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Examining “Self” in Five-Year-Olds' Personal Stories:

A Narrative Analysis of Coherence

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Abstract

Stories are essential throughout our lives as tools for understanding ourselves. The current study qualitatively addressed children’s emerging ability to construct stories expressing understanding of “self.” Five-year-old participants ($N = 7$) made autobiographies consisting of five brief stories. The discussions between child and researcher while creating the stories were transcribed for analysis of narrative coherence. Narrative analysis identified basic story components (i.e. agent, action, setting, purpose, and description) within each discussion. This analysis led to categorization of each stretch of talk as a non-story, incoherent, basically coherent, or fully coherent story. The majority of stories were coherent, demonstrating that children as young as age 5 can construct personal stories. Further analysis revealed that fully coherent stories express the child’s awareness of “self.”

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Stories are pervasive in our lives. People have told stories throughout history in many forms and continue to do so through mediums such as television, film, plays, novels, and music. Children become interested in listening to stories from a very early age and begin to tell their own stories without explicit instruction from adults. By creating, telling, and hearing stories, we work toward understanding our selves and others (McAdams, 2000; Mishler, 1986, Murray, 2003). The stories we tell to our selves and each other about our experiences help us make meaning of our past actions, anticipate future results, and assess our selves in the present moment.

Narrative Construction of “Self”

When the story being created takes the form of a narrative recounting a previous experience, the narrative is selective and subjective. A narrative cannot recreate an experience precisely as it occurred. Rather, the storyteller offers one perspective by recounting the experience with selective attention to some details over others, as well as by including subjective interpretations of the event (Budwig, 2003; DeSocio, 2005; Ochs & Capps, 1996). As our narratives shape how we remember events, our beliefs about what is important to our “selves” are shaped and formed.

In addition to representing fragments of experiences, narratives represent fragments of our “selves”. In the telling of a single narrative, we only evoke certain aspects of “self” to represent specific beliefs, values, and experiences. The “self” in a single narrative may be presented as public or private, past or present, subject or object, normal or abnormal (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Over a collection of narratives, such as a life history, these partial “selves”

become multiplied across dimensions of evaluations, expectations, and memories. Ochs and Capps believe that narrative and “self” are inseparable and view “self” as “an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world” (p. 21). As the narratives of one’s life events express different experiences of being-in-the-world, conflicting aspects of the “self” are represented. The authors explain that “as narratives reach out to tap a preexisting identity, they construct a fluid, evolving identity-in-the-making” (p. 22). The “self” created and expressed through narratives exists both in situated fragments within a single narrative and in the fluid connections of these multiplied fragments within a collection of narratives. Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) add to this notion with their theory of the dialogical self. In telling a life story, the storyteller “I” moves from one perspective to the next, creating multiple storytellers within the one “I.” According to this theory, these storytelling selves are in dialogue with each other through the life story. In summary, narrative theorists reject the traditional view of the “self” existing as an individualized and unified construct within the mind, claiming instead that the “self” is multiplied and fluid, embedded in the shared language used to convey our narratives to ourselves and each other (Budwig, 2003; DeSocio, 2005; Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon, 1992; McAdams, 2000; Murray, 2003; Ochs & Capps, 1996). McAdams (2000) concludes: “The stories of self are not inside the person, waiting to be told. Instead, the person seems to reside amidst the stories, which surround and define him or her” (p. 473).

Narrative Coherence

When the narrative is clearly organized and constructed, both the teller and the listener can assess the “self” expressed within it (Fiese & Sameroff, 1999). Van Abbema and Bauer (2005) stated that a coherent narrative conveys all of the necessary information about the speaker and the experience to the listener, including context and evaluation of the experience.

Researchers have been attempting to clearly define and analyze *narrative coherence* for several years. Many claim that a coherent narrative is one that follows an ideal story structure (De Roten, Favez, Drapeau, & Stern, 2003; Fiese & Sameroff, 1999; Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, Bentivegna, 1992; Kleinknecht & Beike, 2004; Mishler, 1986; Murray, 2003; Van Abbema & Bauer, 2005). The difficulty in this claim lies in categorizing which components are necessary for a narrative to be labeled coherent. Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, and Bentivegna (1992) coded the narratives in their study for story structures including a formal beginning and ending, five types of action (general, rising, falling, climax, and alternative), setting (including place, time, and characters), evaluation, and dialogue. Kleinknecht and Beike (2004) utilized another approach to the ideal story structure in their analysis of preschool children’s narratives as part of a cognitive approach to assessing Theory of Mind. They categorized each subject-verb proposition in their narratives by the story structure categories of action, description, elaboration, evaluation, and orientation.

Criticism of the use of ideal story structures in analyzing children’s narratives was demonstrated by Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, and Bentivegna (1992) in their content analysis of 4-year-olds’ narratives. These researchers elicited emotional narratives from the children in their study by instructing them to tell about one time when they were very, very happy, mad, or scared. The researchers found that the emotional purpose of the speaker changed the structure of the narrative. In a narrative of happiness, the structure was a moment-in-time story; the teller focused on recreating the experience of happiness rather than telling a plotted or chronological narrative. In a narrative of fear, the story followed the plotted structure of rising action and climax, but typically did not include falling action and resolution. Explanation of how the fear reached its height was more important than telling a goal-directed narrative with a conclusion. Finally, in narratives of anger, the stories were clearly goal-directed; the focus of the anger

narrative included its resolution and the action taken to reach the resolution. This study convincingly demonstrated that narratives can be coherent without following the ideal story structure, suggesting that researchers should seek another approach to analyze coherence.

An alternative approach to analyzing narrative coherence was developed by Van Abbema and Bauer (2005) in their research on autobiographical memory in middle childhood (ages seven to nine). The researchers coded each proposition in children’s memory narratives for information that answered the questions *who, what, where, when, how, and why*. Additionally, propositions that included descriptions, internal states, and intensifiers were coded. Van Abbema and Bauer’s method of analysis is supported by Burke (1969), who developed his dramatisitic analysis from a journalistic, rather than psychological, approach. Burke’s dramatisitic pentad consists of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose and demonstrates the interdependence of each in a complete description of motives (e.g. a personal narrative). Burke explained that “any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (p. xv).

Coherence can also be defined and analyzed within a collection of narratives, such as a life history. In the context of a collection of narratives, coherence can be based upon the relationships existing between narratives. McAdams (2000) asserts that coherent narratives express an integration of experiences that provide a sense of unity and purpose. Agar and Hobbs (1980; 1982; 1983) developed an extensive analysis of life history coherence based on the relationships between statements and story segments. These researchers believed that each statement had the potential to be relationally linked (local coherence), that each story could contain themes repeated in other stories (thematic coherence), and that each story could contain

utterances that are related to the life history’s over goal or plan (global coherence). These relationships could also take the form of repeated beliefs or assumptions of the storyteller (Agar and Hobbs, 1982). Both DeSocio (2005) and Mishler (1986) support the analyses of Agar and Hobbs through their agreement that analysis of coherence should take into account the internal connection among statements and the presence of consistent themes throughout narratives of life experiences.

While some researchers have attempted to define narrative coherence by adherence to an ideal story structure (Kleinknecht & Beike, 2004), others have exemplified problems with this definition (Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, Bentivegna, 1992). Alternative approaches include narrative coherence defined by the presence of basic story components (Burke, 1969; Van Abbema & Bauer, 2005) as well as narrative coherence of relationships occurring throughout a collection of narratives (Agar & Hobbs, 1982; DeSocio, 2005; Mishler, 1986).

Narrative Research with Children

Narrative researchers have worked extensively with adult populations to elicit narratives, such as life histories (Agar & Hobbs, 1982; 1983; Mishler, 1986), but research with children is still developing. Uszynska-Jarmoc (2004), in an extensive study on the conception of “self” in the narratives of 8-year-olds, developed useful methods encouraging self-talk from children. Uszynska-Jarmoc obtained two types of narratives from the participants in her study: narratives representing the public self and the private self. To elicit public self narratives, the researcher placed the participant before a video camera and told the child that a documentary was being made about children of similar age to be shown to children in a different city. The researcher instructed the child to simply talk about his or herself before the camera. For the presentation of the private self, the child was paired with a familiar teacher and instructed to draw his or her self-

portrait while contemplating the self, such as what he or she is like, who he or she is, and what he or she wants to be in the future. After completing the self-portrait, the child was instructed to talk about his or herself in the presence of the familiar teacher while the conversation was audio recorded without the child’s knowledge. In the analysis of the self-talk, Uszynska-Jarmoc found that the 8-year-olds in the study volunteered a limited number of self-related categories. Rather than narratives, children most often volunteered information about personal preferences and behaviors. “Past” and “future” selves were rarely discussed in comparison to the “present” self. Similarly, this study identified a prevalence of comments about the “actual” self as opposed to “ideal,” “possible,” or “duty-bound” self. Uszynska-Jarmoc concluded that 8-year-olds do not have elaborate or well-developed self-concepts, and therefore have limited self-knowledge. However, because the children in the study were not specifically prompted to tell stories about themselves, it may well be that they did not often volunteer information in that form. When asked in the present moment to talk about themselves, the children most often volunteered present and actual information about the self, rather than information about the “past,” “future,” “ideal,” “possible,” or “duty-bound” selves. While the participants in this study volunteered limited information in narrative form, this study does present a useful method for eliciting self-talk from children by drawing a self-portrait in the presence of a familiar adult.

De Roten, Favez, Drapeau, and Stern (2003) offer further insight into the importance of familiarity with the adult in child storytelling. These researchers elicited emotional narratives from preschool children by first having each participant take part in a theatrical play in a laboratory setting. Directly afterwards, half of the children discussed the event with their mothers while the other half discussed the event with an unknown research assistant. The researchers found that the children told longer narratives with more detail and expressed more emotion with

their mothers than with the unknown researcher. They concluded that personal narratives are sensitive to the relationship with the listener, especially when the narrative has emotional content.

The final source of methodology for child narratives comes from DeSocio (2005), who explored the use of narratives in therapy with an 8-year-old boy named Tony in foster care. Over six months of therapy, Tony and his therapist created “Tony’s Book,” a 3-ring binder with drawings, photographs, mementos, and stories. The therapist transcribed the stories for Tony, freeing Tony from the labor of writing so that he could focus on recall and narration. Stories in “Tony’s Book” included: “Tony’s memories of his sister,” “What Tony remembers about his mom,” “Birthday memories,” and “What Tony wants to be when he grows up.” Through a combination of narrative therapy and play therapy, Tony’s aggressive behaviors reduced, his sleep improved, he re-established contact with his sister, and he developed a closer relationship with his foster mother, who later adopted him.

Researchers have studied how children in middle childhood use narratives to make sense of their lives and their “selves” (DeSocio, 2005; Uszynska-Jarmoc, 2004; Van Abbema & Bauer, 2005), but narrative theorists have largely ignored the narratives of young children. However, researchers have identified several cognitive abilities that must be present before children can produce coherent narratives. DeSocio (2005) acknowledges that children must have awareness of themselves as separate and distinct individuals to develop personal narratives. DeSocio reports that this awareness develops by the age of 3. Also by the age of 3, children understand the difference between reality and non-reality and understand symbols (Kleinknecht & Beike, 2004). Related to these concepts, Kleinknecht and Beike found that Theory of Mind, which is the ability to think about thinking or reflect upon experiences, begins to develop during the preschool years.

Preschool children are developing the language and vocabulary skills necessary to convey internal concepts such as self-reflection and problem solving (DeSocio, 2005; Nelson, 1992). Also necessary for creation of meaningful personal narratives is knowledge and skill with the structure of narratives (Kleinknecht & Beike, 2004). DeSocio asserts that “the first evidence of simple, goal-directed story telling in children occurs between ages 5 and 7” (p. 57). Finally, autobiographical memory, the ability to recount memories that are important to the self, is necessary for young children to produce personal narratives. DeSocio (2005) explains that a child’s first autobiographical memories occur through scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) with parents, who prompt the child to remember a shared event, between the ages of 2 and 4. Nelson (1992) agrees that children are able to produce autobiographical memory without the aid of scaffolding at around the age of 4.

Based on the development of these cognitive abilities, I believe that 5 years of age is the earliest that children are likely to produce coherent narratives about the “self.” While narrative theory has been applied to middle childhood, researchers have yet to identify the use of narratives by children as young as 5 years of age to create stories about personal experiences. While a complete sense of identity is not formed until late adolescence in most cases, it is my contention that young children are capable of actively making sense of their “selves” and their worlds through the creation of coherent narratives.

The current study addresses the question: How do young children create coherent narratives about the self? Five-year-old children were helped to generate personal narratives which were analyzed for coherence. Given De Roten, Favez, Drapeau, and Stern’s (2003) findings that children give longer, more detailed, and more emotional narratives to familiar listeners, children were selected who had some level of previous contact with the researcher

through a preschool program where the researcher served as the children’s teacher. To obtain narratives from the children, each child was helped to make a simple autobiography consisting of five personal stories and drawings. It was expected that the actions of drawing pictures and making a storybook would help the child focus on the task and remain interested. This choice of methodology was drawn both from Uszynska-Jarmoc (2004), whose participants drew self-portraits in the presence of a familiar teacher, and DeSocio (2005), whose therapy with a child included making a book about the child’s life. My contention is that analysis of these narratives will demonstrate that this age group is able to construct coherent narratives expressing a beginning awareness of individual perspective. A narrative analysis, adapted from Van Abbema and Bauer (2005) and Burke (1969), was conducted to identify levels of story coherence.

Method

Participants

Participants were seven 5-year-old children previously or currently enrolled in a preschool located on a rural Midwestern Liberal Arts college campus. Four of the participants were female and five were male. Two additional participants were excluded from analysis due to an inability to fully participate in the task. Drawing from the general population of the area, the children were of middle class, Caucasian families. Recruitment was conducted via a letter mailed to all parents of eligible children (see Appendix A).

Materials

A small room was equipped with a table, two chairs, and various art supplies for making a book. These included markers, crayons, colored pencils, and construction paper in various colors. A small audio tape recorder was located on the table.

Procedure

Parents of the participants returned a completed consent form (see Appendix B) and a short questionnaire about the child (see Appendix C). Information obtained from this questionnaire included the precise age of the child, important figures in the child’s life (including family members, friends, and other adults), the living situation of the child (including family members and pets in the home), any recent important events that may be relevant during the child’s interview with me, and the extent to which storytelling with the child takes place in the home. The parents were informed that their child and the researcher would be engaging in a book-making activity designed to capture drawings and stories about the child. Book-making sessions ranged between 40 minutes and 1 hour. Upon receiving the consent form and questionnaire, the parents were contacted to set up a date for the child to have a session with the researcher.

When the parent and child arrived for the session, the child’s general understanding of the task of making a book with the researcher was attained before taking the child to the separate interview room. Upon entering the room, the child’s attention was directed in turn to the art supplies on the table, then to the audio tape recorder and microphone on the table. After the child indicated basic understanding of the microphone and tape recorder, the researcher closed the door to the interview room. To direct the child’s attention to the task of making a book, the researcher asked the child to select the paper color and guide the child through making a cover page. For a detailed script of directions and prompts with each child, see Appendix D.

Each child’s storybook contained five stories. The first story served as an orientation narrative about the child’s family. It familiarized the child with the task of making a drawing and telling a story as well as helped the child talk about personal experiences by beginning with what

is most basic in the child’s life: the family. The second story was an event narrative. The topic for this story was chosen based on answers from the parent’s questionnaire. If no applicable recent and important event was given in the questionnaire and the child had not thus far mentioned a recent event, the researcher asked the child to tell a story about his or her last birthday. The third story was a relationship narrative. This topic was also dependent on the information provided in the questionnaire. If the child has a sibling of similar age, the researcher prompted the child to tell a story about him or herself and the sibling. If there was no sibling, or a best friend had already been mentioned in the interview, then the researcher asked for a story about something that the child and his or her best friend did together. The fourth story was an emotion narrative. The researcher asked, “Can you think of a time when you were very, very mad?” An anger narrative was chosen based on previous research, which found that narratives about anger from 4-year-old children contained the most complete narrative structure (Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, Bentivegna, 1992). The alternative to anger, if the child could not think of a story about anger, was sadness. The last story was a future narrative with the prompt, “This story is about what you want to be when you grow up.”

After finishing the storybook, the researcher explained that the storybook would be returned to the child at a later time. To help the child feel comfortable with parting with the book, the researcher suggested that they read the book to the parent in the waiting area before leaving. This period of sharing the storybook allowed the parent to better understand the child’s involvement in the research task and gave the researcher further information on the stories told by the child.

Data Coding

Each session was transcribed using a method adapted from Ochs (1979). For explanations and examples of the symbols used in the transcripts, see Appendix E. These transcripts were then used for a narrative analysis of story coherence.

Based on the six basic story components identified by Burke (1969) and Van Abbema and Bauer (2005), each story was coded for information pertaining to the component questions *who*, *what*, *why*, *how*, *where*, and *when* by highlighting the text with a different color for each component. A *story* was defined as any stretch of talk made by the child pertaining to the story topic from the point when the researcher stated, “This story is about...” to the point when the researcher asked, “Are we ready for the next story?” *Who* and *what* were considered basic information necessary for a story. *Who* was defined as any identification of characters (e.g. “this is *mommy* and this is my *sister*”), as well as any time that the child said “I” or “me.” *What* was defined as any action occurring in the story (e.g. “I *told* Fred” or “we *like* to play”). Without character and action, the stretch of talk could not be defined as a story. *Why* and *how* were expected to build upon the basic components of *who* and *what*. *Why* was defined as any statement explaining the purpose of a previous statement or overall purpose of the story (e.g. “you can’t come to my party *because* you’re so far away”). *Why* could be demonstrated through the use of “because,” though it was not necessary (e.g. “we loved having the tea party / it was very yummy”). *How* was defined as any description that expressed what kind or how much, as well as any description of how the character was feeling or experiencing the event (e.g. “his hair is really *orange*” or “we always draw *funny* pictures”). *When* and *where* add setting or context to the story by giving the physical and temporal location (e.g. “we were going to the park” or “it was when the moon first came up”).

In addition, shifts in information were noted. Shifts often occurred when the child identified a character and later changed the character’s identity (e.g. “that’s me. . .that’s Daddy”). However, shifts also occurred for components of *what* (e.g. “we’re jumping on the trampoline. . . we’re on the merry-go-round”) and *where* or *when* (e.g. “my bed was put together the next night. . . it was never put together”). Shifts were recorded because they caused confusion and could reduce the coherence of the story.

Narrative Analysis

Tallies of story components and shifts were organized in a spreadsheet (see Appendix F) and served as the basis for the narrative analysis. Thirty-five stories (five from each of seven participants), or stretches of talk on a single story topic, were categorized at one of four levels of story coherence: non-story, incoherent story, basically coherent story, and fully coherent story. A fully coherent story confirmed the expectations of this study by conveying the child’s perspective, or subjecting reflection, of the event in the story.

Non-Story

Four of the 35 stories (11%) were classified as non-stories. The most basic components necessary for a story are agent and action (i.e. *who* and *what*). All of these stretches of talk were missing identifiable action and therefore did not contain the basic information necessary to be defined as a story. Without action, the stories in this category could be better identified as lists of characters, with some details about the characters (i.e. *how*). An example of this can be found in the session with Isabelle:

285 T: this one is about you and your best friend
 286 I: okay
 314 I: should I draw me and Sandra?
 315 T: (*nods*)

- 318 I: I think I’m gonna / be both in dresses / me and Sandra / I’m gonna color my dress pink / that’s my favorite color / I’m gonna Sandra dress / red / because that’s her favorite color / okay?
- 322 I: first I have to draw us / (*drawing*) this / one / is Sandra / I think Sandra has green eyes

Isabelle identified two characters while drawing, “me and Sandra,” which were considered information of *who*. Isabelle also added *how* to her story by providing details about the characters (i.e. “Sandra has green eyes”). However, because the characters never performed any action, or *what*, this is not considered a story.

Incoherent Story

Five of the 35 stories (14%) were categorized as incoherent stories. These segments did contain agent and action, so they were considered stories in the most basic form. However, these stories were missing components of two or three of the remaining four components. Each of these stories exhibited limited or no connection between statements, such as in the example from Charlie, who shared a story about a friend’s birthday party:

- 251 T: this story / let’s make it about / henry’s party yesterday?
- 252 C: okay
- 253 T: you want to draw a picture of that?
- 254 C: yeah / they had a really good tv
- 256 C: and / I liked their door
- 268 C: (*drawing*) and / I liked their whole house
- 270 C: and I like to um / play at their swimming pool
- 293 T: okay / (*writes*) / so / how does this story start?
- 294 C: um / I really like things / and / I really like to play with things
- 299 C: um / I like to / play / on the computer / and / I always like to run / but sometime I’m tired
- 302 C: and / some / time / I / want to watch tv / I eat breakfast first / and / I like / to / play / and I like to play with my mommy and daddy / and / I really really really like to play
- 306 C: um / I / like / um / henry’s / um / playroom
- 308 C: and I like / and / um / his toys
- 310 C: and / and / he-he has new star wars characters for / me
- 328 C: um / I like when I go on vacations / and I / I like my teachers at my school / and / I / um / and / I like / to / really play

Charlie’s story does identify characters and actions; mainly in the form of “I like.” His story does contain one example of *how* by describing how much he likes to play: “I really really really like to play.” However, Charlie does not identify any setting to the story or any purpose within his statements. Charlie’s statements shift from comments about Henry’s house and toys into Charlie’s home life, vacations, and school without transition. Had Charlie’s story contained components of *why*, *where*, or *when*, his statements may have been more connected by focusing on only one story, such as the suggested story of Henry’s birthday party. Because Charlie’s story contained only a limited amount of story components and exhibited disconnecting statements, the story is confusing and therefore incoherent.

Basically Coherent Story

Thirteen stories (37.5%) were identified as basically coherent. To be basically coherent, components of four of the six questions must be present in the story, including *who*, *what*, and one or both of *why* and *how*. Over half of the basically coherent stories included information shifts, often shifts of *who*. These were cases when the child identified an agent in the story and later changed the character’s identity. An example of a character shift can be found in Adam’s story about his family:

- 151 T: the first one is about your FAMILY
 153 T: do you want to draw a picture of your family over here?
 160 A: this is / ME (*drawing*)
 164 A: that’s me / um / I am walking
 166 A: this is my / dad / dy (*drawing*)
 168 A: (.) actually I’m walking with my momma
 170 A: and we’re PLAYing / OUTside / she’s jump / I am jumping / on a trampoline / with my / mom / at the PARK
 173 A: she jumps higher than ME / and I jump lower
 177 A: and / here’s / [my brother] (*drawing*)
 181 A: (.) oh / that’s DADdy on the ferris wheel
 182 T: oh now it’s daddy?
 183 A: yes
 185 A: here’s [my brother] / on the ferris wheel / with daddy (*drawing*)

- 203 T: how do we start this story?
 204 A: it was / when / when my MOMMY / well / when mommy and me were sitting
 in the front / when daddy and mommy were sitting in the front of the car and me
 were sitting in our car seats
 212 A: we were going to the park
 214 A: mommy and me / went / on (*draws circle with dots underneath*)
 216 A: the merry go round
 220 A: well daddy and [my brother] / bounced on the trampoline
 232 A: and THEN / we / mommy and me / had to go / home / to take [my brother] /
 daddy / home / and [my brother] / came with us / and he had to stay HOME / and
 235 A: and then we ALL went HOME

Adam shifted characters several times in this story. The first shift occurs in lines 166 and 168; Adam identifies his daddy, and then changes the character to mommy. In lines 177 to 185, the researcher is confused about the shift from brother to dad, and asks for clarification in line 182. The conclusion of the story, in lines 232 and 235, continually shifts the agents who are going home, ending with the entire family at home. While this story does contain all story components and follow one sequence of events about going to the park, playing at the park, and going home, the numerous shifts in agents cause confusion and reduce the coherence of the story.

Fully Coherent Story

The remaining 13 stories (37.5%) were categorized as fully coherent stories. Stories in this category must contain at least one instance of the story components of *who*, *what*, *why*, and *how*. Components of *where* and *when* were not required in all cases; four of the fully coherent stories were missing one or both of these components. In these stories, the settings were implicit or implied, and direct identification of the setting would have added little to the coherence of the story. Context can add more detail to the story, but are not crucial to understanding the story being told. Beth’s story about playing with her sister illustrates this exception:

- 264 T: how about we make this one about you and your sister / do you have a story
 about you and your sister?
 266 B: mmhmm (*drawing*)
 279 T: what’s going on in the drawing?

- 280 B: we're both having a tea party
 282 B: that's me / and that's my sister
 287 T: what's the name of this story
 288 B: the happy / TEA PARTY
 291 B: we loved having the tea
 293 B: it was very yummy
 295 B: and our mom / and / dad / said hurry / up / your / tea party
 297 B: (*playing with necklace*) and we said / oh / kay
 299 B: and we said / we / hope / we could have the tea party again someday
 305 B: and / and it was very exciting / exciting / to have the tea party / again /
 someday

Beth's story conveys her perspective of what is important about this tea party with her sister.

Beth shares the enjoyment of the tea party by expressing *how* she and her sister experienced the game – they “loved” it, the tea tasted “very yummy,” and the game was “happy.” The importance of the story, to Beth, was the interruption of the game by her parents and how she handled it. Beth expresses how she dealt with the sudden interruption by demonstrating how she responded with hope for another “exciting” tea party in the future. Although Beth did not explicitly state *where* or *when* this tea party took place, the missing information did not interfere with Beth's ability to clearly convey the essence of her experience of her negotiations with her parents to end her game.

All of the fully coherent stories conveyed the child storyteller's perspective, or point of view, of the story being told. The stories in this category have intentional and sequential statements, unlike the disconnected statements of the incoherent stories, and do not have shifts of agents, which cause confusion in many of the basically coherent stories. Rather, the fully coherent stories allow the listener to see how the child makes sense of the event through the stories. Another example of a fully coherent story comes from Danny, who tells a story about moving to a new house:

- 121 T: this one is about MOVING / do you want to tell a story about when you moved?
- 125 D: it's a blue sky / but / the moon was almost up
- 127 D: and [my friend Fred] was going to have his BIRTHDAY party at (*drawing*) / at the bowling ally
- 138 D: mom and dad JUST bought our house / and when I first told it to Fred he said / AW NO / now you can't come to my / birthday party / because you're so FAR AWAY
- 142 D: I said / no Fred / we didn't move IN this ACTUAL day / this is JUST the day we bought it
- 145 D: I'm drawing a picture of WHEN he was ASKING me to the party
- 147 D: when the night was first beginning to fade
- 151 D: (*drawing*) there's the moon
- 153 D: it's when it / first came up
- 155 D: when it's ORANGE
- 189 D: (*drawing*) and when / we first came in / Fred said / YOU'RE LATE / YOU'RE LATE / YOU'RE LATE /
- 166 D: there's his hair / his hair is really orange but / just dimmer than that
- 168 D: because / the moon is shining on it
- 170 D: me / (*drawing self*) / my brown / hair / there / two eyes / a mouth / and a nose
- 184 D: we're ready for the story
- 191 T: what's the name of this story?
- 192 D: I went to Fred's house
- 196 D: I went to Fred's house before the party one night / well / the night BEFORE the party
- 204 D: I told Fred / that I was / that I just / that my mom and dad just bought / a HOUSE
- 206 D: Fred said / OH NO you can't come to my party because you're so far away / I'm SORRY

Danny's story includes several instances of each of the story components, including explicit setting (i.e. “when the moon...first came up”), agents, action, purpose (i.e. “this is just the day we bought [the house]”), and detail (i.e. “his hair is really orange”). Additionally, Danny chose a unique way to tell his story of moving; rather than focus on the moving day, as an adult may expect, Danny chose to talk about the part of moving that was most important to him – the day that he first told a friend that he was moving. By reflecting on the event when he told his friend that he was moving away, Danny was becoming more aware of how he understood the concept of moving to a new house. Danny's story used all six components to keep the segments

purposeful and sequential from beginning to draw the picture to dictating the story to the researcher.

Discussion

All 5-year-olds in this study were able to tell stories about personal experience. The narrative analysis suggested a range of storytelling ability, with 11% of talk categorized as non-stories, 14% incoherent stories, 37.5% basically coherent stories, and 37.5% fully coherent stories. The majority (75%) of the stories told by the participants in this study were coherent at either the basic or full level of coherence, suggesting that the ability to create stories about personal experience is developing by the age of 5 years. Further, each of the fully coherent stories told by the children in this study demonstrated selective attention to and organization of story components into a narrative of the child’s perspective on the event. This ability to use perspective demonstrates “a reflective awareness of being-in-the-world” (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21) which narrative theorists understand to be the point of emergence of a “self” in the story. Children who created fully coherent stories demonstrated a beginning ability to reflect upon and express “self” through stories by sharing narratives that convey their unique perspectives of the event.

The current study sought to develop a method for analyzing story coherence using the basic story components of *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *how*, and *why*. Building upon previous analysis of story components (Burke, 1969; Van Abbema & Bauer, 2005), I rejected an analysis based on ideal story structure in favor of a method that better captured the less mature forms of narratives elicited by young children. The six components used in this study’s analysis did capture the basic components of the stories. Additionally, the shifts in information made by the children reflected the reduced coherence of the narrative. These shifts have been noted by other

narrative researchers as contradictions that reduce the internal consistency of the narrative (Agar & Hobbs, 1983; Fiese & Sameroff, 1999). Classification of each story into a category of coherence was more interpretive than simply the number of components present in each story. For example, Beth told two stories that each contained four of the six story components. Both stories were missing the context of *where* and *when*, yet one was categorized as fully coherent while the other was basically coherent. If the stories were made up of the same components, what made their coherence different? The answer seems to lie in the interconnection of the statements within the story that create its structure and organization. Beth’s family story, which is missing information of *where* and *when*, lacks this organization:

- 103 T: next we need to write a STORY about your family / can you think of a story you’d like to tell?
 105 B: mmm (.) we like to play
 114 B: mm (.) we like to laugh
 117 B: (.) we like to run
 121 T: do you have a story about a time when you played or laughed together?
 122 B: mm (.) (*shrugs*) I can’t make it up = I can’t ()
 129 B: um (.) (*plays with necklace*) () because my mommy / and / da / ddy and brother always / tickled me and my sister?
 138 B: um (.) we like to goof around (*playing with necklace*)
 141 B: mm (.) I can’t think of ANY OTHERS
 142 T: do you want to tell a story about getting tickled?
 147 B: um (.) we liked it very much
 151 B: mm (.) it’s / fun
 154 B: (.) we always draw funny pictures
 158 B: mmm (*plays with necklace*) and / and we scares ourselves? / with the pictures?

Beth struggled throughout this segment to find a story to tell, despite several prompts from the researcher. While she did share several components of *who*, *what*, *why*, and *how*, her statements were not grounded in a single event and her story was therefore basically, but not fully, coherent. Conceivably, if her story had been focused in a single event, then the story might have also contained identification of *where* and *when*, which would bolster coherence further.

Beth’s story of her tea party with her sister, discussed as an example of a fully coherent story, did not contain *where* or *when*. In this instance, Beth’s narrative was focused, with each statement relating to the event being told. The location of the story in time and place was not necessary to convey understanding of the event and Beth’s perspective. These two stories from Beth demonstrate that coherence encompasses more than mere inclusion of the six basic story components. Coherence of a story also relies on the interconnection of statements which is often guided by the plot or purpose of the story.

The researcher played several active roles in this study – the theoretician, interviewer, and analyst – which may have impacted the results of this study. Because this study sought to develop a method of narrative analysis applicable to early narratives, reliability of the analysis has not been assessed. However, the six story components used to code the children’s narratives were chosen with the belief that even an investigator untrained in narrative theory would be able to reliably apply these components to children’s narratives as well as other forms of narrative data samples (e.g. adults’ narratives, children’s books, or naturally occurring talk of adults and children). Future research will test whether an independent trained coder can reliably apply this method to categorize a story’s coherence based on the presence of basic story components.

Continuing analysis will take a more detailed look at the children’s narratives by analyzing each child’s storybook as a whole. This study has identified that fully coherent stories convey the child’s perspective, or point of view, of the events in the stories. Further analysis will address each child’s collection of stories for relationships between them that offer further detail about the child’s awareness of a “self,” or subjective experience, through the stories. Previous researchers have identified that these relationships among stories may take the form of the overall goal of the stories, recurring themes among the stories, recurrence of the child’s basic

beliefs and assumptions, or the use of emotions in telling the stories (Agar & Hobbs, 1982; Budwig, 2003; DeSocio, 2005; Fiese & Sameroff, 1999). More specifically, plans for future research include analysis of the child storyteller’s use of agency to convey point of view (Ochs & Capps, 1996). For example, this analysis will address questions such as: What role is the child playing in this story? Is the child often the active agent or passive observer?

The current study argues that narrative theory is applicable to stories told by people as young as five years of age. Additionally, this study demonstrates that alternative methods can be used to assess the coherence of children’s narratives. Five out of seven participants in this study were able to tell fully coherent stories at least part of the time. Therefore, the majority of the children in this study have the ability to use storytelling to reflect upon their experiences as a way to actively and selectively make sense of their worlds. As they do this, they are constructing an ability to reflect upon whom they believe themselves to be in their worlds. Children should be understood not as passive people incapable of self-awareness, but as active agents who are beginning to author their lives.

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Appendix A
Recruitment Letter to Parents

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a senior psychology major at Hanover College, and I am writing to invite your child to participate in my senior research project.

Research Purpose and Procedure:

The purpose of my research is to assess the development of identity in 5-year-old children. I would like to spend about 45 minutes with your child (one hour maximum) to create a storybook together. This storybook will be a form of an autobiography; it will contain drawings and stories created by your child and will include memories that are important to your child.

Included with this letter are a consent form and a short questionnaire. If you would like your child to participate, please fill out the consent form and questionnaire and return both to me by mail. The information about your child that you provide on the questionnaire will help me plan how best to interview your child, as well as guide me in understanding your child while working with him/her.

After I have received the consent form and questionnaire for you, I will contact you to set up a date for me to interview your child. My interview with your child, where we will work together to create your child’s storybook, will be audio-taped. I plan to later transcribe the recording and use this data along with the storybook that was created to look for evidence of a coherent identity within the stories that your child told.

Participation:

Your child has been selected to participate in my study both because your child is currently five years old (or will be five by the end of February) and because your child is currently enrolled or was previously enrolled at the Center for Child Development. The latter is important for my research for two reasons. First, by having been enrolled at the Center for Child Development, your child is familiar with the task of telling stories and making books. Second, because I have been working at the Center for Child Development since fall of 2005, including serving as an intern during the summer of 2006, your child is familiar with me on some level and will presumably be comfortable working with me.

Participation is voluntary and is in no way suggested or encouraged by the Center for Child Development. By giving your consent, you are allowing your child to participate in my research as well as consenting to answer a brief questionnaire concerning your child. I will also obtain verbal assent from your child before beginning my interview with your child. Both you and your child may choose to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no significant risks involved in participation in this research. You and your child have the right not to respond to any questions with which you or your child feels uncomfortable. When my research is complete, you will receive your child’s Self Storybook in the mail. In addition, you may request the audio tape or transcript of my interview with your child. Your child may enjoy keeping the book that he/she created, and both you and your child may benefit from the important stories that the storybook could contain.

Confidentiality:

The audio tape of your child’s interview will be heard only by me and my advisor, Michelle Mamberg, a licensed clinical psychologist. These recordings will be kept secure throughout the course of this research. Following the completion of data analysis, the tapes will be destroyed or, if you request, they will be mailed to you. I will not include your child’s name or identifying information in any presentation or publication of my results. However, I may choose to show the book your child created during a presentation. Before doing so, I will contact you to allow you to review the material and give consent.

Dissemination of Results:

The results of this research will be presented to Hanover’s psychology professors and students in April. I also hope to present this study at the Butler Undergraduate Research Conference in April. Additionally, a manuscript will be written. You are welcome to read the final manuscript and attend the presentation.

Questions:

If you have any questions or are interested in learning more about this study, you may contact me or my advisor by mail, phone, or e-mail:

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Appendix B
Consent Form

“Narrative Coherence of 5-Year-Olds’ Stories”

Researcher: Taryn Bellgard
Faculty Advisor: Michelle Mamberg, Ph.D.

Research Summary:

The researcher plans to assess the development of identity in children by conducting individual interviews with 5-year-old children who have been or are currently enrolled in the Center for Child Development. The interview with each child will consist of making a storybook similar to an autobiography, containing drawings and stories about the child’s life. The interview will be audio-taped and later transcribed and used with the storybook in analysis for evidence of a coherent identity.

Agreement to Participate:

I have been fully informed of the purpose and expectations of participation in this study. I have read the consent form and understand its contents. I am hereby volunteering to participate and to allow my child to participate in this study. I understand that this includes answering a brief questionnaire and returning it along with this completed consent form as well as being contacted to set up a 45 minute interview between the researcher and my child. I realize that I or my child may withdraw at any time if I or my child so choose.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

PHONE: _____ EMAIL: _____

Please check your preferred method of contact: PHONE: _____ EMAIL: _____

Please indicate if you would like additional information about this study (you will be receiving your child’s storybook in the mail after data collection is complete):

AUDIO RECORDING OF INTERVIEW: _____

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW: _____

FINAL MANUSCRIPT: _____

Appendix C
Parent/Guardian Questionnaire

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. NAME OF CHILD: _____

2. AGE OF CHILD IN YEARS: _____ MONTHS: _____

3. LIVING SITUATION (INCLUDING HOME AND NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE AND FAMILY MEMBERS IN HOME): _____

4. OTHER IMPORTANT FIGURES (INCLUDING OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS, ADULTS, OR PEERS): _____

5. RECENT EVENTS THAT MAY HAVE SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACTED YOUR CHILD:

6. HOW OFTEN DOES YOUR CHILD ENGAGE IN STORYTELLING/STORYMAKING
BEHAVIORS IN THE HOME? _____

—

Appendix D
Interview Script

<i>Action</i>	<i>Description/Prompt</i>
Parent and child arrive	<i>Hi, [Child’s name], do you remember me from preschool?</i> [Establish familiarity/relationship with the researcher, likely as teacher at preschool]
Obtain assent from child	<i>Do you know what we’re going to do today? We’re going to make a book together. [Mommy] will wait out here while we go make a book in that room [point]. When we’re done, in about 45 minutes, we can come back out and get [Mommy]. We have lots of things in that room to make our book with. Would you like to go see?</i> [if child agrees, lead into interview room] [if child is reluctant to part with parent] <i>Maybe [Mommy] can come look at all of the art supplies with us.</i>
Introduce child to the research room	<i>Look at all of the art supplies on the table! What do you think you would like to use for your book?</i> [Child indicates preferred art supplies] <i>We’re going to make a book all about you; it’s going to have stories and pictures about you in it. Every page will have a different picture and a story on it. When the book is done, it will have five different stories.</i> <i>Do you see that [indicate tape recorder] on the table? It’s going to record what we say while we’re making the book. That way I can remember what we talked about after you leave. See this part [indicate microphone]? This is a microphone. Have you ever seen a microphone so tiny? When we talk, this is the part that hears what we say.</i> <i>Are you ready to start making our book?</i> [If child agrees, then go to the door] <i>I’m going to close the door so no one bothers us.</i> [If parent is still in room] <i>Is it okay for [Mommy] to go sit outside now?</i>
Select paper	<i>What color would you like your book to be?</i> [Indicate color choices on table] <i>I’m going to staple the pages together so that it will look like a book when we open it.</i>
Make the cover page	<i>This will be the cover of the book. What should we call a book that’s all about you?</i> [If child is hesitant, offer prompts] <i>How about “The Story of [Child’s name]” or “My Storybook”?</i> <i>What’s next? Should we write your name on the cover? Would you like to write your name yourself? Maybe we should we add the date so that we can always remember when we wrote this. Do you know what day it is today? Should we write how old you are?</i>
Story 1: Orientation drawing	<i>Now we’re ready for the first story. How about we start with a story about your family? Do you want to draw a picture of your family?</i> [If child needs more structure, ask about family members or house. Continue conversation by commenting and asking about the pictures]
Story 1: Orientation narrative	<i>That’s a great picture! Are you finished? Now let’s write a story to go with the picture. You tell me what you want it to say, and I’ll write down the story over here [point to opposite page].</i> [If child has trouble beginning] <i>Can you think of a story about your family?</i>

Appendix E:
Transcription Scheme

Symbol	Explanation	Example
T:	Interviewer; Taryn	T: do you want to draw a picture of your family?
A-I:	Child’s pseudo name; letter corresponds to each P# (A is 1, B is 2, etc.)	B: I’m just drawing my cousin
<i>Italics</i>	Non-verbal behavior	F: (<i>shrugs</i>)
CAPS	Verbal emphasis	E: it’s gonna be a BIG BIG FAMILY
/	Slight pause (often between phrases)	C: um / I like my whole family / and / my mom and dad
(.)	Long pause	A: (.) I think / I might wanna do
()	Inaudible words	I: I think the () my family () is
?	Verbal rise	D: and how much I care for my family?
//	Placed at beginning and end of verbal overlap	E: and // then // T: // that // would take a long time

Appendix F:
Data Reduction Grid

Each of the 35 stories has an identifying number (key). Each participant (P#) told five stories (family, event, relationship, mad emotion, and future). This grid shows the tallies of each of the six components (who, what, why, how, where, when) as well as shifts for each story, then totals the story components (out of six possible), and gives the coherence level (non-story, incoherent, basically coherent, and fully coherent story) of each story.

Key	P#	Story	Who	What	Why	How	Where	When	Shift	Total	Coherence
1	1	FAM	29	18	1	1	7	8	7	6/6	Basic
2	1	EVE	34	17	2	0	2	10	3	5/6	Basic
3	1	REL	22	11	1	1	2	2	3	6/6	Basic
4	1	MAD	23	18	3	4	6	5	1	6/6	Basic
5	1	FUT	24	17	2	6	4	8		6/6	Basic
6	2	FAM	20	11	3	4	0	0		4/6	Basic
7	2	EVE	11	7	1	3	1	2		6/6	Full
8	2	REL	10	6	2	2	0	0		4/6	Full
9	2	MAD	11	7	3	7	1	3	1	6/6	Basic
10	2	FUT	6	6	2	2	1	3		6/6	Full
11	3	FAM	51	21	0	0	7	0		3/6	Incoherent
12	3	EVE	38	24	0	1	0	0		3/6	Incoherent
13	3	REL	34	22	1	0	1	0	1	4/6	Basic
14	3	MAD	18	13	2	1	4	2		6/6	Full
15	3	FUT	22	9	1	0	0	0	1	3/6	Incoherent
16	4	FAM	33	11	4	12	1	0		5/6	Full
17	4	EVE	35	14	1	4	5	3		6/6	Full
18	4	REL	18	12	2	3	5	1		6/6	Basic
19	4	MAD	26	19	4	9	1	5		6/6	Full
20	4	FUT	11	9	3	2	0	2		5/6	Full
21	5	FAM	9	0	0	3	0	1		3/6	Non-Story
22	5	EVE	4	2	1	3	4	1		6/6	Full
23	5	REL	9	5	1	5	4	1	1	6/6	Full
24	5	MAD	11	8	1	4	1	1		6/6	Full
25	5	FUT	7	1	0	2	1	0	4	4/6	Incoherent
26	8	FAM	7	0	0	8	1	0	1	3/6	Non-Story
27	8	EVE	8	7	1	4	0	1		5/6	Full
28	8	REL	16	5	0	6	1	3	1	5/6	Basic
29	8	MAD	5	3	1	1	1	1		6/6	Full
30	8	FUT	2	1	0	0	0	1		3/6	Incoherent
31	9	FAM	9	0	0	6	0	0		2/6	Non-Story
32	9	EVE	2	1	0	3	2	1		5/6	Basic
33	9	REL	12	0	0	3	0	0		2/6	Non-Story
34	9	MAD	11	1	0	4	2	0		4/6	Basic
35	9	FUT	3	1	0	3	1	0		4/6	Basic