, 1995). Also,

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conflict may be less likely to threaten the basic bond in long-standing family relationships, compared with conflict in newer peer relationships (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985). Whereas prior studies of relationship conflict in adolescence have focused on specific kinds of conflict that occur with parents and with peers, as well as on conflict negotiation strategies (see Laursen, 1993; Smetana, 1989), the present study compared the basic prevalence of conflict in memories about parents and peers.

In addition to expecting conflict to be more prevalent in parent memories than in peer memories, we also expected conflict to be more prevalent for memories of parental events that occurred in early adolescence than for those that occurred in late adolescence. A recent meta-analysis found that the rate of conflict with parents lessened across adolescence (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998), possibly because of greater success at balancing autonomy and connectedness with parents. We therefore examined the relative prevalence of conflict in memories about parents and memories about peers as well as changes in conflict with the age of the remembered event.

### The Emergence of Meaning-Making in Adolescence

Whereas separation, closeness, and conflict refer to concerns that prevail between self and others in one's memory of a salient past event, *meaning* refers to what one gleans from, learns, or understands from the event. Meaning-making requires stepping back from an event to reflect on its implications for future behavior, goals, values, and self-understanding (Pillemer, 1992).

The process of inferring larger meanings from past events requires a capacity for abstract thinking that emerges in adolescence (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Piaget, 1965). Erikson, in particular, targeted the period of late adolescence as the beginning of efforts to unify past, present, and future selves in order to construct a coherent life story (see also McAdams, 1988). To date, however, only a few studies have systematically examined the kinds of meanings that adolescents make of autobiographical memories, which are a basic unit of the life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1988).

Past research on the meanings that adolescents make of autobiographical memories has primarily conceptualized meaning-making as learning lessons (McCabe, Capron, & Peterson, 1991; Pratt, Norris, Arnold, & Filyer, 1999). McCabe et al. (1991) studied lesson learning by asking college students to recall three of their earliest childhood and earliest adolescent memories in an interview setting. Lesson learning was found to be more prevalent in early adolescent memories than in early childhood memories. Lessons included learning that spray painting one's name does not lead to positive outcomes, that people will get hurt when racing cars, and that it is important to learn whom to trust. Using questionnaires and interviews, Pratt et al. (1999) compared meaning-making in cross-sectional samples of young, middle-aged, and older adults. Building on McCabe et al.'s (1991) findings, Pratt and colleagues found that self-reported lessons learned increased with age. Moreover, the quality of lessons learned in middle and late adulthood seemed to be more deeply reflective and more indicative of the kinds of insights found in well-formed life stories (McAdams, 1988).

Although prior research on meaning in memories has focused on lesson learning, there appeared to be a qualitative difference in the depth of reflection displayed by younger and older participants. We thus distinguished two kinds of meaning-making, lesson learning and gaining insight, which were differentiated by depth of reflection. *Lesson learning* refers to learning a specific lesson from an event that could direct future behavior in similar situations. *Gaining insight* refers to gleaning meaning from an event that applies to greater areas of life than a specific behavior; with insight, there is often some kind of transformation in one's understanding of oneself or one's relationships with others in general. Take, for example, an event in which a son throws eggs at his mother. If the son comments that he learned never to throw eggs at his mother again, he claims to have learned a lesson. On the other hand, if the son comments that he realized that he has an anger management problem, his realization counts as gaining insight because it extends beyond eggs and beyond his mother. Theoretical claims that the life story begins in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1988) suggest the possibility that adolescents' lessons can extend to such deeper insights. However, because concern with constructing a coherent life story appears to begin in earnest only around age 30 (McAdams, 1993), we expected that lesson learning would be more prevalent than gaining insight in our sample of late adolescents.

In addition to examining the prevalence of meaning-making in self-defining memory narratives, we also investigated the relationship between meaning-making and interpersonal conflict. Because conflict tends to instigate reflective attempts to work through the meaning of an event (Azmitia, 2002; Piaget, 1965), we expected narratives of events that involved conflict to show more efforts toward meaning-making, in the form of either lessons learned or insights gained, than would narratives without conflict. Prior research has found that the process of negotiating conflict can encourage new perspectives and prompt a healthy reworking of the parent-adolescent relationship (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Conflict that involves constructive engagement (e.g., challenging opinions in open dialogue) can allow the adolescent to test boundaries and establish some autonomy while also fostering closeness with parents as new levels of relating are established (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). In such ways, interpersonal conflict can engender healthy new perspectives about oneself and one's relationships.

### Hypotheses

Self-defining memory narratives were coded for the presence of separation, closeness, and interpersonal conflict and for the kind of meaning, if any, that the reporter made of the event (lesson learning or gaining insight). Although prior research suggests that separation and closeness are both common in parent relationships (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1985), when comparing parent memories with peer memories, we expected that parent memories would show more separation than would peer memories. However, when looking only at parent memories, we expected to find similar proportions of separation and closeness. Because developing intimacy with peers has been found to be a salient concern for adolescents, we expected that peer memories would emphasize closeness more than would parent memories. With regard to conflict, we expected more conflict in parent memories than in peer

memories and more conflict in parental memories occurring in early than in late adolescence.

In addition to examining themes in adolescents' self-defining memories, we also explored the meanings made of the memories. Although our hypotheses with regard to meaning were more tentative, we expected to find more references to lessons learned than to insights gained. We also expected both kinds of meaning to emerge more often in narratives that contained interpersonal conflict.

## Method

### Participants

The initial sample consisted of 203 college students (64% female) at a public university. Participants were enrolled in psychology courses in which research participation fulfilled a course requirement. Ages ranged from 17 to 54 years ( $M = 20$  years), with 95% of the participants between the ages of 18 and 23 years. The modal group of 18- to 23-year-olds was selected for the present study ( $M = 19$  years). Seventy-two percent of the modal participants described themselves as European American, 13% as Asian, 10% as Latino, 1% as Native American, 1% as African American, and 3% as other. European Americans were selected for the present study because cultural and ethnic differences have been found in narrative style (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997; Minami & McCabe, 1991), because European American samples produced most of the results from which the present study drew, and because sample sizes were small for other ethnic groups.

Two thirds ( $n = 92$ ) of the European American, late-adolescent participants reported at least one self-defining memory that concerned an event in which their relationship with another person was the central theme (Thorne & McLean, 2002). All but 4 of these 92 participants focused on relationships with parents or peers. The final sample consisted of the 88 European American 18–23-year-olds (31 males and 57 females) who spontaneously described at least one relationship memory about parents or peers.<sup>1</sup>

### Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire

Participants responded to a four-page questionnaire. The first page asked for demographic information (gender, age, and ethnicity) and described features of a self-defining memory. A self-defining memory was described as a memory that was vivid, highly memorable, personally important, and at least 1 year old, the kind of memory that "conveys powerfully how you have come to be the person you currently are" (see Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992, p. 242). Each of the succeeding three pages solicited a description of a self-defining memory. The first section of each page asked participants to report their age at the time of the event and to describe the self-defining event, including where they were, whom they were with, what happened, and the reaction of themselves and others who may have been involved in the event. The second section of each page elicited a description of an episode in which the participant had told the memory to someone else. Although the latter section was not emphasized in this study, the section was included when coding the meaning of the memory because it pressed for a longer time perspective.

### Coding Categories

All narrative coding categories were nominal; that is, they were identified as either present or absent in the narrative.<sup>2</sup>

**Relationship memory.** Relationship memories were identified on the basis of the event narrative and were defined as events in which the reporter's relationship with someone else was the central theme. Two coders reliably differentiated relationship events from other kinds of event

narratives (e.g., life-threatening events, achievement events, and leisure events; overall  $\kappa = .84$ ). The remaining categories were coded only for relationship memories.

**Conflict.** Conflict was defined as present if there was at least one explicit reference to a fight, disagreement, or disappointment in which at least two characters (not necessarily including the reporter) had conflicting needs or goals. Conflict was coded independently of separation and closeness; that is, an event could show conflict and separation, conflict and closeness, or could lack any or all of these features. An example of a conflict narrative is shown in Table 1.

**Separation and closeness.** Separation and closeness were defined as mutually exclusive; that is, coders characterized the predominant theme as either separation, closeness, or neither. *Separation* was defined as emotional or physical distancing from an emotionally significant other regardless of who initiated the separation. The separation could be construed by the narrator as either positive or negative. For example, leaving home could be framed as sad, because the reporter would miss friends or family, or as exciting, because the reporter could leave bad relationships behind. *Closeness* was defined as wanting warm, close personal communication within the context of either a positive or negative relationship event. For example, if the reporter desired and struggled to achieve close communication with a parent but failed, the predominant theme would still be closeness. It should be noted that we have defined closeness similarly to McAdams's (1980, 1982) definition of intimacy motivation. Our definition, however, allows for failure at closeness. Examples of narratives coded as separation and closeness are shown in Table 1.

**Meaning.** Meaning was identified on the basis of the entire memory narrative. Although it is possible that meanings that emerged in the event narrative might have different developmental implications than meanings that emerged in the telling narrative, an abundance of personal memory research has produced little evidence that people can discriminate between their memory of the original event and their memory of a subsequent telling of the event, and has shown that what is remembered at a particular time is a function of current goals (e.g., Pasupathi, 2001; Ross & Wilson, 2000). Our interest in the current meaning of the memory thus led us to use the entire memory narrative.

Two kinds of meaning were identified: lesson learning and gaining insight. *Lesson learning* was defined as a reference to having learned a specific lesson from the memory that had implications for subsequent behavior in similar situations (e.g., "I shouldn't talk back to my mother"). *Gaining insight* was coded if the reporter inferred a meaning from the event that applied to larger areas of his or her life (e.g., "I realized that I need to become more self-sufficient"). Narratives coded as gaining insight typically referred to transformations of self or relationships. Insight was defined as superordinate to lesson learning; that is, if both lesson learning and gaining insight were present, the narrative was coded as gaining insight. The higher order coding rule was invoked in the event that narratives included both lessons and insights; however, narratives with both kinds of meaning were not found in the present data. Examples of narratives that referred to lessons or to insights are shown in Table 2.

<sup>1</sup> Four participants' narratives were excluded from the final sample because their relationship narratives were not about parents or peers (e.g., they concerned teachers, priests, or strangers). Nine narratives were included that were about either siblings or grandparents. The grandparent narratives were coded as parent narratives because the grandparent appeared to be playing a parental role. The sibling narratives were included because the issues dealt with in the narratives appeared to be equally relevant to peer and sibling relationships (e.g., childhood arguments, drug use, and fun times).

<sup>2</sup> Manuals for coding event categories and relationship events are available from the authors.

Table 1  
*Definitions and Examples of Conflict, Separation, and Closeness*

Category	Definition	Narrative example
Conflict	Fights, disagreements, or disappointments in which characters have conflicting needs or goals.	“I was kinda the leader of my group of friends at school . . . One of them, S., had problems. She loved to fight and whine and complain. It was usually my job to sedate her. Lucky me. One day I just couldn’t take it, I wanted her to see how destructive she was being. I talked to her and asked her to stop hurting others. It escalated into a big fight and ended when she turned on the tear ducts. She sulked and was comforted by others. I stalked off, confused and mad. Found the confining bathroom and let my own tears fall.”
Separation	Emphasis on a feeling of emotional or physical distance from others. Separation might be an ongoing concern, for example, the reporter struggles with the issue of separation.	“During dinner, the impending separation from my father was making me on the verge of tears the whole time. My father would be leaving me there and I wouldn’t see him again for three months . . . I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of being alone and unsure of what was going to happen.”
Closeness	Feeling close to another person or wanting to feel close, warm, or communicative regardless of eventual outcome.	“Being alone with my dad and spending important time together has thoroughly influenced my relationship with him. Struggling to finish the hike and cooperating once we set up camp added to the bond we share.”

All of the narratives were initially coded by the first author, who discussed difficult narratives with the second author in order to reach a consensus. An independent reliability coder, who was blind to the hypotheses of the study, coded 80% of the narratives. Acceptable levels of reliability were achieved for theme overall ( $\kappa = .78$ ) and for meaning overall ( $\kappa = .75$ ). Levels of individual kappas were also acceptable: separation,  $\kappa = .78$ ; closeness,  $\kappa = .82$ ; conflict,  $\kappa = .81$ ; gaining insight,  $\kappa = .79$ ; and lesson learning,  $\kappa = .79$ .

Results

*Representative Contexts for Separation, Closeness, and Conflict*

To ground the statistical findings in the kinds of events that exemplified the sample of self-defining memories, we first grouped the memories by the kind of relationship events that most

often characterized each relational theme. Table 3 lists the kinds of events that were most frequent for each theme. Separation from parents most often emerged in the context of parents divorcing or separating (42%). Separation from peers emerged most often in narratives about breakups with close friends or lovers that were initiated by the reporter or by the partner (54%). Closeness with parents most often emerged when the parent was ill or in need of help and was comforted by the child, for example, a father crying or a mother grieving or sick (54%). Finally, closeness with peers most often emerged in the context of falling in love (33%). Narratives of these kinds of events are used to illustrate subsequent findings.

Table 3 also lists the mean age of the reporter for each kind of event and the percentage of memories with reported conflict for each kind of event. Conflict was present in all separation memo-

Table 2  
*Definitions and Examples of Lesson Learning and Gaining Insight*

Category	Definition	Narrative example
Lesson learning	Learning a positive or negative lesson that relates specifically to the kind of event experienced. Lessons usually pertain to changing one’s behavior in similar situations.	“After joyriding that night, and almost getting in a fight with a gang of girls, I think we really learned a good lesson, that being daring like that can be really stupid.”
Gaining insight	Gleaning insight from an event that applies to greater areas of one’s life. Often involves transformation in how one views oneself, one’s life, or a relationship beyond the specific event experienced.	“After the argument with my dad I realized a lot about my nature, how exactly like my father I really am, and how much my father tries not to be like his father, who was really dictatorial. I realized a lot about my character, my role in the family, who I do and don’t want to be when I grow up.”



Table 3

Primary Contexts for the Emergence of Themes of Separation and Closeness, Percentage of Memories Showing Conflict, and Age at the Time of Memory

Theme	Parent memories				Peer memories			
	Setting and prevalence (%)	Age (in years)		% conflict	Setting and prevalence (%)	Age (in years)		% conflict
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Separation	Parental divorce (42)	8.80	2.77	100	Break-up (54)	16.20	2.97	100
	Leaving home (16)	18.33	0.58	100	Leaving for college (31)	17.00	1.41	100
	Trial independence (16)	12.43	5.38	100				
Closeness	Helping a parent (54)	12.83	4.67	100	Falling in love (33)	15.52	2.93	33
	Argument (15)	16.00	0.00	100	Intimate conversation (16)	15.58	4.10	67
	Vacationing (15)	12.00	6.24	33	Special times with friends (14)	15.36	3.53	38
					Making a new friend (12)	14.71	4.11	50

Note.  $n = 19$  parent separation memories, 13 peer separation memories, 13 parent closeness memories, and 57 peer closeness memories. Prevalence percentages refer to the percentage of memories within each of these four categories. Conflict percentages refer to the percentage of memories per setting that showed conflict.

ries, for both parents and peers. Conflict was also present in most of the parent closeness memories but was not predominant in the peer closeness memories, which showed more variability in conflict. Parent memories also covered a broader age range than peer memories, which were clustered in middle adolescence. We now turn to statistical analyses of the findings.

### Overview of Analyses

The sample consisted of 53 memories about parents ( $n = 15$  males and 30 females) and 94 memories about peers ( $n = 22$  males and 44 females). Because the parent and peer memory samples shared some of the same participants, and because we were interested in comparing across memories as well as examining only parent and peer memories, we used two different data-analytic strategies. Split-sample analyses were used to compare features of parent memories with features of peer memories. These analyses split the sample into participants who reported both parent and peer memories ( $n = 25$ , the “within” sample) and participants who reported only parent ( $n = 20$ ) or only peer ( $n = 43$ ) memories, the “between” sample. Although this strategy reduced the sample size, the subsamples could be treated as attempts at replication and afforded statistical comparisons across parent and peer memories for participants with independent data and participants with dependent data. Full-sample analyses examined features of parent memories for all participants with such memories ( $n = 45$ ) and then examined features of peer memories for all participants with such memories ( $n = 68$ ). The latter analyses used larger sample sizes and also allowed us to more closely examine patterns in only parent and only peer memories. An alpha level of .05 (two-tailed) was used for all statistical tests.<sup>3</sup>

To control for individual differences in the frequency of memories ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), both strategies used percentages within each participant’s parent memories and within each participant’s peer memories. For example, someone who reported two peer memories, each coded as separation, showed 100% peer separation (2 separation/2 peer memories). Someone who reported two parent memories, one coded as separation and the other coded

as closeness, showed 50% parent separation and 50% parent closeness.

### Preliminary Analyses for Narrative Length, Memory Frequency, Age of Memory, and Gender

Using split-sample analyses, we first compared parent and peer memories with regard to frequency, narrative length, and age of memory. Parent and peer memories did not differ significantly with regard to frequency in either the between sample (parent memories,  $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ; peer memories,  $M = 1.44$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ),  $t(61) = -0.86$ , *ns*, or the within sample (parent memories,  $M = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ; peer memories,  $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ),  $t(24) = -1.73$ , *ns*. There was also no difference for parent and peer memories on narrative length in either the between sample (parent memories,  $M = 137.10$  words,  $SD = 67.18$ ; peer memories,  $M = 130.64$  words,  $SD = 55.52$ ),  $t(61) = 0.40$ , *ns*, or the within sample (parent memories,  $M = 137.71$  words,  $SD = 66.76$ ; peer memories,  $M = 154.77$  words,  $SD = 88.19$ ),  $t(24) = -1.27$ , *ns*.<sup>4</sup> For age of memory, however, parent memories ( $M = 11.85$  years,  $SD = 4.73$ ) concerned events that occurred significantly earlier than the events in peer memories ( $M = 14.57$  years,  $SD = 3.37$ ) in the between sample,  $t(61) = -2.61$ ,  $p < .01$ , and in the within sample (parent memories,  $M = 12.00$  years,  $SD = 5.46$ ; peer memories,  $M = 15.14$  years,  $SD = 3.96$ ),  $t(24) = -2.48$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Because prior research has found gender differences in intimacy motivation (McAdams, Lester, Brand, McNamara, & Lensky,

<sup>3</sup> Variables were converted with the use of arcsine transformation. However, no differences were found between analyses that used transformed variables and analyses that used untransformed variables; thus, untransformed variables are reported.

<sup>4</sup> Comparisons of the narrative length of the second section of the questionnaire, which was included along with the original memory narrative only for coding meaning, also showed no significant differences between parent and peer memories and no significant gender differences.

1988), a concept similar to our definition of closeness, and in relationship memory narrative length (Thorne, 1995), tests for gender differences were conducted first. Independent *t* tests comparing gender differences across all memories found that females ( $M = .83$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) tended to report a higher percentage of closeness memories than did males ( $M = .58$ ,  $SD = .77$ ),  $t(145) = -1.88$ ,  $p = .06$ . However, narrative length did not show significant gender differences. We also explored the possibility of gender differences with regard to participant age, age at the time the memory occurred, frequencies of parent and peer memories, and relative prevalence of separation, conflict, lesson learning, and gaining insight. Independent *t* tests across all memories showed no significant gender differences for these variables. Overall, gender differences were not conspicuous in the sample.

### Separation and Closeness

The first hypothesis was that separation would be more prominent in memories about parents and that closeness would be more prominent in memories about peers. The first hypothesis was examined by comparing the proportion of separation and closeness themes in parent and peer memories, using split samples. As can be seen in Table 4, the hypothesis was supported for the between sample: Parent memories were more likely to show themes of separation than were peer memories, independent  $t(61) = 3.22$ ,  $p < .01$ , and peer memories were more likely to show themes of closeness than were parent memories, independent  $t(61) = -3.52$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similar findings obtained for the within sample: Parent memories tended to show more separation than peer memories, paired  $t(24) = 1.73$ ,  $p < .10$ , although conventional levels of significance were not reached, and closeness was more prevalent in peer memories than in parent memories, paired  $t(24) = -2.12$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Although parent memories showed high levels of separation and low levels of closeness when compared with peer memories, levels of separation and closeness did not differ significantly when only parent memories were analyzed. Paired *t* tests in the full sample of parent memories showed that separation themes ( $M = .40$ ,  $SD =$

.47) were not significantly more prominent than themes of closeness ( $M = .23$ ,  $SD = .45$ ),  $t(44) = -1.44$ , *ns*. Analyses within the full sample of peer memories, on the other hand, continued to confirm the prevalence of closeness ( $M = .61$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) over separation ( $M = .13$ ,  $SD = .32$ ), paired  $t(67) = 5.83$ ,  $p < .01$ .

To further explore the relative prevalence of separation and closeness in parent and peer memories, we examined differences in frequencies of each theme for the age of the event, using memories rather than persons as the unit of analysis. Memories were divided into four groups according to the reported age at which the event occurred: childhood (ages 2–9), early adolescence (ages 10–13), middle adolescence (ages 14–16), and late adolescence (ages 17–20). Age-of-event trends in frequencies of separation and closeness themes for parent memories are shown in Figure 1. Although these data could not be statistically tested for trends because of nonindependence of data, several notable patterns were apparent: Separation prevailed over closeness until middle adolescence, when closeness increased dramatically, and only in late adolescence did the frequencies of separation and closeness come close to alignment.

Age-of-event changes in frequencies of separation and closeness themes for peer memories are shown in Figure 2. In contrast to parent memories, peer memories showed an overall prevalence of closeness over separation from childhood to late adolescence.

The following examples illustrate the kinds of narratives that characterized parent separation, parent closeness, and peer closeness. The first narrative emphasizes separation from parents. The episode was reported by a 20-year-old whom we will call Shelley, and the event reportedly happened at age 9:

I remember sitting on a bench in a park between my parents. They were dividing up who kept what because they were getting divorced. They fought and hated each other and turned to me to ask—do you want mommy or daddy to get the, whatever it was. I felt like I was in hell. It was all my fault, two people who hated each other were on either side of me and they made me sit there and decide who got what. They didn't care about me, they just used me as an excuse not to deal with each other directly. They made me, a 9-year-old kid, do their

Table 4  
Comparison of Features in Parent Versus Peer Memories

Feature and sample	Parent memories (%)		Peer memories (%)		<i>t</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Separation						
Between sample	40	48	10	27	3.22	<.01
Within sample	40	48	20	38	1.73	<.10
Closeness						
Between sample	25	38	66	44	-3.52	<.01
Within sample	22	50	52	47	-2.12	<.05
Conflict						
Between sample	98	11	64	44	3.33	<.01
Within sample	96	20	66	45	2.88	<.01

*Note.* Table values are the average percentage of each feature within memories about parents and within memories about peers. For the between sample,  $n = 20$  (65% female) participants with parent memories only,  $n = 43$  (63% female) participants with peer memories only. For the within sample,  $n = 25$  (68% female) participants with both parent and peer memories.

<sup>a</sup> For between sample,  $df = 61$ ; for within sample,  $df = 24$ .

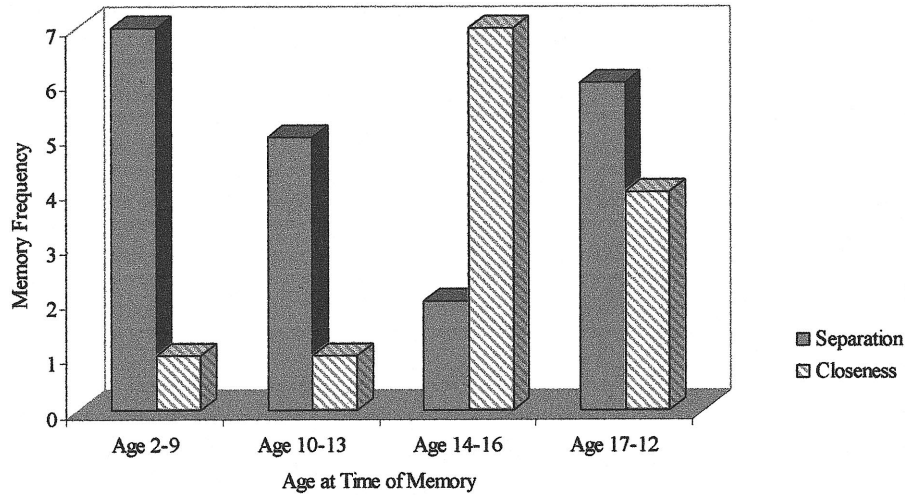


Figure 1. Frequencies of parent memories showing separation and closeness by reported age at time of memory.

dirty work. I remember watching all the other kids playing in the park and on the swings. All I wanted was not to have to choose over and over between my parents. Why couldn't they just deal with their own shit.

The second narrative, by 21-year-old Laura, emphasizes closeness with parents. The episode reportedly occurred at age 16:

I was fighting with my mother . . . Things were hard for us at the time because she had found out she had breast cancer while I was away at school, and had a mastectomy. I don't think I really realized the seriousness of the disease or the experience that she had had . . . This particular fight escalated fast . . . until she ripped open her shirt and screaming at me "Look what happened to me! Look what I am going through!" I saw the long red, ugly scar still stitched together, her one lone breast next to it and I was speechless. It totally changed the way I perceived her from then on, the way I treated her. I realized

that even though she was "Mom" and she was never supposed to have her own problems, she was only supposed to help me with mine, she was a person too, one who had been through immense physical and emotional trauma. She became more precious to me from that point on; I saw that she was mortal just like anyone else and I appreciated and loved her more because of it.

The following peer closeness memory provides a stark contrast to Laura's parent closeness memory. Donna was reportedly 15 years old at the time of this event:

My boyfriend and I fell asleep together one night at my house. We were curled up facing each other. I fell asleep looking at his face. I had a dream that night where I was falling . . . I looked into his eyes and I knew that we were having the same dream. We immediately hugged each other and we both knew what had just happened simply by looking in each other's eyes.

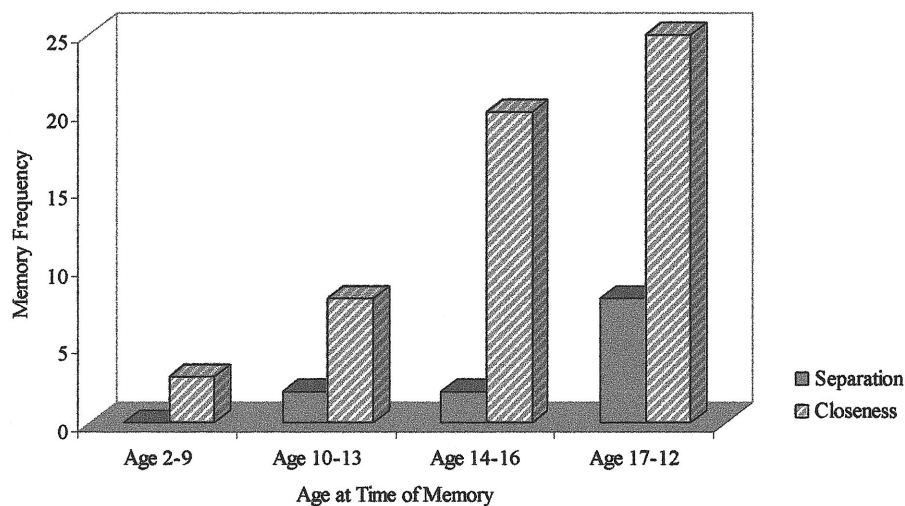


Figure 2. Frequencies of peer memories showing separation and closeness by reported age at time of memory.

### Conflict

The second hypothesis was that conflict would be more prominent in parent memories than in peer memories. Split-sample analyses confirmed the hypothesis for both the between and within samples. As shown in Table 4, conflict was significantly more prevalent in parent memories than in peer memories for the between sample, independent  $t(61) = 3.33, p < .01$ , and for the within sample, paired  $t(24) = 2.88, p < .01$ .

The third hypothesis was that for parent memories, conflict would decline between early and late adolescence. Figure 3 shows frequencies of parent and peer conflict memories between childhood and late adolescence. It can be seen that conflict was present in all but two of the parent memories. Although the two nonconflict parent memories occurred in mid- and late adolescence, the expected decline was not apparent. Declines in conflict, were, however, apparent for peer memories. As can be seen in Figure 3, conflict predominated in almost all peer memories up to mid-adolescence. During mid- and late adolescence, however, conflict predominated in only about half of the peer memories. Nonindependence of data precluded statistical testing of this unanticipated age trend.

### Meaning-Making

The fourth hypothesis was that, overall, lesson learning would be more prevalent than gaining insight. This prediction was not supported. Overall, lesson learning ( $M = .18, SD = .38$ ) and gaining insight ( $M = .21, SD = .41$ ) were equally prevalent,  $t(146) = 0.66, ns$ .

Because prior literature (cited in the introduction) suggests that lesson learning may be a developmentally earlier form of meaning-making than is gaining insight, we also computed the average age of lesson and insight memories. Both kinds of meanings occurred on average at approximately age 14 (for lessons,  $M = 13.54$  years,  $SD = 4.57$ ; for insights,  $M = 13.80$  years,  $SD = 3.95$ ), which

suggests that there were no age-developmental differences with regard to kind of meaning making. Thus, lessons did not occur at earlier ages than did insights, nor were lessons more prevalent than insights.

### Meaning and Conflict

The final prediction was that conflict would be positively associated with meaning-making overall. We tested this prediction by correlating each participant's average percentage of conflict memories overall with his or her average percentage of meaning-making overall (the sum of lesson learning and gaining insight). Results confirmed the prediction that conflict would be positively associated with meaning,  $r(88) = .39, p < .01$ . Separate correlations between conflict and each kind of meaning were also statistically significant: For conflict and lesson learning,  $r(88) = .23, p < .05$ , and for conflict and gaining insight,  $r(88) = .25, p < .05$ .

An example of the association between conflict and meaning is shown in the following narrative, which accompanied Shelley's narrative about her parents' divorce, presented previously. The episode of sharing the divorce memory occurred at age 18, 9 years after the original event. The following narrative describes an emergent insight that she should stop being the "middleman" between her parents:

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

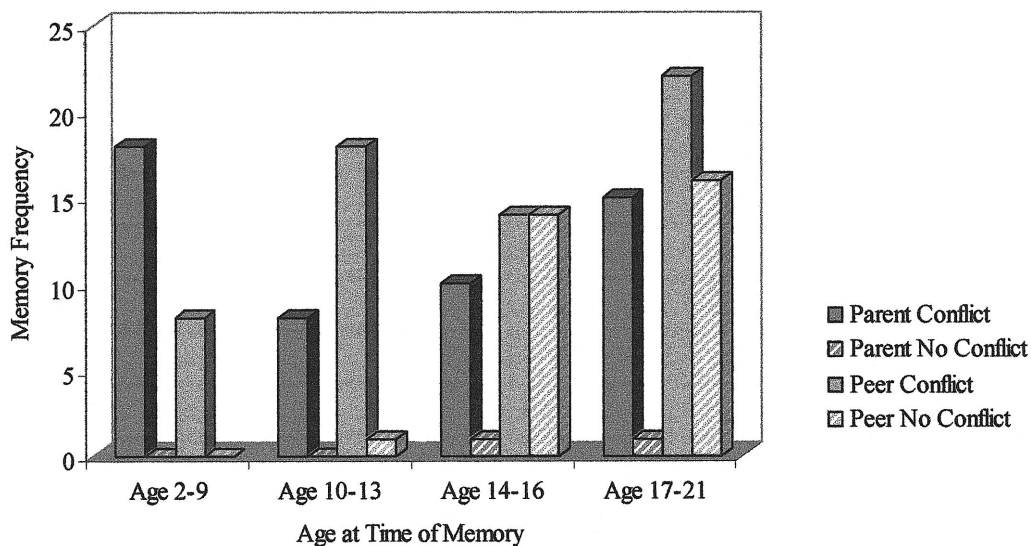


Figure 3. Frequencies of parent and peer memories showing conflict and no conflict by reported age at time of memory.



Across all participants, separation was found to correlate positively with gaining insight,  $r(88) = .23, p < .05$ . Closeness was found to correlate negatively with total meaning,  $r(88) = -.50, p < .01$ , and closeness was not associated with conflict,  $r(88) = -.17, ns$ . To explore whether the association between separation and insight was driven by the conflict that predominated in separation memories, we computed two analyses of covariance: one that controlled for conflict and one that controlled for separation. When conflict was controlled, separation was not associated with gaining insight,  $F(2, 84) = 0.56, ns$ . When separation was controlled, conflict still predicted gaining insight,  $F(3, 83) = 3.64, p < .05$ . Thus, the link between separation and insight was primarily a function of the conflict that prevailed in separation memories.

### Discussion

The overall purpose of this research was to situate adolescent development in the context of self-defining relationship memories. Although predictions with regard to separation, closeness, and conflict were drawn from studies that were not similarly situated (Collins, 1997; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), support was found for most of the hypotheses. Parent memories tended to emphasize separation and conflict more than did peer memories, which emphasized closeness. However, when only parent memories were looked at, similar proportions of separation and closeness were found, which supported prior findings that separation and connectedness are both important features of parent-adolescent relationships (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1985).

Findings with regard to age trends in the parent memories showed that the proportions of separation and closeness were most equal by late adolescence. Although this age trend might suggest an increased balancing of autonomy and relatedness by late adolescence, our mutually exclusive coding system precluded this conclusion. Future research should consider coding separation and closeness as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, categories varying in relative emphasis at particular points in time. A cyclical approach to separation and closeness would elucidate how each theme is mutually embedded, sometimes within the same relationship (as when one runs away and returns to repair the relationship) and sometimes in different relationships (as when one runs away from home and develops a close relationship elsewhere).

The finding that conflict was more prevalent in parent memories than in peer memories also confirmed expectations. Unexpectedly, however, the proportion of memories showing parent conflict did not decline across adolescence. Methodological factors may have partly contributed to the difference between the present findings and those of past research (e.g., Laursen et al., 1998). Whereas past research used survey and interview data to assess rates of conflict, the present study used retrospective narratives about momentous events. Because highly memorable events are likely to be disruptive (Rimé et al., 1991), our method may have enhanced the reporting of conflictual events. Also, because we coded conflict not on a continuum but as either present or absent, we may have obscured variations in conflict that may have been apparent had we coded for intensity of conflict.

The above explanations do not, however, address why parent memories were more frequently conflictual than peer memories.

There are several possible explanations for this finding. Conflict has been suggested to emerge more often in involuntary relationships (e.g., families) than in voluntary relationships (e.g., peers) because for the latter type of relationship, the threat of relationship dissolution is more severe (Shaver et al., 1985). It is also possible that adolescents' experiences in egalitarian peer relationships lead to greater conflict with parents in an effort to bring greater mutuality to the parent-child bond (Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

### *Efforts Toward Meaning-Making*

In support of claims that conflict serves to promote reflection (Piaget, 1965), we found that both forms of meaning-making, lesson learning and gaining insight, more often emerged in episodes that contained conflict. The positive correlation between insight and separation was found to be a function of the conflict that prevailed in separation memories. The kinds of insights that accompanied episodes of conflict typically referred to coming to understand one's own independence or greater need for self-sufficiency, as in Shelley's realization of her own need to stop being the middleman after her parents divorce. Such insights may provide an important context for the recently proposed stage of emerging adulthood, for which self-sufficiency is considered a key component to transitioning into adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2000).

Conflict may also have been more prevalent in narratives that included meaning because conflict and conflict resolution may force an individual to evaluate or reflect on the self or the relationship. Memories about conflicts with parents that included meaning were reflective of late adolescents' efforts toward balancing their own autonomy and closeness with parents. Conflicts with parents may be reflective of important moments of self-discovery and of discovery about relationships. Laura's narrative about her mother's experience with breast cancer is an example of parent-child conflict leading to new perspectives on the relationship between parent and child, because Laura saw her mother in a new light and understood her not only as a mother but also as a person. Laura may also have understood her own developing role as an adult with more responsibility when she saw her mother as mortal.

Contrary to expectations, lesson learning was not more prevalent than gaining insight. Rather, each kind of meaning appeared in approximately 20% of the memories. In addition, lesson learning did not emerge at earlier ages than insight; both emerged, on average, in memories that occurred at age 14. Although prior studies of the meanings that adolescents spontaneously make of autobiographical memories seem to suggest that insight is a developmentally more advanced form of meaning-making than is lesson learning (e.g., Pratt et al., 1999), the present findings suggest that late adolescents are equally capable of drawing concrete lessons as well as more abstract insights from personally important events. However, the fact that at the age of recall, participants were all at the same developmental stage must also be taken into account in interpreting these age findings. It is possible that a longitudinal or cross-sectional study would find differences in meaning-making not for age of memory, but for age of retrieval. Disparities between the present findings and those of past research may also be at least partly methodological. Prior studies (McCabe et al., 1991; Pratt et al., 1999) collected memories that were not

necessarily regarded as self-defining; possibly, efforts to make meaning are less pressing for events that are less momentous. Also, prior studies characterized meaning only as lesson learning.

Memories for which participants did not report meaning—typically, episodes of closeness with peers—may have served a different purpose for identity formation than the conflictual events that were associated with meaning-making. Episodes of closeness with peers were typically about warm, cozy intimacies that were devoid of any apparent conflict or any reported meaning. Donna's sweet narrative of finding romance, also described earlier, is a case in point. Donna later shared the memory with a friend but did not report the meaning of the event and in fact stated, "I couldn't really tell her how I felt about it. But just describing it to her was enough." Telling the story seemed to be enough for Donna, and her listener did not seem to demand a larger meaning. Memorable moments of falling in love or engaging in deep, intimate conversations did not seem to press for larger meanings, unlike more conflictual events. Perhaps moments of falling in love or warm, intimate conversations represent part of how individuals view themselves in relationships or how they represent the capacity to experience love and warmth with others.

McAdams (1988) suggested that the life story involves episodes of continuity and transformation. Episodes of meaning-making would fit with McAdams's notion of transforming episodes, and self-defining memories without reported meaning may represent continuity in the life story. That there was an array of memories chosen as self-defining, only some of which spontaneously referred to larger meanings, suggests that meaning-making, while important, is only one avenue for self-definition and only one part of the life story.

### *Contextualizing Conflict, Separation, and Closeness*

Although self-defining memories and life stories are in many ways unique to each person and are continually evolving as new experiences and new insights accrue, the findings suggest that there were some prototypic relationship events for this late-adolescent, European American sample. Although we expected that events involving separation from parents would primarily entail arguments between self and parents, the most frequent parental separation event involved parents arguing with parents: parental divorce. Shelley's bitter memory about parents separating was also experienced as a separation for the child, a feeling that "they didn't care about me, they just used me as an excuse not to deal with each other directly." The wedge that was driven between the parents was also driven between the parents and the child.

First loves and first kisses are so much a part of American teen culture that we were not surprised that such events exemplified peer closeness. It was interesting, however, that the kinds of events that exemplified parental closeness involved episodes of parental vulnerability, such as comforting a grieving parent. Helping a needy parent may interrupt long-standing patterns of child dependence and may ultimately promote a more emotionally reciprocal relationship. For example, Laura's narrative about her mother's experience with breast cancer appeared to mark a transition from viewing her mother as invincible to viewing her as vulnerable. The recognition did not seem to burden Laura but rather to elevate the relationship to a more mutual level of care and concern.

Comforting one's parent or recognizing one's parent as vulnerable may be an important context for the recently proposed stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), because experiencing one's parents as vulnerable and as needing one's help may help to promote self-sufficiency. Because our participants were only beginning to emerge into adulthood, moments of parental vulnerability may have been particularly salient as they attempted to reconcile their parents' vulnerability with their own needs for autonomy.

### *Conclusion*

This study of self-defining memories revealed late adolescents' personal views of important transitions in relationships with parents and friends. Adolescent tasks and concerns emerged naturally in the narratives, providing vivid episodes with which to better understand the unfolding of conflict, separation, and closeness. Looking beyond these themes to the larger meanings that were made of the episodes is a potentially important innovation. In studying not only what was remembered but also the larger lessons and insights that emerged from the memories, we were able to see emerging connections between the past and the present. These meaningful connections create a sense of unity and purpose in life and are the essence of a psychological sense of identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1988). Because narrative is not just a research method but the mode of thought through which people make sense of themselves and their lives (Bruner, 1990), future research could profitably include narrative meanings to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of identity development.

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