



“My Mom Always Tells that Story to Friends and Relatives”: Exploring the Phenomenon of Other-Presentation

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ABSTRACT

To examine the phenomenon of other-presentation, we framed our study in communicated narrative sense-making theory (CNSM) and employed grounded theory to develop two typologies. Specifically, we sought to illuminate the ways parents characterize and construct the identities of their children when speaking to third parties and identify the types of stories parents tell. Based on theoretical sampling and a narrative adaption of the constant comparison method, we analyzed 60 stories children remember their parents telling about them. This resulted in four identity impression types (prodigal child, special child, party pooper, and child of misfortune) and four story functions (to tease, to express pride, to rebuke, and to entertain). Theoretical implications suggest the importance of the stories people tell about us in the identity construction process.

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The concept of self-presentation, or ways a communicator conveys a desired impression to others, has been the subject of research for decades (Goffman, 1959). As Jones and Pittman (1982) so aptly observed, “No one would seriously challenge the general idea that actors have a stake in controlling the inferences drawn about them from their actions” (p. 231). Yet, despite the proliferation of scholarship that focuses on how people present themselves in the stories they tell (e.g., Riessman, 1990), researchers often ignore the ways third parties create impressions of others, what we are calling other-presentation. Ignoring other-presentation is problematic considering that who we think others are matters. As Smith (2014) explains, “Our impressions of others influence whether we will cooperate with them, fall in love with them, aggress against them, seek their advice, or trust persuasive messages from them” (p. 311). Creating a particular impression of others might be particularly consequential when it comes to relating. For example, painting a favorable impression of a third party could influence a person to go on a first date, give someone a second chance after a transgression, or even debunk an unconscious stereotype. Clearly, there is much at stake when it comes to other-presentation.

For the purpose of this study, we focus on how other-presentation works in a family context. The family context is a promising site because members often have the knowledge and credibility to tell stories about other members of the family. Family members both hear and tell stories that contribute to identity construction and impression management (e.g., Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; McAdams, 1993), socialization (e.g., Fiese & Bickham, 2004; Stone, 2004), and overcoming life disruptions (e.g., Becker, 1997; Buzzanell, 2018). Indeed, Koenig Kellas (2018) asserts, “Telling and hearing significant family stories can have long lasting effects on those involved, often in the form of values, impressions, fears, lessons, and/or beliefs” (p. 62). As such, family stories are foundational in who people believe they are (e.g., Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011) and what they believe to be true

(e.g., Thorne, McLean, & Dasbach, 2004). In addition, such stories reflect both physical and relational well-being (Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Yet, families do not only tell stories to and about each other inside their own family (Langellier, 2002). The research on discourse dependence suggests that families engage in communicative work to construct both internal and external family identities (Galvin, 2014). This distinction between internal and external identities suggests that there might be a difference between the stories that are told to a person and the stories that are told about that person to others. With this in mind, the impetus for the present study is to explore the stories family members recall being told about them to third parties; specifically, we explore the stories that adult children recall being told about themselves by their parents.

We use Koenig Kellas (2018) communicated narrative sense-making theory (CNSM) to frame our study and guide our exploration of other-presentation because self-presentation and family storytelling is central to it. Specifically, Koenig Kellas argues that storytelling reveals individual, relational, and intergenerational meaning-making, values, and beliefs. We embrace this foundational thinking to illuminate a typology of other-presentation (i.e., identity impressions) and story function. As a result, this study responds to Baxter's (1992) critique that researchers traditionally privilege the presentation of self, and, in so doing, fail to recognize that individuals do not exist outside of relationships. Moreover, this study answers the call of Seiter (1999, 2001), who argued that impression management theory "should be expanded to include not only the ways in which people manage impressions of themselves, but also the ways in which people strategically attempt to construct impressions made of others" (Seiter, 2001, pp. 234–235). With this in mind, we begin by delineating the concept of other-presentation before presenting CNSM as our heuristic.

A case for other-presentation

Attention to third parties and other-presentation most closely manifests in the facework (Goffman, 1959, 1967) and gossip literatures (informal talk about absent third-parties; Foster, 2004). Face pertains to the favorable social impression individuals seek to create for themselves and others. Many opportunities exist for people to attend to their own or their relational partner's positive (i.e., desire for autonomy) and negative face wants (i.e., desire to avoid negative evaluation; Brown & Levinson, 1987). If attending to one's own impression and that of one's relational partner is consequential, it stands to reason that facework might be important when people talk about a third party. Indeed, the gossip literature suggests that people who are gossiped about might experience both positive and negative effects (Cole & Scrivener, 2013).

In addition to facework, other existing theories point to the importance of third parties. Take, for example, uncertainty reduction theory (URT), which explains how people seek information to reduce their uncertainty about people they meet (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). One common form of knowledge acquisition involves relying on third parties. Indeed, 45% of students in a study asked a third party (i.e., friends of their partner) about their partner's sexual health at the beginning of their relationship (Afifi & Lucas, 2008). People who date online also reduce uncertainty by verifying information about potential dating partners with third parties (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). In sum, URT is one of many theories that alludes to the ways that people solicit information from third parties to help make important decisions about who they are and whether/how to interact with them (see also, warranting theory; Walther & Parks, 2002).

Given the apparent prevalence and relational implications of other presentation, we assert that the relative absence of research that centers the communicative work of others in the impression management process is problematic. To support this claim, Thomas, Jackl, and Crowley (2017) argue that taking other people's perspectives into account is important because there can be differences between how people present themselves and how those people might be presented by a third party. In this regard, the way people depict others (i.e., create identity impressions) might influence what adoptive family a birth mother chooses, who stays together, how a child perceives

a nonresidential parent after divorce, and a myriad of other important decisions and interactions that people might face in their lifetimes. Considering the potential implications for family relationships, we now turn to a theory that speaks to self and other-presentation. Indeed, narrative theorizing captures the process by which both individual and collective identities are formed (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2013).

Communicated narrative sense-making

CNSM is comprised of three heuristics (i.e., retrospective, interactional, and translational storytelling) and emphasizes the ways that people both construct their identities and make sense of their experiences not only as an individual act but also in relationship to others (Koenig Kellas, 2018). For the purpose of this study, we focus on retrospective storytelling (i.e., people's recollection of past events), which Koenig Kellas contends has significant and lasting effects, especially in families. Particularly, garnering people's recollections is important to understanding self-presentation broadly (McAdams, 1993). Indeed, children can be seen as blank canvases who come to see themselves through the storytelling process (Stone, 2004). In this regard, children learn through stories of socialization but also hear stories that help them decide who they want to become. As it happens, the positioning of retrospective storytelling as a socialization mechanism informs the first proposition of CNSM: "The content of retrospective storytelling reveals individual, relational, and inter-generational meaning-making, values, and beliefs" (Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 65). For the purpose of this study, we use proposition one as a heuristic to explore the importance of the retrospective stories people tell and hear about themselves as well as the functions those stories play in family life.

The importance of the stories we tell and the stories we hear

Communication scholars, through a myriad of methods and in a multitude of contexts, have illustrated the ways that storytelling is integral to the construction of (family) identity. For example, former foster children construct themselves as victims, survivors, or victors (Thomas, 2014). Mothers also tell their children their birth narratives as a way to introduce them to the wider family community (Reese, 1996). Although not empirically grounded, Stone (2004) argued that parents love telling stories of their "sacred sons and sacred daughters" and in doing so, set expectations for their children in terms of who they will become (p. 172). She explained that, "To the listeners, the stories can be experiences in themselves, and as such they exert a force and influence of their own, sometimes so that the listeners are quite conscious of what's going on, but usually more subliminally" (p.18). In other words, the stories parents tell their children might influence who those children become both consciously and unconsciously. The prime site for generating a personal narrative comes from the family (McAdams, 1993). As such, children grow into the stories they are told about themselves (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004).

Not only are the stories we tell important, but so too are the stories we hear. For example, a recent study examines adolescents' perceptions of communication competence during *sex talks* after hearing their parents talk about love and mistakes pertaining to the subject of sex (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018). Adolescents remembered multiple types of messages from these sex talks, some which were perceived as more or less effective. In another context, children came to learn about mental illness through stories their parents told about their family's medical histories (Flood-Grady & Koenig Kellas, 2018). In addition, and most germane to this study, existing research suggests that the stories we hear about ourselves contribute to how we come to see ourselves. For example, adoptees recalled seven themes in the entrance narratives told to them by their adoptive parents pertaining to how they became part of the family (Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011). Importantly, the salience of three themes (i.e., "chosen child," "negative reconnection," and "difference") significantly predicted differences in adoptees' self-concepts. Evidence for the importance of other-presentation also emerges when these findings are considered alongside other research exploring themes in entrance narratives told by adoptive parents (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Specifically, although somewhat similar, the themes adoptees recalled were also in some ways different from

those adoptive parents recalled. Overall, then, the existing body of research suggests that the present study is important not only because it examines other-presentation empirically, but also because it potentially underlines the importance of how the stories we hear about ourselves/family impacts our own identity construction. With this in mind, our first research question asks:

RQ₁: How do adult children recall being presented (i.e. characterized as representing a particular identity) in the stories their parents tell about them to other people?

The functions that stories serve

In addition to playing an integral role in how we see ourselves and how others see us, family stories can serve multiple functions (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2013). As Koenig Kellas and Trees argue, “Family stories draw people in, teach them lessons, and stay with them long after they have been told” (p. 391). For example, a comparative study between Euro-American and Taipei families revealed that American parents typically told stories to create favorable impressions of themselves and their children. In contrast, Taipei parents called up stories that reminded children about the children’s transgressions to reinforce the importance of not making those same mistakes again (Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001). Furthermore, American parents were more likely to tell stories about their own transgressions as a way to humanize themselves, whereas Taiwanese parents positioned their own transgressions as threats to their authority. In the context of adoption, adoptive mothers told their internationally adopted children stories to (a) offer positive reinforcement, (b) build familiarity, (c) build a complete history, and (d) avoid building unrealistic expectations (Harrigan, 2010). Taken together, these studies illustrate that the stories parents tell to their children serve a multitude functions in a variety of contexts. Yet, what people say to each other directly might differ from what they say about each other to third parties (Thomas et al., 2017). To explore this possibility, our second research question extends what we know about story functions:

RQ₂: What types of perceived functions do the stories adult children recall their parents telling about them play?

Together, both research questions explore CNSM’s first proposition with the goal of illuminating meanings, values, and beliefs associated with the stories parents tell about their children.

Method

To answer our research questions, we turned to constructivist grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2014). This meant we engaged simultaneously in theoretical sampling and constant comparison. Theoretical sampling involves (1) readjusting protocols to gather additional information, (2) revisiting the raw data with new insight, and (3) collecting new data. Constant comparison requires researchers to compare units of data both across and within the data corpus. Finally, engaging in grounded theory procedures requires researchers to explore whether there are any higher order constructs that help organize the data. With this in mind, we asked our final

RQ₃: What, if any, relationships exist among the emergent findings?

Data collection

Recruitment

To participate, adult children had to be at least 18 years old and remember a story their parents (as they defined them) told about them to other people. These participants were originally recruited by

students in a research methods course who shared the study announcement through e-mail, social media, and flyers. Throughout the theoretical sampling process, all participants ($n = 60$) took a demographic survey before they met for a face-to-face narrative interview for which they were not compensated.

Participant demographics

Most adult children recalled a story told by their mothers ($n = 50$), although some shared stories told by their fathers ($n = 10$). Participants' ages ranged from 19–64 years with a mean age of 27 years ($SD = 12.1$), with 33 identifying as women, 26 identifying as men, and one person who selected other. The majority of participants identified as White ($n = 58$), although some participants selected more than one category.

Collection and analysis

With institutional review board (IRB) approval, we asked adult children to recount a story they remembered their parents telling about them to other people. The adult children were instructed to think of themselves as an author of a novel, doing their best to share the story as their parent tells it (see Holmberg et al., 2004). Later, participants were given the opportunity to tell the story from their own point of view, although the vast majority reported that they told the story exactly as their parents did. Asking participants to share their stories is known as narrative interviewing (Langellier, 1989) and is the least structured type of interview. Narrative interviews allow participants to tell their story their way without interruption and/or direct guidance from the interviewer (other than to share their story). Finally, adult children were asked just a few semi-structured open-ended questions to garner more evocative details about components of their recollected stories. For example, adult children were asked how they felt when their parent shared the stories with others and whether there was anyone they did not want to hear the story. The data collection ($n = 60$) resulted in three types of elicited documents: (1) demographic information, (2) narratives, and (3) semi-structured interviews (Charmaz, 2014). On average, interviews lasted minutes (6 minutes and 26 seconds) and ranged from 3 minutes and four seconds to 16 minutes and twenty-nine seconds. Although these interviews were fairly short, they reflect the genre of parents telling a short story about their children to friends and family. Of note, interviews increased in length as we adjusted our protocol and added more questions. Nevertheless, interviews resulted in 324 pages of double-spaced text. Pseudonyms replaced identifying information during the transcription process.

Theoretical sampling. Researchers conducting grounded theory should simultaneously sample and analyze the data corpus (Charmaz, 2014). Although we discuss these processes separately in the present study for clarity, they occurred simultaneously. Theoretical sampling first began in the Spring of 2017 and occurred over a three-month time period. Answers to the first research question emerged clearly and in rich detail. During the on-going analysis, however, constructs began to emerge that warranted additional questions being added to the protocol. For example, some stories were told to highlight how the adult children had changed over time whereas others were told to illustrate persisting personality traits. Thus, for the last ten interviews we added one more narrative question:

Sometimes parents tell stories about how we've grown or become better. But sometimes they tell stories that reflect how we've changed in a way that they don't approve of. Can you think of such a story that they told about you? Would you mind telling it?

Over time (i.e., throughout collection), we also added six additional semi-structured questions which included inquiries such as, "Why do you think your mom/dad tells this story about you?"; "When your mom/dad tells this story about you, what type of person are they describing?"; and "Do you still think you are the same person they are characterizing in the story?" These questions became important during the theoretical coding process (see section below).

In addition to asking new questions, theoretical sampling also includes returning to the data with a fresh perspective (Charmaz, 2014). To speak to this process, the research questions were first analyzed in the Spring of 2017 and again in the Fall of 2017 after additional data were collected (i.e., the last component of theoretical sampling). Finally, the data were examined one final time in the Summer of 2018.

Constant comparison. The constant comparison method involving both initial and focused coding, guided both the first and second analysis (Charmaz, 2014). As a heuristic and because our study aligns with interpretive research, we adapted this procedure based on Riessman's (2003) thematic narrative analysis (TNA) process to guide our reading of the corpus. Thematic narrative analysis diverges from a traditional thematic analysis because instead of focusing on themes within a story, researchers focus on an overall type of something (e.g., story, identity, impression). In this regard, we added an extra layer of iterative coding.

Specifically, and in concert with traditional grounded theory technique, initial codes emerged through line-by-line reading of each transcript. Next, these codes were synthesized into coherent categories (i.e., themes) as part of an iterative process. To do this, we compared each code to each other to determine whether they were a part of the same theme or part of a new theme. We then added an extra layer of iterative coding that corresponds to TNA. This meant that after themes emerged, we explored the ways these themes coalesced into identity impressions (RQ₁) and perceived story functions (RQ₂). Previously, scholars have used TNA in multiple contexts to identify types of stories/identities as opposed to describing patterns within a story which is the goal of traditional thematic analysis (Scharp, Thomas, & Paxman, 2015; Thomas, 2014). To accomplish this extra layer of coding, we followed the process of constant comparison such that each impression and function was then compared to the next to check for conceptual likeness or difference. These steps served to organize the data corpus into a typology.

Data verification

To verify our analyses, we engaged in the following four procedures: (1) peer-debriefing, (2) negative case analysis, (3) audit trail, and (4) exemplar identification. For the purposes of peer debriefing, the authors engaged in separate analyses before coming together to compare notes, argue through differences, and reach a consensus. Although there were multiple instances when we named impressions/functions differently and thus, had to make decisions about labels, we overwhelmingly agreed on the same categories at the conceptual level. Because every story fit into one of the reported identities and story functions, we achieved negative case analysis. This means we accounted for 100% of the stories in our findings. Throughout the entire process, all members of the research team kept detailed notes about their decisions as part of the audit trail. Finally, we selected exemplars to illustrate the robustness of our findings.

Findings

Based on a 60 narrative interview story corpus, four identity impressions and four story functions emerged from the theoretical sampling and the process of constant comparison.

RQ₁: emergent identities

Overall, identity served as the central impression management tool that emerged in the stories. Throughout the story corpus, four types of identities became apparent: (1) the prodigal child, (2) the special child, (3) the party pooper, and (4) the child of misfortune. First, *prodigal children* were presented as mischievous and/or naughty when young but well-mannered as adults. For example, Parker recounted a story about him as if his mother told it:

While I (Mother) was out, Parker and Betsy decided to fill up our car with water. So, they took the hose and they just put it in the window of our little car. They just filled it up. So, I remember I came home and I looked and I just wasn't too happy. But it was all fun and games and the car wasn't ruined. It just kind of shows that I'm (Parker) mischievous ... and ... I was a very exciting child. (Interview 44)

In this example, Parker shares his story as his mother tells it but at the end cannot help but make his own sense of it (e.g., "I was a very exciting child"). As it happens, prodigal children stories were ones where both parents and adult children could look back on with mirth because the adult children were so different from their younger selves in the stories.

Second, parents constructed impressions of *special children* by telling stories about their child's unique behaviors while also emphasizing how this uniqueness still characterizes their adult child today. For example, Emma recounted:

It was time for me and everyone my age was already walking and I would refuse to walk. I would just chug, like, on my knees, like, walk on my knees 'cause I wanted my mom to carry me. Like, not even crawl. I just refused to walk and I had calluses on my knees 'cause I was not wanting to get up and walk. Then one day I finally did start walking and I never – I rarely fell down after that. (Interview 19)

Emma's mom tells a story about how special Emma was because she did not progress as a parent might expect when it came to walking. Instead of learning to crawl first, Emma just went straight to walking after refusing to do so. Overall, this story reflects the ways that parents characterized their children as special when their children deviated from traditional expectations.

Third, although less typically told, some parents constructed impressions of their children as *party poopers*. Of note, these children were not engaging in particularly bad behaviors. Instead, such children were presented as though they were enacting behaviors that made an experience less enjoyable for their parents, often through the act of taking on responsibility beyond what might be expected of them. For example, Ashley recalled:

I was in 1st grade and it was the first time we ever went duck hunting with my dad. And we got up at five in the morning, but the night before I told him that I would only go if I would be on time to school and not be late. So the next morning we get up really early and we go. And it was a great day of duck hunting and we got lots of ducks. And then I saw the time and I started telling my dad that we needed to go, and he's like, "No we're not done yet, look how good this is." And I started crying and I told him that he promised me I would be back, and he said, "Well, you're going to be a little late anyway, let's just have fun while it lasts." And I started getting mad and walked back to the car and waited. And then my dad was driving me back to school, and I was crying and having a fit and telling him that he was the worst dad ever, and he asked me what was the big deal. That I was missing school, and he was letting me miss school. I was complaining, and I told him that it was not ok, and that he made a promise to me, and that I hate being late, and that it was 1st grade, and we don't be late in 1st grade. And then we got to school and I was mad at him for the rest of the day. (Interview #4)

As evidenced in this narrative, the problem, was not so much about Ashley's desire to be on time for school, but rather the ways she disrupted the fun her father was having hunting for ducks. In these types of stories, party pooper children were presented as barriers to enjoyment, not only when they disrupted the parents' good times, but often the good time the parent was having with the children. Importantly, adult children who heard these stories tended not to enjoy hearing them, perceiving that such stories cast them in a negative light.

Finally, unlike the first three identities, *children of misfortune* were not necessarily the primary actors in their own story. Specifically, although sometimes unpleasant consequences occurred as a result of these children's own behavior, more often children of misfortune were presented as those who had something bad happen to them beyond their control. For example, Dallin shared this story about something that happened during emergent adulthood:

I was on my mission in [Big City], um, and I think my mom probably tells the story more often than my dad does. So, um, the way that I remember her telling the story is that, um, she tells about how I went to the laundromat one day to do all of my laundry for that week. And I set my pants out to dry and, um, left for a minute to go grab something, and she just tells about how somebody came in and stole my pants. Um, but the thing that she talks about the most is how, um, weird it is that someone would steal my pants because, um, they

wouldn't fit anyone else no matter who it is. Um, so she just talks about how funny it is thinking that they were going to get gain out of the situation. Where really it probably didn't benefit them in the end. But, that's the story. (Interview #12)

In these stories, adult children were discussed as victims of circumstance, where in many instances, the circumstance was more important than the children. Children of misfortune, then, were very different than party poopers who played an active role in the parents' good times. In misfortune stories, children were more often characterized as not having much control over the world around them. Thus, it might not be surprising that the adult children who were depicted as victims of circumstance did not tell their story in as much detail as those stories where they were depicted more positively or negatively. Overall, these young adults remember their parents, to varying degrees, telling stories that characterized their children in better and worse ways, depicting them with more and less agency.

RQ₂: story functions

The second research question pertained to adult children's perceptions regarding the functions of parents' stories. Overall, four functions emerged in the story corpus: (1) to tease, (2) to show pride, (3) to rebuke, and (4) to entertain. First, *stories perceived as teasing* were recognized by adult children as having been told in the spirit of fun. That said, typically, adult children were not thrilled about their parents telling such stories. For example, Amanda narrated:

I was 18 months-2 years old, something like that. Um, so, my mom bought this big box of peaches ... and I love peaches. But she would go around the house and find peaches I had taken, and I would just take like a bite or two of it, and then I'd get bored and drop it somewhere. She was like, "Amanda, you have to stop eating the peaches." And finally, she just took the whole box of peaches and stuck them on top of the refrigerator ... So, she's over vacuuming over in one of the rooms and she stops and realizes the house is really quiet, which is never a good idea if you have a two-year-old. And she goes and looks out the window, and I am running down the street with a peach in each hand. And I'm just running down the street with the peaches, and so she had to pick up my brother and go running out and catch me. (Interview 2)

Reflecting on this story, Amanda shared how this story is not one she is particularly proud of but one that brings her mom a lot of joy to tell. Indeed, adult children who reflected on stories told to tease often accepted that this story was going to get told whether they loved the story or not.

Second, *to show pride*, parents expressed pleasure in who their child was and/or bragged about their children's behavior. Nancy shared:

So, usually my dad. When they're, like, talking to someone who, like, has young children, and they are, like, explaining something that their child does, my dad always chimes in with a story of me when I was younger. I would play the Bop-It!—if you remember what the Bop-It! was. And I would sit on my piano bench. I remember I would sit on my piano bench and I would play the Bop-It! And I was way good at it, like, I was literally so good. And then I realized my parents would give me a ton of praise about how good I was, so they got me, like, a harder version of it. And so they got the harder version of it, and then I started singing with it. So, I would sing a song and play the Bop-It! at the same time. And my parents thought it was, like, the coolest thing 'cause I was, like, so young. I don't remember how old I was, but apparently, like, it was, like, amazing that I was that young, could play the Bop-It!, and sing all at the same time.

In addition to explaining that her father enjoyed telling other parents of children about his daughter's amazing talent as a young child, Nancy went on to note, "I mean I think all parents like to brag about their kids at some point so I think that's probably why he shares it." In short, from Nancy's perspective, her father's story functions to communicate the pride he has in her.

Third, parents told stories to *rebuke* their children for previous behaviors of which they did not approve. As such, these stories resemble those that Miller et al. (2001) heard from Taiwanese parents. As one example, Hank remembered:

We were eating at this Chinese restaurant and, like, the day before, I had a super sour warhead, and I was able to suck all the sour stuff off without making a face. And so I thought I was all cool and stuff. And we were at

this Chinese restaurant, and they brought out the pork with the sweet and sour sauce and the hot mustard. And so, I grabbed a piece of pork, and then I just doused it in the hot yellow mustard. And then my dad was like, “Well that stuff is pretty hot, you might not want to have so much of that on there.” And I said “Dad, it’s ok. I can suck the sour off a warhead without making a face.” Then I proceeded to chow-down on the pork, just drenched in hot Chinese mustard. Within several seconds, my face turned red, I was sweating, I had to pee really bad, I was trying to drink everything I could to get the taste to go away. I ran to the bathroom as my parents were laughing hysterically. (Interview 26)

Hank recalled his parents telling this story about him as a way to socialize with others and remind him of the importance of humility. In this regard, stories of rebuke not only worked to remind the adult child of a lesson but also to share that lessons with others.

Finally, parents’ stories functioned to *entertain*, and, in so doing, often implicated multiple family members. For example, Sara recalled:

Since it was just a couple of houses down from my house, and so I was like, “Okay! Sure! We can race.” So, my dad got in the car and I was on the sidewalk. And he started driving, pretty slowly at first, and I was still running as fast as I could. Then he started driving faster, and so I started running faster. And then he started driving faster, so I started running faster. And then he just went probably, it was probably only 25 mph, but he started going pretty fast, so I couldn’t keep up anymore. And I was running as fast as I could, trying to keep up, when I realized my shoes were probably a little bit too big. And so I fell, and my arms were, like, out in front of me (stretches arms out), and I pretty much did a face plant and skidded for a couple feet across the pavement. But my dad in the car didn’t see, and so he just drove home, leaving my mom to pick me up. And I was screaming and bleeding from both my elbows and my face and both my knees and some other parts. And she then had to carry me the rest of the way home. And when I got home, my dad felt so bad because my mom had had to carry me the whole way. And then I just remember I was in my white church dress, and it was all covered in blood now, and they had to take it off and just set me in the bathtub. And my mom, when she tells it, she always makes fun of my dad because he didn’t see it happen, and so he just drove away in the car, laughing to himself when I was actually really pretty hurt. (Interview #50)

Indeed, adult children suggested that stories meant to entertain were told to garner a laugh, and in some instances, even tease or stick something to another member of the family. Thus, instead of socialization, these stories were about bonding through shared laughter and interaction.

RQ3: conceptual relationships and interpretations

Beyond identifying emergent impression and story functions, a constructivist grounded theory requires researchers to examine the relationships between a set of concepts (Charmaz, 2014). Guided by that principle, we identified two orientations that helped inform the emergent identity impressions and perceived story functions: (1) time and (2) valence.

Time

One of the most salient components of adult children’s stories was the function of time. According to adult children, parents often tell stories as a way to compare the child they once were to the adult children they are now. For example, Lauren says:

... One year for Halloween I got, like, a Lion King Costume. It was Nala from the Lion King, and how I would always just wear it. Sometimes, I would just wear it randomly in the house. I would just wear it outside like bike riding. Um, sometimes it would get knots in it. The tail would get stuck in the spokes of the tire. And I just didn’t really care about what other people thought. Um, I just would go out and play, and have fun, and not really care. Um, and that, I guess that’s pretty much the story.

When asked why she thought her parents share that story, Lauren further explains:

I think that they are doing it in a positive way ... I think that they like just who I am, and who I am is a person who really likes cats, and is someone who doesn’t ... still doesn’t always care what people think about me, and is independent, and will kind of do what I want to do. (Interview #36)

Thus, unlike teasing stories that are humorous because the person has changed over time, proud parent stories are typically told about children who have not ventured far from the special children they always have been. In this regard, time serves as an important factor in what type of person parents portray and what type of story gets shared with others.

Valence

The other important marker that served as a foundation was the valence of both the person and the story more generally. Surprisingly, perhaps, parents did not stick to telling stories that were solely positive or constructing their children's identities in particularly favorable ways. Sometimes parents' stories embarrassed their adult children, characterizing them as previously naughty children, who although reformed now, engaged in behaviors they might rather forget as adults. For example, Ryan recalled:

The only person that ever tells stories about any of us kids is my mom. And she always tells stories when she gives talks at church. Every single time she gives a talk, she starts it off by giving an embarrassing story about one of us kids at random. My story that my mom tells is when my little sister was born. She's four years younger than me. Apparently, I didn't like the idea of having a sister, of having a little sister. So, I must have been, like, four at the time. And the doctor was, like, checking up on my sister, and I came into the room and I just said a few words. I said, "Baby, trash can." (Interview #49)

Although Ryan discussed being embarrassed that his mother would share this story in public and to an audience that included people whom he did not want hearing it, he continued to share:

My mom just tells it to embarrass us ... I think it's because to ... to set the stage that, that, she has, like, a close relationship with her kids. Like, she can embarrass them publicly and it's okay ... It's just to be funny really.

Thus, stories told to tease could be perceived negatively by adult children, even when the parent was not suspected of being inherently malicious. Although Ryan did not want the story told, he was, at the same time, capable of perceiving his mother's motives for telling it. Thus, valence is a complex heuristic that highlights potential mismatches between parent and child perceptions.

Finally, time and valence, considered together, can bring meaning to emergent identities and functions in stories. The prodigal child identity, for example, hinges on the child's transformation from naughty (i.e., negative valence) to nice (i.e., positive valence), which only makes sense with the passage of time. Likewise, although, by comparison, special children might be presented by parents as less wavering, their ability to instill admiration (i.e., positive valence) over the course of time, might seem all the more special. Similarly, these orientations also serve as a helpful heuristic when thinking about story functions. For example, stories told to tease serve to reflect and construct parents' delight (i.e., positive valence) with their children's once naughty behaviors, whereas stories meant as rebuke might serve as a reminder or chastisement to adult children who, over the course of time, have not learned their lesson. Some stories, however, transcended time, such as the children of misfortune and stories perceived as entertaining. Indeed, these stories, although often featuring the child, sometimes more prominently featured another family member or constructed a child with little agency. Another important finding was that identities emerging on the basis of time and valence did not inherently correspond to the story types that emerged based on time and valence. Stated differently, these young adults felt that their parents did not always tell proud parent stories to construct them as special. Rather, all different combinations emerged to illustrate the ways identities and story types contribute unique information to understanding the process of other-presentation.

Discussion

To understand the meaning, values, and beliefs in the stories children recall their parents telling about them, we developed a typology of identity impressions and story functions. In doing so, this study extends research examining debaters' attempts to create impressions of opponents in political debates (Seiter, 1999). Ultimately, we identified four emergent impressions and four emergent story

functions rendered meaningful by the heuristics of time and valence. Specifically, parents created the following four impressions: (1) the prodigal child, (2) the special child, (3) the party pooper, and (4) the child of misfortune. Furthermore, parents identified these four story functions: (1) to tease, (2) to express pride, (3) to rebuke, and (4) to entertain. Although there was no emergent pattern linking one impression to one function, there was a noticeable absence of any story that depicted children who were once characterized positively who parents now characterize in a negative way, even though we specifically asked participants to try to think of this type of story. Perhaps such stories are family secrets that families do their best to keep private. If so, this notion advances the process narrators use to decide what version of a story they will tell (see Jackl, 2018). Narrators generally follow rules that determine the extent to which they tell a detailed story. One of these rules pertains to whether narrators perceive that the listener might wrongfully judge them (Jackl, 2018). Findings, from our study, however, suggest that narrators might also refrain from telling stories that depict family members or other close others negatively. This conclusion speaks to our larger argument that narratives not only serve an important function for the self but also for others. Indeed, the emergent typologies illustrate the ways that stories can create impressions of others and simultaneously serve a variety of functions for the narrator. Based on the theoretical sampling and analysis of 60 narratives, we now further discuss the theoretical and methodological implications of this study.

Theoretical implications and applications

Based on this study's findings, a typology of identity impressions and stories emerged that scholars should find useful in a myriad of ways. For example, telling stories to family members is a way to create a cohesive family identity (Galvin, 2014). This study extends that research to suggest that the stories family members tell about each other also have the potential to create meaningful identity impressions. As such, narratives provide an important route through which parents can communicate/construct an impression of another person (i.e., their children). This theoretical implication is important not only because it offers an alternative explanation for how people understand themselves but also because it emphasizes interaction as a primary component of the identity construction process, a central tenet to CNSM theory. Put differently, this study serves as a reminder that individual identities are not merely the product of an individual's self-presentation. In the future, researchers might design studies to parse out the ways in which these impressions influence people's sense of self, depending on factors such as the narrator, frequency of telling, and consistency with one's desired identity. Gaps between how people speak about themselves and how others speak about them could contribute to the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993) by adding an additional layer of consideration. In this regard, scholars might be interested not just in how an individual sees themselves, but also in how others see and present them.

This study also has implications for CNSM. Specifically, there were multiple instances when children co-constructed their identities as they interjected their own meaning making into the stories that were being told about them (e.g., see Ashley's story above). In this regard, identity construction was an interactional process by which people heard stories about themselves, made meaning of themselves in those stories, and then incorporated that meaning into the retelling of the stories. As a result, findings from this study illustrate how identity is not only constructed in individual telling or co-constructed in telling, but also constructed through both the individual and co-tellings and re-tellings of the past. As such, this study elucidates how the stories that other people tell about us intersect with our own meaning-making processes to facilitate identity construction as an iterative process. Researchers should further attend to how meaning-making intersects with the re-telling of stories over time.

Practically, studying other-presentation might be particularly important in contexts such as in-law relationships (see Mikucki-Enyart, 2011) or estrangement (see Scharp, 2019) and processes such as conflict or uncertainty management. For example, how a family comes to understand a new member might be heavily reliant on the types of stories that are circulated about him or her. Other-

presentation might also serve as a justification mechanism to explain why certain members of the family no longer come to holiday events such as the case of parent-child estrangement. In this vein, how well people transition in or out of the family could have very little to do with their own presentation and much more to do with other-presentation.

In addition, researchers might empirically link the impression types and story functions to individual/relational health and well-being outcomes. Creating these links would illustrate a useful path between CNSM's first and second propositions, helping to advance this burgeoning theory. It is also possible that the stories that are told to us have a different effect than those that we know are told about us. With contributions to the narrative literature in mind, this study advances the conversation about the dark side of telling stories. Koenig Kellas (2018) argues that existing research suggests, "a bias toward positive story tone such that positive stories are rated more effective, competent, and told more than negatively themed stories" (p. 65). This study suggests, to some extent, that families are telling what a person could perceive as negative stories in the name of teasing or sticking it to a family member for their past actions. In the future, researchers should explore the role and impact of these functions in relation to people's self-esteem, well-being, and family satisfaction/closeness.

Limitations and future directions

As with all studies, limitations exist. We recognize that different contexts (i.e. other than family stories) might yield different identities and story functions. Presumably, for example, other-presentation functions differently in the context of political debates, where candidates might be especially motivated to present their opponents in a negative light (see Seiter & Weger, *in press*). Understanding other-presentation in multiple contexts, however, provides a robust opportunity for future research. In addition to context, an additional limitation of this study concerns its lack of sampling diversity. Specifically, the majority of participants identified as White and female, which might have led to particularized results. Although a large White sample is representative of the state in which the data were collected, future researchers should explore more diverse populations.

Despite its limitations, this study serves as a foundation for robust explorations of both other and self-presentation. The presentation of others might also have implications for the self. In the future, researchers should explore the degree to which narratives told about others provide an alternative/additional route to expressing one's own identity. For example, parents might see their children as an extension of themselves, telling stories that map onto the attributions people typically pursue through self-presentation (see Jones & Pittman, 1982). Furthermore, researchers might apply social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999) to explore how parents tell stories about their children to pass along family values. Indeed, narratives seem like an ideal mechanism for the transmission of identity and values (Stone, 2004).

With outcomes in mind, scholars might also explore the interplay of other-presentation, identity, and emotions. For example, some emotions, including shame, are dependent on third parties. To the extent that shame involves negative feelings about how we appear to others (see Leeming & Boyle, 2004), it seems reasonable to imagine that stories told to others about a child's wrongdoing would go further in shaping that child's identity than stories told to the child alone. The same argument might hold true of other identities and emotions (pride, embarrassment). Researchers should test the influence emotion has on identity formation and variables like self-esteem in the context of other-presentation.

Conclusion

This study specifically examines stories people recall being told about them. The study sheds light on presentation research that is important and compelling. Through an extensive grounded theory approach, we illustrated the roles others play in impression management, yielding two typologies of family storytelling. In this regard, our findings provide a foundation for increasing focus on identity construction as a relational process as opposed to an individual endeavor. Indeed, there are multiple

avenues that researchers can pursue based on these typologies and with other-presentation as a focus. With this in mind, we call for additional research that focuses on other-presentation in a variety of contexts.

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