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Quality Interactions and Family Storytelling

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This study examined how individuals' satisfaction with their family, as well as the ways they negotiated the telling of a family story, combined to predict their perceived quality of the storytelling interaction. Drawing from family members' (150 individuals, 50 families) joint telling of an often told family story, multilevel modeling analyses revealed significant variance within and between families' perceived quality of their storytelling interaction. These variances were explained by family satisfaction and family-level ratings of engagement during storytelling. These findings drive our suggestions for future assessment of multiple members' perspectives of joint family storytelling interactions.

Keywords: family communication, interactional sense-making, multilevel modeling, narrative, storytelling

Communication among family members is multifaceted, consisting of episodes that both affect and reflect the ongoing interactions of those involved (e.g., Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Marrow-Ferguson & Dickson, 1995; Prescott & LePoire, 2002). Although these episodes take place in a variety of contexts, family storytelling is one of the primary ways that families and family members create a sense of individual and group identity (Blum-Kulka, 1993; Norrick, 1997; Stone, 2004), connect generations (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2013), and establish guidelines for behavior (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2013). Moreover, the content and processes of joint family storytelling offer a glimpse into the windows through which people see themselves and their relational lives (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Koenig

Kellas & Trees, 2013; Stueve & Pleck, 2001). Thus, family storytelling offers a strong context for understanding family communication and culture.

The collective telling of a family story involves the negotiation of multiple individuals who potentially differ in characteristics, feelings, and/or preferences for interaction at multiple levels (i.e., the individual level and the family unit level). To further complicate this process, following the sharing of a family story, families and family members have the potential to differ in whether or not their expectations for interaction were met (i.e., whether or not they perceived the quality of an interaction to be satisfying). Given this, family storytelling serves as a rich context from which to observe the interactional sense-making process performed by the family as a group and provides a window into the complexities associated with multiple individuals contributing to a joint product(ion). For example, individual sex has been shown to play a role in storytelling style (Fiese & Skillman, 2000), as has relationship satisfaction (e.g., Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992). Indeed, both group-level processes and individual characteristics are relevant to family members' perceptions about, or experiences of, the interaction—impressions that likely reflect the past and affect future interactions and feelings. Despite the potential to illuminate both family- and individual-level processes, researchers often draw their conclusions from either the entire family (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2005) or individual members (e.g., Koenig Kellas, Trees, Schrodt, LeClair-Underberg, & Willer, 2010). Considering both the individual perspectives that members bring to a storytelling interaction and the family-level communication processes involved, an examination of the interplay between the family system and its components is warranted in order to better understand the complexities of family storytelling.

The purpose of this study was to combine and extend the previous research on interactional sense-making to *simultaneously* examine the perceived quality of storytelling interactions both within and between families. As such we tested the hypotheses that individuals' characteristics, including sex and satisfaction with their family, as well as the ways in which they collaboratively negotiated the telling of a family story together (i.e., engaged in interactional sense-making behaviors), combined to predict individuals' perceived quality of the family storytelling interaction.

Family Storytelling

Although family stories are often told together by family members (e.g., at the dinner table or to others to celebrate, critique, and explain who the family is to outsiders), not all family members may interpret the telling of a story in the same way and family members may differ in their feelings about that process. Family members, for example, may disagree on the details of a story or vary in the degree to which their perspectives integrate into the family story (Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, Jannusch, & Scharp, 2012; Koenig Kellas et al., 2010). Additionally, storytelling performs family culture; but it may also function to control or sanction members (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). Thus, individuals' perceptions of the quality of storytelling interactions likely vary among members of the same family, as well as across different families.

Research on family storytelling has focused on relational qualities and interaction in either the family system as a whole (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009) or its components (e.g., Baxter et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2009; Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). For example, at the family system level, emergent themes in joint family storytelling predicted differences in satisfaction, cohesion, adaptability, and family functioning across families (Koenig Kellas, 2005). In addition, satisfaction, cohesion, adaptability, and family functioning were positively predicted by a combination of high levels of perspective-taking, identifying as a storytelling family, and the ability to balance discussion of family and individual identity during the telling (Koenig Kellas, 2005).

At the member level, however, Baxter and her colleagues (2012) have argued that individuals telling the same story—adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth mothers—often differ in the extent to which their stories are coherent. Research on parents and adolescent children (e.g., Noller, Atkin, Feeney, & Peterson, 2006) suggests that adolescents evaluate some interactions more negatively than do parents. Likewise, Bormann, Knutson, and Musolf (1997) have found that individuals' preferences for certain kinds of narratives influenced their predisposition toward sharing fantasies based on their feelings for the group. Satisfied and dissatisfied family members varied in how they shared family stories (Vangelisti et al., 1999), which in turn may shape how family identity and legacies are perceived (Thompson et al., 2009). These past studies have regularly examined *either* the family system as a whole or its components. Thus, in order to advance narrative theorizing, there is a need for additional research to understand the interplay between individual- and family-level perceptions and processes, particularly because family storytelling is salient to both individual and family identity (Stone, 2004).

To further our understanding of how individual and group processes explain the systemic nature of family storytelling, we tested the ways in which families experience a storytelling interaction differently by assessing their satisfaction with the interaction, as well as the influences of biological sex and satisfaction with the family. First we tested our assertion that perceptions about the quality of a family storytelling interaction differ within and between groups.

> H1: Perceived quality of storytelling interactions will vary significantly within (i.e., among family members) and between families (i.e., when comparing Family A, to Family B, to Family C).

Biological Sex

In addition to individual family members' feelings and preferences, previous research suggests that demographic characteristics (e.g., sex) may influence group communication and evaluations of group interaction in general (Hawkins, 1995). For instance, with regard to biological sex, some researchers argue that women rate the quality of their conversations higher than men (Duck, Rutt, Hoy Hurst, & Strejc, 1991). Conversely, others argue that, because husbands often fail to meet their wives communication expectations for vulnerability, wives likely rate the quality of their spousal communication lower than husbands

(Hawkins, Weisberg, & Ray, 1980). Additionally, family narrative processes are often gendered. More specifically, researchers examining storytelling interactions indicate that there are sex differences in storytelling practices—positioning storytelling as part of the female realm (Stone, 2004) and characterizing women as the kin keepers of stories (Sherman, 1990). Other research indicates that men and women tell different kinds of stories in the family. Fiese and Bickham (2004), for example, found that mothers are more likely to tell children stories focusing on closeness while fathers focus their stories on independence and work.

Given the sexed nature of family narrative processes and discrepancies in the literature concerning its role in shaping conversation expectations, it is important to assess how perceptions of joint storytelling interactions may differ based on the sex makeup of the family system:

H2: Individuals' sex will influence their perceptions of the quality of their family storytelling interaction, such that women will report higher quality storytelling interactions than men.

Family Satisfaction

In addition to biological sex, researchers have found that members' family satisfaction also affects evaluations of the quality of storytelling interactions. A number of studies have identified correlations between relationship satisfaction and storytelling interaction (e.g., Buehlman et al., 1992; Orbuch, Veroff, & Holmberg, 1993). Additionally, research illustrates the importance of considering the satisfaction of individual family members rather than the family as a whole. For example, researchers have found that a collaborative narrative style in dinnertime interaction for married couples was positively related to wife's satisfaction (Dickstein, St. Andre, Sameroff, Seifer, & Schiller, 1999). Although these studies do not directly test perceived "quality of storytelling" as such, they establish relational satisfaction as an important correlate to storytelling in personal relationships and illuminate the importance of assessing the satisfaction of the member, as opposed to the family as a whole. Thus, we pose the following hypothesis to test the association between a family members' satisfaction with his or her family before interacting and his or her perception of the quality of the interaction after a family story is told:

H3: The more satisfied an individual is with his or her family before interacting, the more positively he or she will perceive the quality of their family interaction.

Interactional Sense-Making

Last, it is important to examine *how* different families jointly manage telling a story about their identity. Previous research has examined the ways in which families jointly collaborate on storytelling during interactions within family triads (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). Specifically, Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) identified four behaviors central to interactional sense-making during the joint tell-

ing of family stories: engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence. Engagement refers to the degree to which the family as a whole is warm and involved in the telling of a family story. Turn-taking involves the ways in which the family negotiates turns and talk-time during the storytelling interaction. Perspective-taking is the extent to which the family as a whole takes each other's perspectives into account and confirms these perspectives. Finally, the creation of coherence (i.e., the degree to which the story makes sense and is constructed as a joint product among family members) is also central to interactional sense-making. Previous research demonstrates that each of these factors relates to family satisfaction and functioning (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). Because family members jointly construct a sense of family identity when collaboratively telling a story together, the ways in which they negotiate that process through interaction—as assessed through these four interactional behaviors—likely explain differences in not just the overall quality and functioning of the family, but in their perceptions of the interaction itself. This reasoning leads to the following hypotheses:

> H4: Interactional sense-making behaviors (engagement, perspective-taking, turn-taking, and coherence) in joint storytelling will be significantly associated with individual family members' perceptions of the quality of his/her family interaction.

> H5: Interactional sense-making behaviors (engagement, perspective-taking, turn-taking, and coherence) in joint storytelling will moderate the relationships between (a) sex and individual family members' perception of the quality of his/her family interaction and (b) family satisfaction and individual family members' perception of the quality of his/her family interaction.

Method

Participants
Fifty family triads were recruited at a large northwestern university. Students volunteered to participate and received extra course credit for their participation, while their family members received $10 each for their participation. Of the 50 families, the sample comprised the following triad combinations: 21 (42%) mother, father, daughter; 10 (20%) mother, daughter, daughter; 9 (18%) mother, daughter, son; 5 (10%) mother, father, son; 3 (6%) father, daughter, daughter; and 2 (4%) father, daughter, son. In total, 30 fathers, with a mean age of 52.5 years (SD = 6.57), participated in the study. Twenty-five fathers were White, 3 were Asian, and 2 did not report their ethnicity. Forty-six mothers participated, with a mean age of 48.4 years (SD = 6.96). Mothers identified themselves according the following ethnicities: 39 White, 5 Asian, 1 African American, and 1 did not report her ethnicity. Of students in the study, 57 daughters with an average age of 20.4 years (SD = 3.62) and 17 sons with an average age of 19.24 years (SD = 2.36) participated. Sixty-three reported their ethnicity as White, 9 as Asian, 1 as African American, and 1 as East Indian.

Procedure

After signing an informed consent, individuals completed a series of measures assessing their relationships with their family members. Upon completing this initial survey, family members came together to collectively tell an "often told story." These stories had to meet the following two requirements: (1) the story should best describe what their family is like and (2) the story should be one that the family tells frequently. Families then told their story while being video-recorded in a research lab. After storytelling was complete, each individual family member completed another set of measures to assess their perceived quality of the storytelling interaction.

Instruments

Among the measures which each individual completed before interacting, there were small amounts of missing data (< .096% of the total data). For these missing data, we utilized the available item method to account for nonresponse (Schafer & Graham, 2002). These missing data were included in the description of the instruments that follows.

Family satisfaction

Family satisfaction (as perceived by each participant) was measured before the family interaction was videotaped using a scale adapted from Huston, McHale, and Crouter (1986). Participants shared their feelings about their family by responding to a 7-point semantic differential scale (e.g., miserable = 1 and enjoyable = 7). An 11th item asked participants to report their overall satisfaction with their family on a scale ranging from completely satisfied to completely dissatisfied. A sum of the 11 items, resulting in a range of scores from 11 to 77, was taken to obtain each individual's within-family level family satisfaction score (M = 61.67, SD = 12.5). Higher scores represent higher satisfaction. This measure demonstrated good reliability (α = .94).

Quality of the interaction

Quality of the interaction (as perceived by each participant), measured after the videotaped "often told story" interaction occurred, was assessed using a scale adapted from Duck et al.'s (1991) research on everyday communication. This was the focal dependent variable for the current study. This asked participants to describe their feelings about the quality of their family interaction by responding to 10 items on a 9-point semantic differential scale (e.g., guarded = 1 and open = 9). This variable was a composite score of 10 items assessing individuals' perceptions of their storytelling. Actual responses ranged from 3 to 7, with higher scores representing higher quality (M = 5.80, SD = .86, α = .86).

Interactional storytelling behaviors

Interactional storytelling behavior scores were obtained through rating storytelling episodes created for previous analyses by Koenig Kellas (2005). After enlisting, training, and checking for interrater reliability, four raters rated family behaviors including (1) engagement (warmth and involvement; M = 3.65, SD = .91; ranging from 1 to 5), (2) turn-taking (distribution of turns and dynamism of turn-taking; M = 3.11, SD = .88; ranging from 1.75 to 5), (3) perspective-taking (attentiveness to and confirmation of others' perspectives;

M = 3.29, *SD* = .67; ranging from 2.25 to 4.75), and (4) coherence (story organization and integration; *M* = 3.47, *SD* = .84; ranging from 1.5 to 5) on two 5-point Likert-type measures for each behavior. A full description of the rating procedures is outlined in Koenig Kellas (2005). Raters' scores for each dimension were reliable: engagement (α = .85); turn-taking (α = .75); perspective-taking (α = .80), coherence (α = .77). Intercorrelations among the components of the joint family storytelling behaviors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Between-Family Level Intercorrelations among Family Storytelling Interaction Variables (*N* = 50)

	Coherence	Turn-taking	Perspective-taking
Engagement	.40**	.74**	.66**
Coherence	—	.36**	.42**
Turn-taking		—	.56**
Perspective-taking			—

**Correlation is significant at the < .01 level (2-tailed).

Results

To test the hypotheses while taking into account the "nested" nature of the data (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2000), multilevel modeling (MLM) using HLM 7.0 was applied. Not only is this methodology ideal for family-related research, but it also meets the call of Hayes (2006), Slater, Snyder, and Hayes (2006), and Bonito (2002) for increased application of MLM in communication research as a whole while expanding upon previous research on family storytelling (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009).

The steps proposed by Hox (2002) for multilevel modeling analysis were followed. The results for each model are presented in Table 2. Explanatory family level data (i.e., engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence) served as the second-level data because they were constant across each family whereas individuals data within families (i.e., sex and family satisfaction) served as the first-level explanatory data because these were assessed by each individual in the family "group." All interval variables in the data set were grand mean centered and sex, a categorical variable, was dummy-coded and uncentered. Full-maximum likelihood with robust standard errors was used to report all results.

Table 2. Predictors of Quality of Family Interaction

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
First-Level			
Intercept	5.80**	5.73**	5.73**
Family satisfaction (FS)		.02**	.02**
Sex (S)		.09	.10
Second-Level			
Engagement			.21†
Turn-taking			−.22
Perspective-taking			.07
Coherence			.05
Cross-Level			
N/A			
Variance Component			
N/A			
Deviance (parameters)	367.95(3)	349.30(5)	344.62(9)

$**p < .01$. $†p$ approaching $< .05$ (i.e., .07).

In response to H1, a baseline model revealed significant between-group variances for quality of the interaction, thus warranting further MLM analyses. Specifically, of the total variance (.73), 73% existed at Level 1 (.53) and 27% (.20) at Level 2. Given that perceived quality of the storytelling interaction varies significantly within and between families, we proceeded to step 2 (Hox, 2002) by introducing Level 1 variables. Thus, the null was rejected for H1.

In the second model, H2 and H3 were tested with family satisfaction and sex entered as fixed components. Family satisfaction was significant and accounted for approximately 7.5% of the Level 1 variance and 31% of the Level 2 variance. Sex, however, was nonsignificant. Thus, findings suggested that the quality of joint storytelling was not explained by whether participants were men or women (H2), but indicated that satisfaction prior to the interaction was associated with greater perceived quality of the joint storytelling interaction (H3). In our third model we tested H4, adding the roles of engagement, perspective-taking, turn-taking, and coherence as fixed Level 2 predictors. This model revealed no significance for the newly added predictors at the $p < .05$ level. However, given the limited power of this sample (only 50 families with 3 individuals in each family) and the nature of MLM analysis, engagement ($p = .07$) was included in this model. As such, engagement's inclusion in the model explained .13 more than the previous model (44% total for model 3's first and second level variables). This finding supports the trend that families who are more engaged in their storytelling—those having high levels of verbal and nonverbal responsiveness, liveliness, and warmth in the story—also reported increased quality of the joint storytelling interaction.

Having tested the fixed effects, we attempted a fourth model to assess the potential random effects of the Level 1 predictors on the between-group (Level 2) variance component. Neither of the first-level variables, sex nor family satisfaction, had a significant random

effect; therefore we did not proceed with a random coefficients model. Furthermore, because neither of the first-level variables had a random slope, cross-level interactions could not be explored. Hence, H4 and H5 could not be addressed using these data.

In sum, the results of this MLM analysis indicate that differences that exist within families and between families regarding the quality of joint storytelling interactions can be explained by both the satisfaction that individual members feel toward the family and—to a lesser extent and only at the between-family level—the extent to which family members are engaged when sharing an often told story.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which perceived quality of a storytelling interaction varied within and between families, thus allowing us to paint a more realistic account of the *varying* opinions between families and among family members. Highlighted within these findings are the underlying complexities of communication that hold implications for the study of family systems, most prominent of which is the importance of individual-level differences in satisfaction (i.e., when family members have different opinions as to the quality of the family relationship).

Findings support the trend that joint family storytelling is useful in helping us investigate the narrative interplay between the family system and its components. The discrepancies among family members' perceived quality of a storytelling interaction varied based on differing levels of family satisfaction, such that an individual's satisfaction with his or her family positively predicted his or her perceptions of the quality of the interaction. Between-family (i.e., the differences among Family A, Family B, and Family C) analyses indicated that families do not always agree in their ratings of family interaction. More specifically, family engagement in the storytelling interaction was the only factor that explained portions of the between-family variance. This latter trend suggests that the pleasantness of the interaction was central to understanding the quality of family interactions. Previous research identified perspective-taking (Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Koenig Kellas, 2005) and coherence (Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009) as particularly important predictors of family satisfaction and functioning. Although these findings support these interactional storytelling behaviors' impact on family well-being, the current findings suggest that—in regard to family members' feelings about the interaction—these interactional storytelling behaviors matter less to individual family members' feelings about the interaction than does engagement or the extent to which the family is warm, involved, lively, and tells the story with positive affect.

The findings of the current study also demonstrate the importance of not only looking at the family as a whole system but also looking at its component parts (i.e., its individual members) because individuals within families varied considerably in their perceptions of the quality of their interaction. The large discrepancy found within and between families among this sample suggests that looking at between-family differences tells only part of the story. In other words, although families differed in their perceptions of the quality of the interaction based on the degree of the family's overall satisfaction and the extent to

which the family warmly engaged in the storytelling interaction, a lions' share of the variance on perceptions of the interaction was based on individual family members' feelings of family satisfaction. Thus, the findings suggest that while stories are often jointly constructed, resulting in a family portrait of sorts, family members differ in their experience of the interaction based on the different ways they feel about the family going into the interaction. The findings also suggest that individuals within families differed significantly in their feelings about how the interaction went.

Overall, these results have theoretical implications in that they support a family systems approach to understanding narrative theorizing about family storytelling. Theoretically, we know that collaborative family storytelling is an important site for the construction of individual and family identity (see Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2013 for a review). The current results, however, also provide previously untested empirical support for explaining how different family members' feelings about the family and the interaction may contribute to the construction of identity and culture. Additionally, these results have methodological implications for family communication researchers and others who collect data from multiple members of groups. As suggested by Slater and his colleagues (2006), an understanding and appreciation of MLM has the potential to "move the field of communication forward dramatically in terms of building and testing theory and addressing substantively important questions by simultaneously considering multiple levels of analysis" (p. 375). These findings signal that using multilevel modeling (MLM) to look at the parts that make up the whole tells a more complex story about the influences and effects of (family) group interaction.

Despite its contributions, specific limitations should be taken into account when interpreting these findings which may serve as springboards for future inquiries. First, the number of participants in the data set was not ideal for HLM analysis. Although there are no set standards, Hox (2002) suggests a minimum of 30 groups, with 30 individuals in each group for HLM analyses. An alternative suggestion is that "the most important sampling consideration is number of groups," suggesting that each sample ideally includes a minimum of 50 groups with at least 5 members in each group (Myers & McPhee, 2006, p. 453). Second, students who participated in this study solicited their own families to share an often told story. As such, it is likely that individuals who were unsatisfied with their family did not volunteer to participate. Third, including responses from all family members—not just three—would provide an even clearer picture of what is occurring within and between these families and allow researchers to determine whether or not the gender makeup of the entire family (i.e., all female, all male, female-dominated, male-dominated, or equal female/male families) influence family storytelling. Hence, given that not all members of every family were involved in the telling of their family story, these findings may be more suggestive than definitive.

In taking these limitations into account, investigators of (multiple) members' storytelling perspectives should consider examining the influence of family story roles, parenting styles, family communication patterns, family closeness, and shared family identity on family storytelling interactions. For example, a multiple member perspective could aid in researching family stories that involve singling out one family member as the butt of a

family joke. Researchers should examine how the telling of a family story improves or impedes a family members' sense of emotional closeness/distance with one another. Finally, in response to family storytelling's power to bridge generations (Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994), direct assessment of multiple generations' perspectives (i.e., grandparent, parent, (grand)child), could provide much needed specificity to the intergenerational transmission of family history, values, and ideals. As with our own findings, these assessments help paint a more realistic/complex picture of family storytelling and the components that are important (and consequently, those less or unimportant) for family storytelling and its links with family relationships. Still, the findings from this study further our understanding of family interaction and offer a glimpse into the underlying complexities of family perceptions and communication at multiple levels of analysis.

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